

THE DESEGREGATION OF ABILENE PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ITS IMPACT ON
CARTER G. WOODSON JUNIOR AND SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL, 1953-1974

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ABSTRACT

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On February 22, 2016, officials in Abilene, Texas, held a special ceremony at Dyess Elementary School to mark the campus' historic role in the local desegregation process. As part of the ceremony, district administrators noted that Dyess had been the city's first public school to open its doors to both white and black students in 1963. The campus deserved, administrators said, to be honored for its crucial place in Abilene's desegregation story. Although the ceremony was attended by students and adults of many ethnicities, it focused on the inclusion of black students at Dyess Elementary. While Dyess Elementary was integrated in 1963, the district continued to maintain an elementary campus, Sam Houston Elementary, for Hispanic students in grades 1-6 until 1970. The white-washed, liberal-integrationist narrative that officials shared with students actually distorted the true complexity of the desegregation process in Abilene. To begin with, the district avoided all calls for racial integration for nine years after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Then, when desegregation actually began in 1963, black students, teachers, coaches, and administrators bore the brunt of the hardship caused by desegregation. The district continued to maintain racially identifiable schools, both for African-American and Hispanic students until the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare forced the district to address the issue.

This thesis will examine Abilene's school desegregation process and focus special attention on the historically-black campus at Carter G. Woodson Junior and Senior High

School. The Abilene school district opened Woodson in 1953 to forestall African American efforts to integrate the schools. The new campus excited the local community and created an important space for African American students, teachers, and administrators to make an independent cultural institution of their own. In fact, Carter G. Woodson became a key fixture in Abilene's black community; it hosted sporting events, school dances, academic ceremonies, and graduation exercises. The teachers, students, and alumni from Woodson developed a love for the school and considered it a vital part of their personal and communal stories. Yet, in 1969, after only fifteen years in operation, Abilene Independent School District chose to close the campus, despite protests by black community activists and students, because administrators feared that white students would refuse to attend the school.

KEY WORDS: Carter G. Woodson High School, Abilene Colored School, NAACP

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CHAPTER I

Historical Literature and Background

In his classic 1955 book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, historian C. Vann Woodward opened with an arresting and controversial argument. The practice of racial segregation began in the North, he said, not in the South. Slavery in the South required that masters work closely with their enslaved laborers, and it would have thus been inconvenient for southern plantation owners to advocate complete separation of the races in public. Instead, Woodward argued, the “supervision, maintenance of order, and physical and medical care of slaves necessitated many contacts and encouraged a degree of intimacy between the races unequalled, and often held distasteful, in other parts of the country.”¹

Vann Woodward’s take on the origins of racial segregation did not negate the findings of W.J. Cash, the enigmatic journalist and author, who portrayed the South as a place unto itself in his classic 1941 work, *The Mind of the South*. Cash argued that prior to the Civil War, a distinct society existed in southern America. He explained that a particular set of qualities -- romance, paternalism, and violence -- made up southern culture.² With the abolition of slavery, however, societal change was thrust upon the South. Roughly four million former slaves were freed, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments empowered them to demand equality and the franchise. White southerners responded to these new demands by doubling-down on race. They disfranchised, segregated, and discriminated against African-Americans so that two separate and

¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press (reprint), 2002), 12.

² W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

unequal societies developed. While the white majority sought to marginalize black Americans, black community members learned to function in their own parallel society.

As racial segregation replaced black exclusion in the South after the Civil War, public education became an important topic of debate. During the late nineteenth century, many leaders considered education a privilege and not a right. Thus, most white Southerners felt justified in providing little to no education for black Americans.³ Southern whites opposed the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau to open schools.⁴ While U.S. Supreme Court cases, such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), offered legal sanction to segregation, they did not create it. Segregation laws grew out of a deeply-held belief among whites that they were members of a superior race. Many white southerners felt that education would be wasted on the recently freed slaves, or worse, that it might empower them. As scholar Michael Klarman explained in his book, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, white southerners adopted racial segregation in order to re-establish and maintain their racial superiority in an era of industrial growth and international expansion.⁵

Early African American civil rights activists, such as Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and W. E. B. DuBois, each fought against racial discrimination in their own ways. Washington founded a school at Tuskegee, Alabama, and taught black students about the dignity of education and work. He urged teachers to "return to the plantation districts and show the people there how to put new energy and new ideas into

³ Michael Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

farming as well as into the intellectual and moral and religious life of the people.”⁶ Ida B. Wells-Barnett challenged white violence and lynch mobs through her crusading journalism and books, such as *The Red Record* (1895). And, W.E.B. DuBois challenged segregation directly, writing that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. Du Bois and Wells-Barnett also served as founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. The NAACP would spend the next fifty years fighting for equality on several fronts.

