



*This Little Light of Mine:  
Children and Young People of the  
Civil Rights Movement  
1954-1965*

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American History Teachers' Collaborative  
Summer Institute 2010

A black and white portrait of Malcolm X, showing him from the chest up. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. His gaze is directed slightly to his left, and he has a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

“Early in life, I had learned that if you want something, you had better make some noise.”

~Malcolm X

# Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas

May 17, 1954

- These students, and nearly 200 others, wanted to be able to attend schools near their homes and schools with better conditions, like the schools for white children.
- Cases: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (Kansas), *Briggs v. Elliot* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (Virginia), *Gebhart v. Belton* (Delaware), and *Boiling v. Sharpe* (Washington, D.C.)
- 5 separate cases became one Supreme Court case, called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*
- On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional for state laws to (1) establish separate public schools for black and white students and (2) to deny black children equal educational opportunities.
- This landmark case paved the way for school desegregation across the United States.



# Emmett Till: Catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement

## August 1954



- Born in Chicago, IL 1941
- Nickname: “Bobo” or “Bo”
- Dad was killed in Japan while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces
- Mom worked for the U.S. Air Force as a civilian
- Had polio as a child—the only lasting effect was that he stuttered
- Enjoyed jokes and playing pranks on people
- Good at art, science, and spelling
- He was good at keeping peace among other kids
- Played baseball and was a Chicago White Sox Fan
- At age 14, tortured and brutally murdered by 2 white men in Money, Mississippi, because a white woman said he had flirted with and whistled at her
- His murderers were found “not guilty” by an all-white jury though they confessed to the beating
- Emmett Till’s death sparked the Civil Rights Movement

# Claudette Colvin, 15-year-old: The First “Rosa Parks” Montgomery, Alabama

March 1955



- Born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1939
- Had a dog, horses, chickens, cows, and pigs
- Loved being outside, climbing trees, and going to church
- Smart—asked a lot of questions
- Rebelled a lot because she knew Jim Crow laws were unfair; always stood up for what she believed in
- Found ways to get around the laws: She would send her biracial friend into a store to try on hats because she could pass for being white, and blacks were not allowed to try on clothes/hats
- On city bus after school, refused to give up her seat to a white woman, so she was dragged off of bus and arrested....yelling “It’s my constitutional right!” to sit where she wanted on the bus.
- Claudette’s case, along with others’, in *Browder v. Gayle*, went to the Supreme Court in 1956, and won. Segregation on city buses was ruled unconstitutional!

# Freedom Walkers: The Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955-1956



- After Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on the city bus to a white person, African-Americans boycotted the buses. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped lead the boycott.
- For over a year (381 days!), African-American children and their families refused to ride the city buses and, instead, walked miles to their destinations.
- In December 1956, the city buses finally became desegregated.
- When the law changed, African-American children were proud to sit in the front of the bus, sometimes right behind the driver or right next to white people. They took great pleasure in their freedom to choose where to sit!

# Little Rock Nine: Integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas September 1957



- Many African-American students tried to integrate schools across the country after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.
- Little Rock School Board selected 9 students, including: Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Gloria Ray, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Patillo, Terrance Roberts, Carlotta Walls, Ernest Green, and Minniejean Brown. Also pictured is Daisy Bates, the president of the Arkansas NAACP, who was an advisor to the students.
- The students tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock on the first day of school, but governor of Arkansas had ordered Arkansas National Guard to let in only white students. They blocked the doors at gunpoint. Hundreds of white adults harassed the black students, spit on them, etc.
- After 3 weeks, a federal court judge ordered National Guard to leave and the students were allowed to enter the school.
- President Eisenhower sent in helicopters and jeeps, as well as armed soldiers to escort the 9 students from class to class. Later the soldiers (all white) said they were honored and proud to carry out their duties for the Little Rock Nine.
- After soldiers left, the African-American students were not treated well: received threats and were tripped/attacked/harassed, but the students remained nonviolent.
- After that year, governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, closed Central High School to prevent any more attempts of integration.

