

DESEGREGATION AT CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

1957

----- *Craig Rains* -----

In September 1957, nine African-American students attempted to enroll at the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They were denied access to the school, first by members of the Arkansas National Guard and then by angry white mobs. After two weeks, President Eisenhower sent in federal troops to maintain order and ensure safe attendance by all students, black and white. The following is an excerpt of an oral history by a white student who attended Central High School at that time.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

To what extent did Rains's memories serve to justify what happened or to challenge what happened at Central High?

There really wasn't anything like Central High anywhere in the country, back in 1957. When the building itself was built in 1928 it was named the most beautiful high school in America. The facilities were unlike anything in this part of the country. We were unique in that we had two or three thousand students going to one school. Central was like a small city.

I don't remember exactly when I first realized that the school was going to be integrated, but I do remember that one of the things that bothered me was that we were being told to do something that we might or might not want to do. I was a student of the Civil War, and Robert E. Lee was, and still is, one of my ideals, and he was a man that believed equally in local government having a closer knowledge and awareness of what the people wanted, as opposed to the federal government. So my first thought was not that we were going to have to go to school with blacks, that didn't bother me, but that we were being told by the federal government to do something and we didn't have any say-so in that.

One of my jobs as an officer in the student council was to raise the flags outside. That gave me an opportunity to see what was going on outside the school, to see the anger. You could cut it with a knife, the tension outside the school, with these people who had come in from other parts of the state, other states. There were license plates from out of state. Very few people from Little Rock were there causing these problems, that I could see. But it was an ugly attitude. Especially when Elizabeth Eckford came to try to get into school. And the crowd began to heckle her, and cheer and shout, as she walked along. I was just dumbfounded.

I had my camera at the time; I ran up and took a picture of it. And then as she went on I thought, Well, I can't believe people would actually be this way to other people. I began to change from being somebody who was a moderate, who, if I had my way, would have said, "Let's don't integrate, because it's the state's right to decide," to someone who felt a real sense of compassion for these students. I also developed a real dislike for the people that were out there that were causing problems. It was very unsettling to me.

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THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Rains's memories justify what happened at Central High School by expressing some of the arguments made at the time. For example, Rains describes his feelings of resentment that the federal government was imposing school integration on the local governments of Little Rock. Rains also remembers out-of-state license plates on nearby cars, maintaining that "very few people from Little Rock were causing these problems, that I could see." The idea of "outsiders" causing problems in Southern race relations was common at the time among Southerners. Some students may note that Rains acknowledges how his attitude about integration changed as a result of what he saw, which brings into question some of the attitudes expressed in 1957 at Central High School.