By the time of the First World War, northern and urban migration became prevalent as African-Americans searched for better opportunities than those available in the rural south. Klarman explained that, “In the South, white opinion opposed equal black education; black schools were obscenely underfunded; and black secondary education was almost nonexistent.”⁷ The racial mores in the North were more flexible, which at times allowed for challenges that could not occur in the South.

Migration played a significant role in increased black activism, especially the first migration of black Americans from rural small towns to urban areas within the South. As Bernadette Pruitt has shown in her book, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941*, the movement of black Americans to southern cities facilitated the growth of a middle class that had the time and money to fight inequality. Black community building created a society within a society. One in which the members of the black community cared for each other. The concept of self-

⁶ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Dover, 1995), 127.

⁷ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 101.

help facilitated the development of a rich heritage and common history as community members worked to provide needed skills.⁸

The Great Depression of the 1930s challenged new black urban communities, but it also presented an opportunity for federal action on the race issue. Unfortunately, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had to rely on white southern Democrats to pass much of his agenda, and, as a result, few meaningful legislative changes were made on the racial front. Congress could not even agree on a bill outlawing the heinous crime of lynching.

World War II initiated nation-altering change, however, as African-American participation, both at home and abroad, opened new opportunities for success. At home, new job opportunities provided economic advancement, which created a strong black middle class, while heroic fighting overseas reduced resistance to integration in the armed forces. Deep-seated cultural biases were confronted as whites and blacks fought for democratic principles during the war. Klarman explained that, “Blacks saw a paradox in America’s fighting against fascism with a segregated army, and they complained of ‘mock democracy’ for which they were being asked to risk their lives.”⁹ The Double-V campaign grew out of World War II as African-Americans fought Hitler in Europe and discrimination in America. After World War II, Harry Truman issued an executive order to integrate the armed forces and end discriminatory federal hiring practices.¹⁰ However, these changes did not induce the southern white population to abandon segregation, which had developed in the last years of the nineteenth century. It would take more than

⁸ Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013).

⁹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 175.

¹⁰ James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education; A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

executive orders and Supreme Court rulings to alter the discriminatory practices put in place by whites in the South.

The black community's economic gains during and after World War II fueled civil-rights activism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As James Patterson explained in his book, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*, "Membership in the NAACP, by far the most important civil-rights organization until the 1960s, jumped from 50,000 in 1940 to 450,000 in 1946."¹¹ Buoyed by this dramatic increase in membership, the NAACP and its corresponding Legal Defense team decided on a new strategy to achieve equal educational opportunities. As historian Mark Tushnet showed in his work, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*, attorney Charles Hamilton Houston first pursued an equalization strategy. In case after case, Houston, Thurgood Marshall, and other NAACP attorneys fought to equalize higher education and teacher pay. The NAACP won victories in *Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Alston v. School Board of Norfolk* (1940), *Sipuel v. Oklahoma* (1948), and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* (1950). These victories, coupled with grassroots activism, set the stage for a direct attack on racial segregation in higher education, which first took place in Texas.¹²

The direct attack on racial segregation in the Lone Star State did not occur without some controversy in the black community. Opinions regarding what would be most beneficial to black Texans varied. Some leaders, such as Carter Wesley, believed that equalization would be best. Wesley favored a separate black branch of the University

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Mark Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

of Texas that would serve only black Texans, while other leaders, such as Thurgood Marshall and Lulu Belle White favored an integration strategy. In 1947, polls showed that blacks and whites both favored the separate university option.¹³ Despite public opinion, the NAACP and Heman Sweatt pursued the integration of the University of Texas law school. Carter Wesley was concerned that forced integration would only help upper- and middle-class blacks who could successfully manipulate the system, but NAACP attorneys believed the liberal integrationist approach would benefit everyone.¹⁴

