

# That fearsome day when 9 black kids made history

By Henry Weinstein

"At first it was an adventure. I didn't have noble thoughts. I wondered what was inside this huge castle. Why didn't they want me to go in there?"

Sitting in her comfortable Glen Park home, Melba Beals recalled how she became part of history 20 years ago this month. She was one of nine black students who integrated Little Rock Central High School — escorted into the school by bayonet-bearing Army troops sent by President Dwight Eisenhower.

Now, she is a reporter for TV station KRON here and says her eight compatriots are also doing well. But she is disturbed that the situation inside public schools in this area seems so bad that she decided to send her 14-year-old daughter Kellie to a private school, something that staunch segregationists in the South did in the past so that their children wouldn't come into contact with black kids.

"I don't want her to go through what I went through," said Beals. It's possible that no other set of students will ever go through what the Little Rock 9 endured.

"Nigger go home," a mob of a thousand yelled at the six girls and three boys and their parents when they first arrived at Central High on Sept. 4, 1957. Gov. Orval Faubus used National Guardsmen to keep the nine out of the school, after a federal court ordered them admitted.

This was three years after the U.S. Supreme Court in its historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision ruled that segregated schools are: "inherently unequal" and as such a denial of the Constitution's protections.

"We got out of there in a car," said Beals, then 15, whose mother Lois Pattillo, a schoolteacher, was at first hesitant about her daughter leaving Horace Mann, the all-black high school she had previously attended but eventually gave her approval.

"For the next 19 days the nine children became a more cohesive

unit. Meetings were held with NAACP officials, hundreds of reporters came to town, there were rumors of the Klan massing for an attack, and Faubus is saying there'll be violence and bloodshed.

"Nobody really realized what would happen. We were more afraid than we'd ever been in our lives," said Beals, who said she was aware that a number of blacks in Little Rock had been lynched and thrown into the Arkansas River. "It was a misdemeanor then to lynch a black in Arkansas."

When the nine arrived at Central High the morning of Sept. 23 for their second attempt to enter the school, they saw a reporter and photographer from *Life* magazine and a journalist from a black newspaper in Memphis being beaten.

The nine were placed in separate classrooms and "on my way up to my homeroom on the third floor I was spat on and kicked.

"Then, a mother of one of the white kids slapped me," Beals said. The anger of the crowd outside the school grew and by mid-day the students had to be taken home in unmarked police cars led by assistant chief Gene Smith, who later committed suicide. Later that day, whites and blacks fought on the streets of Little Rock.

That evening, President Eisenhower ordered in federal troops to implement the court-ordered desegregation. "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts," he said in a lengthy message broadcast nationwide on the radio.

"A lot of people think of Ike as the president who played golf, but I will always remember him for caring about my hide," Beals said.

"For some time we had our personal bodyguards. Mine was Johnny Black of the 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles. He walked with me in the halls but he stayed outside the classroom, looking through the glass.

But having an escort didn't solve the problems. "They shot acid at us in squirt guns, turned scald-



Examiner Photo by Greg Robinson

**MELBA BEALS, NOW A TV NEWS REPORTER**  
"We were more afraid than we'd ever been in our lives"

ing water on us in the gymnasium showers, stole our books, dumped eggs on our heads, and did other things I wouldn't have dreamed of."

The federal troops stayed until Christmas and then were replaced by the Arkansas National Guard, who Beals said "were a real joke" in terms of protection.

In the meantime, most of her white classmates and white teachers were hostile, "except for my shorthand teacher, Miss Pickett.

She didn't cater to me, and she wouldn't put up with anything from those kids. She treated me fairly."

Also providing assistance was one white 12th grader who was on the football team and used to call Beals at night and warn her of upcoming dangers.

By the end of the school year, Beals had lost a lot of sleep and gone through considerable psychological torment. One of the nine had been kicked out of school for allegedly dumping a bowl of chili

on a white student in retaliation for an attack.

"Religion helped me a lot. I attended the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in those days. And to keep my mind off the harassment at school, I'd see how many times I could say The Lord's Prayer walking from the first floor to the third floor at school. I got up to 39," she said.

Beals said that some of her classes were better than at the "all-Negro" school she had previously attended, but that "race was constantly an issue."

During the year, her mother lost her teaching job in North Little Rock, as did a number of other black adults who were associated with the nine. The students were buoyed by visits from Martin Luther King Jr., who had recently emerged as an activist minister during the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, and by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall. "Being from the North, he was not afraid," said Beals. "I thought he was invincible in those days."

She met hundreds of reporters, including the late Walter Lippmann, received letters of support from U.N. leader Dag Hammarskjold and poems from Robert Frost.

But by the last day of the spring term, she had had it. "I just walked out and never looked back," said Beals. Soon after, the nine went on tour and instead of being scorned were put up in hotels like the New York Hilton and driven around in Rolls Royces by the chauffeurs of northern liberals, some of whom would later resist desegregation in much more subtle ways than Beals had encountered.

She made speeches all over the country, was given a special tour of the White House, and "met John Kennedy and a lot of movie stars."

In the fall, though, there was no school for Beals or any of the nine or other black students to attend anywhere in Arkansas. Faubus ordered all the public schools closed, and the white students attended "private academies," which circuitously received public funding as they did in a number of

other southern states.

Federal Judge Ronald Davies ordered the Arkansas public schools reopened in September 1959, "but by this time we were really not safe." So the nine students were dispersed to complete their high school away from home.

"I came to Santa Rosa and stayed with Dr. George McCabe, who was the president of San Francisco State's Sonoma branch."

"I was one of three black kids at Montgomery High but the atmosphere was very different than in Little Rock." Beals graduated and went on to San Francisco State. She soon married, had a child and dropped out of college.

Divorced several years later, she returned to S.F. State and took up journalism. "Maybe I'm a reporter now because of all the reporters in Little Rock. If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't be here now. Their telling the world what was going on was my protection."

Encouraged by her teachers at State, Beals attended a special program for minority journalists at Columbia University. After a short stint at KQED, she was hired as a reporter by KRON and has been there five years.

Central High School is now 51 per cent black and race relations at are improved—if not perfect—at the school, which has been put on the National Register of Historic Places.

This Wednesday there will be a commemoration of the opening of school to blacks 20 years ago, and one of the nine, Ernest Green, will be the keynote speaker. He is now an undersecretary of Labor in the Carter administration. Several of the others are teachers and only one is still in Little Rock.

Beals, who has been back to Little Rock just twice since she left in 1959, said this is the first year she's been able "to sit down and talk about all this. I sacrificed a whole interesting part of my insides," she said.