# Little Rock Nine: Integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas September 1957



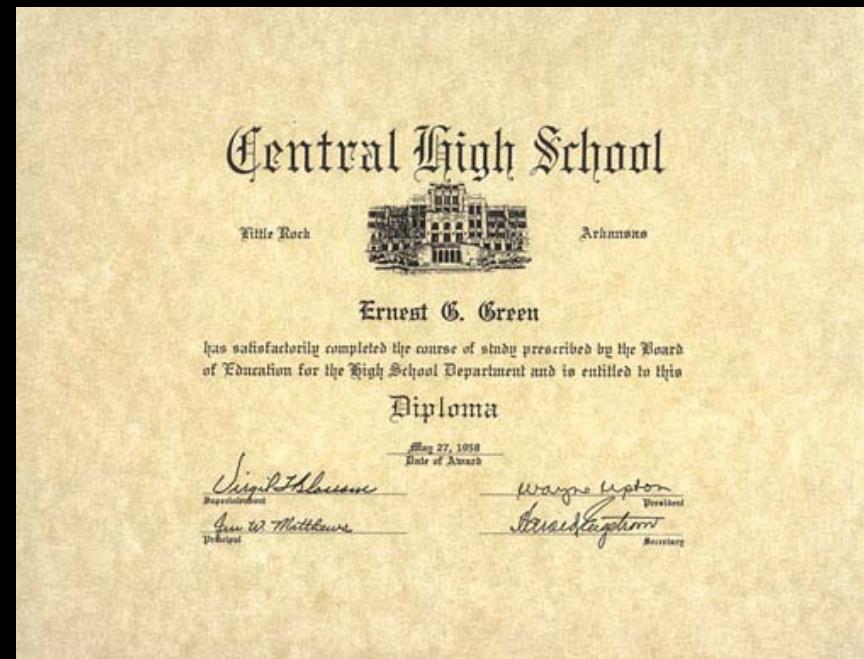
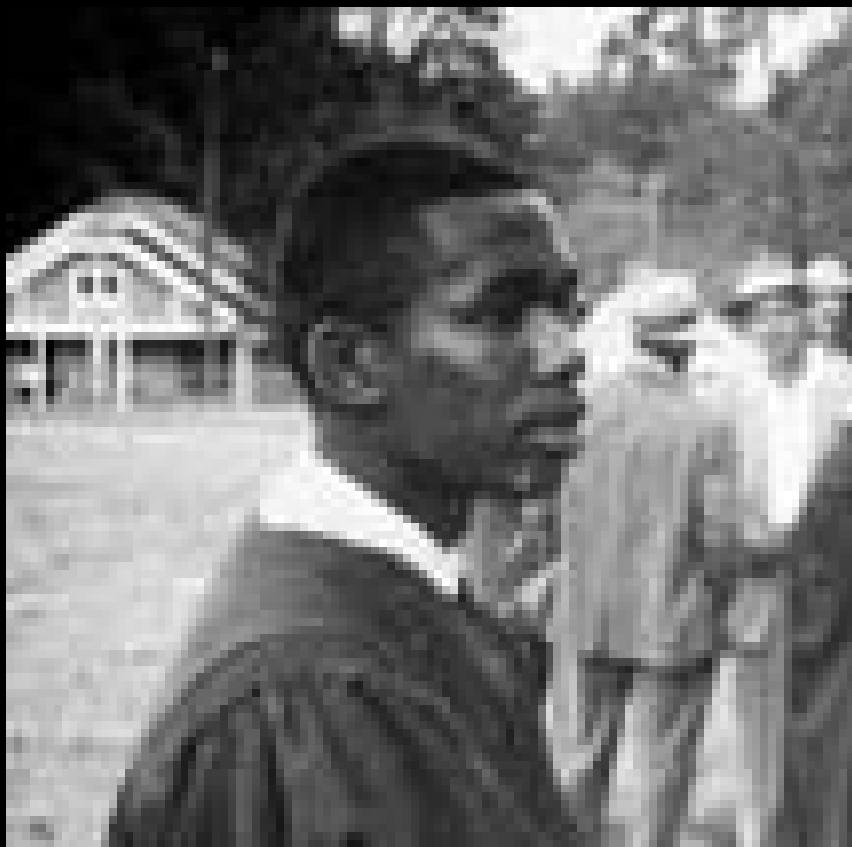
Members of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division of the U.S. Army escorted the Little Rock Nine. Each student had his/her own escort.

Elizabeth Eckford's mother had made her a special dress for her 1<sup>st</sup> day at Central High School. White people spat on her so much that you could wring out her dress when she got home.



# Ernest Green: 1<sup>st</sup> African-American Graduate of Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas

May 1958



# Ruby Bridges: Desegregating New Orleans Schools 1960



- Born in Mississippi in 1954, and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana at age 4.
- At age 6, Ruby's parents volunteered for her to integrate New Orleans Schools. Ruby, with federal marshal escorts, was the first African-American to attend William Frantz Elementary School.
- Every day, angry whites showed up to protest. Some threatened to poison Ruby's food, and one woman carried a black doll in a coffin to scare Ruby. All the white parents took their children out of the Frantz school.
- Ruby began to pray every day as she approached the school, asking God to forgive the people because "they don't know what they are doing."
- Only one white teacher remained at the school. Her name was Barbara Henry. For more than a year, Ms. Henry taught Ruby at the school---just the 2 of them in the whole school.
- Eventually, some white parents began to send their children back to school, despite the protests.