Heman Sweatt began his foray into civil-rights activities on his job as a postal worker. He was a member of the National Alliance of Postal Employees (NAPE).¹⁵ In 1944, Sweatt challenged hiring practices, which allowed blacks to apply but never be hired for indoor clerk positions. This experience, although unsuccessful, encouraged Sweatt to pursue a legal career. His journey would lead him to challenge segregation in higher education. Sweatt would become the face of the NAACP's campaign to integrate the law school at the University of Texas (Austin). He was "a committed civil rights unionist. Sweatt also understood that such discrimination in higher education thwarted the upward mobility of the state's entire black population -- only thirty African-Americans held Texas law licenses" in 1940.¹⁶ With Sweatt's help, the NAACP pursued the integration of Texas higher education in a case against the University of Texas. The state's Attorney General Grover Sellers attempted to compromise with Sweatt by establishing a new black law school with a single law professor at Prairie View College,

¹³ Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press), 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵ Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

which simply did not meet the equality test and violated Sweatt's constitutionally-protected civil rights. In a rushed attempt to sway judgement in its favor, Texas then set up a makeshift law school in a Houston law office. The school would become Texas State University for Negroes, established on the campus of Houston College for Negroes, and Henry Eman Doyle became the first student. As Amilcar Shabazz explained in his book, *Advancing Democracy*, "Doyle and Sweatt thus became the physical embodiment of the terms of a critically important political and theoretical debate."¹⁷ One pursued integration, the other equalization: two entirely different journeys that both worked towards bettering education opportunities for black Texans.

Sweatt v. Painter put Texas in the national spotlight. The state of Texas argued that allowing the state to provide equal education opportunities and upholding segregation would bring the most good to everyone, and segregation was needed to maintain racial peace.¹⁸ Sweatt's NAACP lawyers argued that the Texas system was inherently unequal and denied Sweatt his equal protection rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court issued its unanimous decision on June 5, 1950.¹⁹ The court did not nullify segregation, but did require the University of Texas law school to admit Sweatt. Although, the court failed to issue a definitive opinion on segregation, the match was struck and the NAACP would continue to fan the flame. This win would prove bittersweet for Sweatt who was unable to weather the publicity and subsequent discrimination he faced as a student at the University of Texas. Sweatt nevertheless became a trailblazer who made change possible for others. His bravery and sacrifice

¹⁷ Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy*, 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

opened the door for future black students to earn their degrees. Shabazz explains, “on the basis of Herman Sweatt’s travail, the Texas University Movement produced fourteen victories in the years before the Supreme Court ruled in [*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954)].”²⁰

By the beginning of the 1950s, many white southerners realized that they could no longer provide African-Americans with substandard unequal education. Fearing integration, whites began what Michael Klarman called a series of “crash equalization programs that promised rapid redress of educational inequalities in black schools.”²¹ Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP confronted segregation through litigation, attacking segregated elementary, high school, and secondary campuses. They also argued cases involving housing, busing, recreation, and voting.²² These small changes would prove to be too little and too late and in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. the Board of Education* that separate but equal was no longer legal.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown* was the culmination of years of African-American activism and marked the beginning of the end of *de jure* segregation in America. This landmark decision overturned the precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and held that racial segregation in public schools violated the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment. Many white Americans in both the North and the South resented the decision, and it set in motion a struggle that has lasted for more than six decades.

²⁰ Ibid., 136.

²¹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 311.

²² Patterson, *Brown V. Board of Education*, 14.

Part of the problem with the *Brown* decision was the fact that the U.S. Supreme Court refused to set a time limit for racial integration. In *Brown II* (1955), the court ruled that desegregation should proceed with “all deliberate speed.” This vague phrase allowed southern states to delay integration, since no hard deadlines were required by the Supreme Court. In fact, the state of Texas passed legislation requiring a local referendum in order for school systems to desegregate and not lose state funding. Before this legislation passed, one hundred and twenty school districts had desegregated, after the legislation was in place, however, desegregation slowed to standstill.²³ Texas Commissioner of Education J. W. Edgar counseled public schools, in a letter sent May 24, 1954, not to integrate.²⁴ White terrorist attacks against black activists increased across the state. As Robyn Duff Ladino explained in her book, *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High*, “Ku Klux Klan activity was reported to the Attorney General’s office in twenty-two counties.”²⁵ This type of violent activity was discouraged by the Attorney General, but white resistance in Texas was organized by the Texas Citizens’ Council with branches in Kilgore, Arlington, Beaumont, Dallas, Fort Worth, Galena Park, Houston, La Grange, Mansfield, Marshall, Orange, Texarkana, and Waco.²⁶

