

CHAPTER
21

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE **Crisis in Little Rock**

When 16-year-old Elizabeth Eckford left for Little Rock's Central High School in September 1957, she did not know that the governor had ordered the National Guard to keep her and eight other black students from entering the all-white school. This is Eckford's account of her first day at an integrated school.

Before I left home Mother called us into the living room. She said we should have a word of prayer. Then I caught the bus and got off a block from the school. I saw a large crowd of people standing across the street from the soldiers guarding Central. As I walked on, the crowd suddenly got very quiet. Superintendent Blossom had told us to enter by the front door. I looked at all the people and thought, "Maybe I will be safer if I walk down the block to the front entrance behind the guards."

At the corner I tried to pass through the long line of guards around the school so as to enter the grounds behind them. One of the guards pointed across the street. So I pointed in the same direction and asked whether he meant for me to cross the street and walk down. He nodded "yes." So, I walked across the street conscious of the crowd that stood there, but they moved away from me.

For a moment all I could hear was the shuffling of their feet. Then someone shouted, "Here she comes, get ready!" I moved away from the crowd on the sidewalk and into the street. . . .

The crowd moved in closer and then began to follow me, calling me names. I still wasn't afraid. Just a little bit nervous. Then my knees started to shake all of a sudden and I wondered whether I could make it to the center entrance a block away. It was the longest block I ever walked in my whole life.

Even so, I still wasn't too scared because all the time I kept thinking that the guards would protect me.

When I got right in front of the school, I went up to a guard again. But this time he just looked straight ahead and didn't move to let me pass him. I didn't know what to do. Then I looked and saw that the path leading to the front entrance was a little further ahead. So I walked until I was right in front of the path to the front door.

I stood looking at the school—it looked so big! Just then the guards let some white students go through.

The crowd was quiet. I guess they were waiting to see what was going to happen. When I was able to steady my knees, I walked up to the guard who had

let the white students in. He too didn't move. When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets.

They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me.

They moved closer and closer. Somebody started yelling, "Lynch her! Lynch her!"

I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob—someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.

They came closer, shouting, "No nigger bitch is going to get in our school. Get out of here!"

I turned back to the guards but their faces told me I wouldn't get help from them. Then I looked down the block and saw a bench at the bus stop. I thought, "If I can only get there I will be safe." I don't know why the bench seemed a safe place. . . .

When I finally got there, I don't think I could have gone another step. I sat down and the mob crowded up and began shouting all over again. Someone hollered, "Drag her over to this tree! Let's take care of the nigger." Just then a white man sat down beside me, put his arm around me and patted my shoulder. He raised my chin and said, "Don't let them see you cry."

Then, a white lady—she was very nice—she came over to me on the bench. She spoke to me but I don't remember now what she said. She put me on the bus and sat next to me. . . . [T]he next thing I remember I was standing in front of the School for the Blind, where Mother works.

from William Loren Katz, Eyewitness: The Negro in American History (New York: Pitman, 1967), 492-494.

Discussion Question

Why do you think Elizabeth Eckford encountered such a hostile reaction when she arrived at Central High School? Cite evidence from your textbook to support your opinion.

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SKILLBUILDER PRACTICE *Making Inferences*

In September 1957, Elizabeth Eckford made history as she forced her way through an angry crowd of whites in an effort to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Study the photo of Eckford on page 703 of the text and read the news article on this page. Consider what inferences you can make about the impact of this event. Then answer the questions that follow. (See Skillbuilder Handbook, p. R10.)

Hazel Bryan was part of the crowd that day [in September 1957]. Her face grimaced in hate, she shouted at Eckford, who clutched her books to her chest and walked on, her emotions hidden behind dark glasses.

When a photograph of the bitter meeting between the two 15-year-old girls appeared in newspapers around the country, Eckford became a symbol of the civil rights movement. Bryan's young face became an image of racial hatred.

Now 55, the women

met . . . for the first time since that troubled time. There were smiles and poses for pictures. They mostly let the past be.

"Thank you, Elizabeth, for agreeing to do this," Bryan, now Hazel Massery, said quietly as she greeted Eckford at her home.

Answered Eckford, before the two left for the school: "I think you're very brave to face the cameras again. . . ."

At the school, both black and white students recognized Eckford. "Miss Eckford, I just want you to

know how much I respect you," a black student said. A white junior high student gave Eckford a big hello; they talked briefly about taking classes at the high school.

Massery said that she had hoped others would know of her regret and her acknowledgment that intolerance was wrong.

"I just want to say, Elizabeth, I'm elated that you're doing this," she said. "I'd like for my children to be proud, to see that both of us are role models."

Peggy Harris, *Associated Press* writer, Tuesday, September 23, 1997

1. By studying the photo on page 534 what can you infer about the obstacles facing Eckford and the other African-American students who integrated Central High School?

2. By comparing the photo with the news story, what can you infer about reasons African Americans consider Little Rock a milestone in the civil rights movement?