# Ruby Bridges: Desegregating New Orleans Schools 1960



# Sit-ins: Nonviolent Protests

RAFO20204-2/2/60-GREENSBORO,N.C: A group of Negro students from North Carolina A&T College, who were refused service at a luncheon counter reserved for white customers, staged a sit-down strike at the F.W.Woolworth store in Greensboro 2/2. Ronald Martin, Robert Patterson and Mark Martin are shown as they stayed seated throughout the day. The white woman at left came to the counter for lunch but decided not to sit down. UPI TELEPHOTO fwb



- In Greensboro, North Carolina, and later in many cities throughout the South, college students staged sit-ins at lunch counters, where only white people were allowed to be served. After many months, African-Americans were able to be served at lunch counters. The sit-ins had been successful!
- Sit-ins were used across the South and the rest of the U.S. to desegregate public places such as restaurants, parks, pools, libraries, and theaters.



# The Children's Crusade: Birmingham, Alabama

## April & May 1963



- Kids thought that adults should stand up for what was right. They felt that adults just accepted the unfair laws and practices. Kids wanted to rebel—they wanted conditions to change in Birmingham. They didn't understand why adults were afraid to stand up for themselves.
- Many young people participated in demonstrations, picketing, & boycotting stores, restaurants, libraries, etc. because of segregation.
- Many were sprayed with water hoses, attacked by police dogs, etc.

# The Children's Crusade: Birmingham, Alabama

## April & May 1963



- Many young children were arrested and thrown in jail during the Children's Crusade. Their only “crime” was protesting racial discrimination.
- Audrey Faye Hendricks (not shown) was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at the time—9 years old. She was arrested during a march and spent 7 days in jail.
- In 2009, the mayor of Birmingham pardoned thousands of people who had been arrested during the demonstrations in Birmingham.

# The March on Washington, D.C.

August 28, 1963



- 250,000 people participated in the march on Washington, D.C. People marched for freedom and fair hiring practices.
- Martin Luther King, Jr., made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech here.
- Children were among the marchers



# Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing: Birmingham, Alabama September 15, 1963



CYNTHIA WESLEY



ADDIE MAE COLLINS



DENISE MCNAIR



CAROL ROBERTSON

- The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had been the gathering site for people during the civil rights movement in Birmingham.
- On Sunday, September 15, 1963, the church was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan, killing 4 young girls and injuring 22 other people.
- The “4 Little Girls” who lost their lives were:
- Cynthia Wesley: Age 14
- Addie Mae Collins: Age 14
- Denise McNair: Age 11
- Carole Robertson: Age 14
- People became outraged, and riots erupted in Birmingham.

# Mississippi Burning Case: August 1964



- Ben Chaney's brother, James Chaney, along with 2 other civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner, were murdered by Ku Klux Klan members in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The 3 were part of Freedom Summer, a movement that registered blacks to vote in the state of Mississippi.
- After his brother's murder, Ben Chaney became very active in the civil rights movement. He attended many demonstrations and went to Freedom School at the Freedom Center to discuss issues plaguing his community.
- Ben was arrested at least 21 times before he was 12 years old....all because he wanted freedom and equal treatment for all.
- As an adult, Ben runs the James Earl Chaney Foundation, in work related to voter registration.

# Sheyann Webb: “The Smallest Freedom Fighter” Selma, Alabama

March 1965



- Only 8 years old when she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement.
- Her parents were afraid to get involved in the movement and didn't want her to be involved either, but she felt she needed to do.
- Very poor, and lived in a housing project next to Brown Chapel AME church in Selma, Alabama, where civil rights meetings were held, much like at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.
- She went to the church to see what was going on and one day met Martin Luther King, Jr. there. She always sat in the front row during the meetings, and became a friend of Dr. King, who called her “The Smallest Freedom Fighter”.
- Kept telling her parents she wanted them to be free and to vote just like the white people.

# Sheyann Webb: “The Smallest Freedom Fighter”

Selma, Alabama

March 1965



- Voter registration was the focus of the marches in Selma.
- Sheyann participated in both Selma marches. She marched with Dr. King on the 2<sup>nd</sup> march from Selma to Montgomery. Dr. King took her in because she had gone there by herself....at only 8 years old!
- Sheyann wrote plans for her own funeral because she thought she might get killed.
- Police used extreme violence on the marchers, and the media called this “Bloody Sunday”.
- As a result of this march, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 came about. It made it easier for Southern blacks to register to vote.
- Sheyann is shown here at Dr. King’s funeral in 1968.



“The blanket of fear was lifted by Negro youth. When they took their struggle to the streets, a new spirit of resistance was born.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

# Essential Questions/Topics for Discussion

1. What role did children and young people in the South play in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's?
2. How do the actions and sacrifices of these young people and their families affect children, families, and our society today?
3. Why should we care about events that happened 50 or 60 years ago?