Without a deadline for integration, Texas authorities did not see any necessity to take action. “For segregationists, the idea of ‘social equality’ triggered their deepest fear. White supremacy ideology claimed ‘race mixing’ would lead to miscegenation and the

²³ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 410.

²⁴ Robyn Duff Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

destruction of the white race.”²⁷ The white majority was concerned that integration would lead to “social equality” and a world in which it might be permissible for a black boy to ask a white girl on a date. However, white resistance lacked the organization, leadership, and drive that typified black activism. Black Texans stood resolute in the face of white violence and discrimination.²⁸

The NAACP began to encourage Southern blacks to petition for the end of segregation.²⁹ An Emergency South-wide NAACP meeting was held in Atlanta, Georgia, following *Brown*. The conference issued a clear directive, which included eight steps. Local citizens were encouraged to petition school boards and offer assistance with integration. They were asked to stay aware of local school boards’ integration plans and insure that they complied with the *Brown* decision, and to work to inform the local black community about the decision and the possible need for plaintiffs in lawsuits if their local school boards did not proceed with integration.³⁰

One of the earliest national showdowns over racial desegregation occurred in Mansfield, Texas, after a petition was filed to integrate the local high school. White opponents of integration responded with threats of violence. An effigy of a black student was hung first at the intersection of Broad and Main Street, and then a second was hung from the high school flagpole.³¹ President Dwight Eisenhower, a native Texan, had remained quiet on his position towards civil rights and the *Brown* decision.³² Truly, he did not believe that integration could be forced upon the South, which led him to take a

²⁷ William R. Simon, “Breaking the Color Bar at SMU,” *Legacies* 24, no 1. (Spring 2012), 32.

²⁸ Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy*, 174.

²⁹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 368.

³⁰ Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools*, 74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

hands-off approach to the Mansfield situation in 1956.³³ Scholar Robyn Duff Ladino explained that the “crisis in Mansfield came to represent the epitome of the southern struggle between those for civil rights and school integration and those inflexibly opposed to change.”³⁴ When President Eisenhower refused to take a firm stance in Mansfield, however, the forces of delay and denial won the day. The victory was short-lived though. The following year, President Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne into Little Rock, Arkansas, to force the implementation of the *Brown* decision at Little Rock’s Central High School. After this show of federal force, and, later, after the implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, desegregation would proceed with haste.

In his work, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas*, Brian D. Behnken takes a revolutionary approach to the study of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of characterizing the movement as a Southern black/white phenomenon, he argues that the black and Hispanic movements “intersected and diverged throughout the period.”³⁵ Behnken specifically examined Texas due to its’ unique nature of being the only Southern state with both a significant Hispanic and black population. Although, Hispanic Americans were classified as white, they faced discrimination and segregation in Texas. Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. explained, in his book “*Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981*,” that white educators used the language “deficiency” and attendance issues to justify the segregation of Hispanic

³³ Ibid., 70.

³⁴ Ibid., 93.

³⁵ Brian D. Behkan, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, And the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 4.

children.³⁶ As integration progressed in Texas, attempts were made to only integrate Hispanic and black students, which caused protests from the Hispanic community. In his book, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston*, Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. explored the Mexican American fight for legal recognition due to educational discrimination in the early 1970s. Once full integration was achieved both black and Hispanic students faced discrimination on their new campuses, which led to unrest. In his thesis, "Sick at Heart: the Latino Boycott of the Abilene Independent School District," Bradley Paul Gallaway examines the Chicano school walkout and the subsequent legal battle, which occurred in Abilene, Texas in 1969 and 1970. Discriminatory practices within the district led to a nine-day school boycott by 300 Hispanic students. The Civil Rights Movement was multifaceted and minority citizens, both black and Hispanic, worked towards the goal of equality.

The integration process created new questions such as, what will become of black educators. Will they be accepted by white students? Will black administrators be allowed to continue in similar positions of authority? Throughout the South these questions were being asked by black educators. The elimination of *de jure* segregation allowed white administrators to eliminate positions for black educators and administrators. Michael Fultz explained in his article, "The Displacement of Black Educators Post-*Brown*: An Overview and Analysis," "for a period of approximately two decades, from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s, African-American school staff at all levels -- teachers, principals, coaches, counselors, band directors, even cafeteria workers -- were fired, demoted, harassed, and bullied as white communities throughout the South reacted first

³⁶ Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., "Let All of Them Take Heed:" *Mexican Americans and the campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 55.

to the prospect and then to the reality of court-ordered desegregation.”³⁷ In many cases, black personnel, especially principals, were demoted. White administrators often chose not to hire minorities for open positions because their cultural bias led them to believe that black educators were unqualified and incompetent.³⁸ The displacement of black educators was just another attempt by southern whites to maintain their power and privilege. While many school districts experienced smooth transitions, there were also many that experienced heightened racial tensions. Not all black educators were treated fairly and some faced discrimination from white students and administrators. Students too did not always make the transition from their segregated campus to the new integrated campus without tension.

In her book, *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville*, Sonya Ramsey explores the role of black women teachers in Nashville’s education system, from inception in 1867, through the end of segregation in 1983. Ramsey explains how black educators were both excited and fearful after the *Brown* decision. When Nashville implemented a gradual desegregation plan, Ramsey describes how the district chose the first black teachers for previously all-white campuses. “Some African American teachers believed the board selected not only the best applicants but also those whose appearance whites would find less threatening.”³⁹ After five years of voluntary faculty desegregation, most campuses had no more than four African-American educators and many had none.⁴⁰ Black educators who moved to

³⁷ Michael Fultz, “The Displacement of Black Educators Post-*Brown*: An Overview and Analysis,” *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 44 (Spring 2004), 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁹ Sonya Ramsey, *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

previously all-white campuses often lost the status and respect they were known for in their previous position. Ramsey's describes how seasoned teachers "suddenly became minorities who had neither voice nor power to influence policy."⁴¹

One of the ironic outcomes of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* was thus that it ended an era of enforced African-American separatism and independence, which black Americans were asked to leave behind in order to assimilate into white society. Ramsey explains that black educators felt this acutely, as they were forced to prove themselves in new positions, while portraying African Americans in a positive manner.⁴² The black community was thus unequally burdened with change. Although white students kept their schools and traditions, black students, teachers, and administrators were forced to leave their community institutions and embrace historically-white culture for the "good of everyone."

⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

⁴² Ibid., 121.

CHAPTER II

Jim Crow Education in Abilene

Established by cattlemen in 1881 as a stop along the Texas and Pacific Railway, Abilene, Texas, drew its name from Abilene, Kansas, the original endpoint for the Chisholm Trail. Populated by a group of frontier farmers and cattle barons, the Texas town grew quickly and soon became the seat of Taylor County. As the land was devoid of any natural resources, it fell to the Texas and Pacific Railroad to stimulate local growth and development. The railroad proved up to the task. Chartered by Congress to run from eastern Texas to San Diego, the railway attracted farmers and ranchers to the area. Indeed, by the time the railway line was completed in 1881, Abilene's population had increased to just over one thousand residents. This type of population growth would prove to be a recurring challenge for Abilene, which the railroad advertised as the "Future Great City of West Texas."⁴³

Abilene's first educational facility was a tent, the teachers served as volunteers, and the city's first residents passed a hat to collect funds for a permanent building. Local boosters soon collected \$600, and two years later the school moved to a Baptist church at the corner of North Third and Hickory, while a frame building was constructed. During the first decade of the town's existence, many different buildings were utilized for educating Abilene's white children. The most interesting was a warehouse dubbed by the students as the "Beer and Ice Seminary" due to its past function.⁴⁴

⁴³ Katharyn Duff, *Abilene on Catclaw Creek: A Profile of a West Texas Town* (Abilene, Texas: The Reporter Publishing Company, 1969), 57.

⁴⁴ Robert W. Sledge, *A People, A Place the Story of Abilene Volume One The Future Great City 1881-1940* (Buffalo Gap, Texas: State House Press, 2008), 93.

By 1890, Abilene had grown into a modest cattle town with a population of 3,194. The majority of the local residents were white, but 181 African-Americans also lived in town. The small black community included 61 school-aged children, but black parents were forced to educate their children at home due to racially exclusionary policies that prohibited black children from attending the white public schools. This exclusion was permissible under the Texas Constitution of 1876, which included several provisions regarding public education and insured separation of the races. Article seven of the constitution provided that separate facilities with impartial provisions must be made available for the white and black communities. This provision made Texas one of only three states to grant legal sanction to schools for black children at public expense.⁴⁵

As Abilene's population continued to grow, local leaders recognized the need for a new institution of higher education. In 1891, the Sweetwater Baptist Association used land donated by rancher C. W. Merchant, the "Father of Abilene," to establish a local Baptist College. The founders of the new school—one of the first colleges west of Fort Worth, Texas—later renamed Simmons College (1892) and then Hardin-Simmons University (1934), showed a strong commitment to education. This devotion to education continued as the population grew and local leaders added new schools including Abilene Christian College (1912) and McMurry College (1923).

Despite the founders' clear commitment to education in Abilene, the city's educational system was divided along racial lines that made it terribly unequal. The school system remained segregated and unequal until 1970. This chapter examines the development of segregated education in Abilene, tracing the origins of the city's racially

⁴⁵ J. Reuban Sheeler, "Vital Issues Encountered in Education of the Negro in America," *The Texas Standard*, Vol. 29. No. 3, January-February 1956, 4.

discriminatory system back to the mid-nineteenth century. After a survey of the Civil War era and Reconstruction, focus shifts to the development of separate facilities for Abilene's white, Hispanic, and African-American children. While Hispanic Americans were considered "white", Abilene School District operated a segregated school based on language for the city's Hispanic children.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, the Freedman's Bureau began operations in the former Confederate states. For the first time, African Americans in some areas gained access to education. Over a period of five years, 4,239 schools were built, and 247,333 pupils were educated.⁴⁶ However, many of these improvements were short-lived as white government officials implemented legislation, which effectively separated the races and cemented African-Americans as second-class citizens. From 1866 to 1900, Texas lawmakers passed legislation limiting African-America's freedom and access to education. For a short time, in the 1870s and 1880s, some gains were made, especially in the area of higher education. In 1872, for example, the African Methodist Episcopal Church founded the first black college in Texas, Paul Quinn College, and soon several more private institutions followed. The first public institution for higher learning was founded in 1876 through the Morrill Act of 1866, and was named Prairie View State Normal School (later renamed Prairie View A & M). However, most campuses were underfunded, which limited their ability to provide equal education.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ J. Reuban Sheeler, "Vital Issues Encountered in Education of the Negro in America", *The Texas Standard*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January- February 1945), 4.

⁴⁷ Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy*, 6-7.

Education of Abilene's African Americans consistently lagged behind white citizens. In 1890, for example, just as local Baptists made plans for their all-white college, Abilene's black children received their first one-room wooden school house built with city funds in the 200 block of Plum Street. Twenty-two students attended the Abilene Colored School under the direction of J. L. Allen.⁴⁸ Despite the continuing growth of the black community in Abilene over the first two decades of the twentieth century, the local school board kept the teaching staff to a minimum and only employed two teachers. In 1917, L. D. Glover became the principal. In the same year, he requested and was denied additional teaching staff. Mr. Glover worked as both the principal during the school year and as the janitor during the summer. He received, seventy dollars per month for his janitorial duties, twenty more than for his administrative duties.⁴⁹ Wage gaps were a consistent problem throughout the state with African-Americans earning less than whites in the same positions. A 1932 report to the Taylor County Superintendent listed white teacher pay between \$525 and \$920 per year, while African American teachers received only \$200.⁵⁰

Despite continuing school growth in Abilene, the teaching staff remained fixed at two teachers, Mrs. W.S. Collins and Miss A.V. Wooden, into the 1920s. The two teachers shared the one room frame building, while teaching 84 students. Finally, in response to the overcrowded conditions the school board divided the room and added two wood-burning stoves for heat. Although this was an improvement, it was far from equal to the

⁴⁸ Jewell G. Pritchett, *The Black Community in Abilene* (Abilene: Pritchett Publications, 1984), 10.

⁴⁹ Dorothy Wiseman, "Black Education...Remembering the Times, Places, People," *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 12, 1981, 34-35.

⁵⁰ "Report Shows County Rural School Setup," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 8, 1932, 3.

facilities provided for white students. This situation played out across the state of Texas and most of the South.⁵¹

Education developed separately with black and Hispanic students consistently receiving less funding, supplies and attention. Every gain came only after continuous requests and was offered grudgingly. As Abilene's minority population continued to increase, a new building became a necessity. In 1922, the Abilene Colored School received the gift of a "new" used building. When the white College Heights Elementary School moved into a new brick-and-mortar facility, the old frame building was moved from its original location to the all-black Carver neighborhood. Dorothy Wiseman, 1946 Woodson graduate, spoke at the 1979 Woodson Reunion where former students and faculty gathered together to reconnect and share memories. Her speech, "Black Education in Abilene: The Way We Were" was recorded, transcribed, and published in the *Abilene Reporter-News* centennial edition in 1981. Wiseman said, "We were, in a sense like the prospective new bride except we already had something old, we wanted something new, they gave us something borrowed and for the most part, we stayed blue." She explained that the Negro students "were, in fact, little Cinderellas -- we got all the cast-offs, all the hand-me-downs."⁵²

In 1929, an addition and renovations were completed on the old building. Two additional classrooms were added to address the previous year's overcrowding. The old building also received a new floor and ceiling.⁵³ During this time, the school consisted of 115 students and was led by principal R. W. Stafford and five teachers: Sammya Muric

⁵¹ Klarman. *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Stafford, Juantia Lucille Thomas, Julia Mae Christian, Raymond B. Hayden, and Alphonso D. Scott. The district offered first aid and home hygiene classes at three elementary schools including the Abilene Colored School, which illustrated some attempt at providing “equal” education opportunities.⁵⁴ Although facilities at the Colored School continued to be over utilized and supplies were most often second hand, the staff and administrators worked to maximize the education of pupils in their charge. *The Abilene Reporter-News* includes several small articles on the achievement of Abilene’s Negro students, which exemplified how R. W. Stafford strove to provide opportunities for the students under his charge. In 1932, eight pupils attended the Negro State College at Prairie View state competition in declamation, spelling, and debate.⁵⁵

During the 1930s, all of Abilene’s schools continued to increase in size, despite the Great Depression. In 1935, with the assistance of Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds, a new school for black students was built at North 9th and Plum. The WPA contributed \$12,575.78 dollars to the project. The new campus, completed in 1936, included six classrooms. Yet, it was only half as large as was needed, since it served Abilene’s entire black community, in the first through twelfth grade. Further complicating matters, the school was built in a high-traffic area, which made it dangerous for children to walk to and from the campus. In October 1937, local African-American residents petitioned for and received slow street signs near the school.⁵⁶ The African-American community continued to be concerned for the safety of their children and in July 1938, one hundred and twelve African-American residents petitioned the city to

⁵⁴ Judith Wallin, “First Aid and Home Hygiene Classes Opened in 3 Schools,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 10, 1929, 2.

⁵⁵ “Negro Pupils Here Off to State Meet,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 21, 1932, 6.

⁵⁶ “Signs. Mosquitos,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 30, 1937, 7.

build an underpass for the schoolchildren east of Pine Street. Parents explained that the Plum Street crossing, which schoolchildren used, closed when the Texas and Pacific underpasses were built.⁵⁷ As a result of the petition, Mayor Will W. Hair wrote to railway officials and requested an underpass. He specifically cited the dangers inherent in children crossing seven tracks. However, T&P superintendent A. E. Pistole cited the 1935 agreement with the city, which stated that the Plum Street crossing would close when the Pine and Cedar underpasses were completed. He recommended that the children be encouraged to use the nearest underpass, which was a two-and-a-half-block walk. He also requested that police presence be implemented to discourage students from crossing at Plum Street.⁵⁸

By the 1940's Abilene had firmly established color lines. The majority of Abilene's black and Hispanic citizens lived and worked in the Carver neighborhood. Black children attended Abilene Colored School and Hispanic children enrolled at the Americanization School, later renamed Houston Elementary, until they mastered the English language. One of the first recorded school for Abilene's Hispanic children opened in 1929, named the Mexican Public School. From 1936 to 1948 it was operated as the Americanization School, and in 1949 it became Sam Houston School.⁵⁹ Although some Hispanic student's attended schools across the district the majority of Hispanic student's were segregated based on language until they completed the sixth grade.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁷ "Commission," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 9, 1938, 1 & 3.

⁵⁸ "T. & P. and City Trade Requests," *Abilene Reporter-News*, August 20, 1938, 3.

⁵⁹ Bradley Paul Galaway, "Sick at Heart": The Latino Boycott of the Abilene Independent School District." Master's Thesis, Abilene Christian University, 2002, 5-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

1940 census shows a total population of 26,612 with 1,515 black citizens. Hispanics were reported as white in 1944, but the 1930 census showed 599 in residence.⁶¹ The population nearly doubled by 1950 and then again by 1960. Population growth proved to be problematic for all Abilene schools.

Abilene's population growth accelerated at the beginning of U. S. involvement in World War II with the establishment of Camp Barkley, eleven miles southwest of Abilene. The facility became one of the nation's largest military training centers and the home of the 45th division.⁶² The opening of Camp Barkley was cited as causing elementary school congestion as well as high school overcrowding.⁶³ The 1941-42 school year showed a 340-student increase from the previous year, bringing total enrollment to 5,231. Overcrowding was noted across white fifth grade classrooms, but was most acute for third- and fourth-grade students at Abilene Colored School. On January 24, 1941, there were 79 students in one room and 72 in the other. The school board authorized the hiring of a new teacher and approved the use of the library as a classroom, while a more permanent solution could be determined.⁶⁴ The city applied for more money from the Public Works Administration to build two new junior high schools and to expand Abilene Colored School. In 1941, the commission approved the money and expanded the school with the addition of four classrooms.⁶⁵ As World War II escalated headlines focused more on the war and less on local events, where school news and events previously were featured frequently they became sporadic unless they dealt with wartime issues.

⁶¹ Paul Lack, Robert Sledge, Fane Downs, and Paul Jungmeyer, *The History of Abilene Facts & Sources* (Abilene: McMurry College Publication, 1981), 9.

⁶² "The Name is Barkley," *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 10, 1941, 1.

⁶³ "Ward School Expansion is Under Study," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 13, 1941, 1.

⁶⁴ "Abilene School Head Get 2-Year Contract," *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 7, 1941, 1 & 13.

⁶⁵ "Commission Approves Negro School Plans," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 20, 1941, 4.

Schoolchildren took half-day holidays to participate in scrap drives. Across the United States, schools began to see a decline in enrollment, particularly among males who left high school early to enlist or find employment in war related industries. The 1942-43 school year commenced with an enrollment of 4,968 at thirteen schools. The district consisted of 209 administrators and instructional staff.⁶⁶ The opening of two new junior high schools and the decrease in students alleviated overcrowding at the high school. Enrollment remained stable at Abilene Colored School, and space continued to be a concern even after the addition of four new classrooms. In 1946, the enrollment at Abilene Schools climbed to 5,514 students.⁶⁷

World War II was a crucial point in history and served to change the worldview of many who served. The fight against Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology of racial superiority highlighted that black Americans were treated as second-class citizens. The injustice became evident and the U. S. military led the way in the integration of the races. It became evident that change was on the horizon.

Until 1946, the black school in Abilene was referred to as the Negro School or the Abilene Colored School. On May 30, 1946, the Negro Parent Teacher Association recommended the school be named Carter G. Woodson School. The new name honored the noted black historian who initiated the study of black history. Woodson was first an educator and then became a historian and political activist. Jacqueline Goggin explains in her biography, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History*, “Woodson was convinced that education in black history at all levels of curriculum was essential to the

⁶⁶ “City Teachers Assigned,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 13, 1942, 10.

⁶⁷ “Enrollment in City Schools Increases 343,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 12, 1946, 1.

psychological health of black people.”⁶⁸ He believed in the transformative power of education. Woodson’s *Journal of Negro History* was first published in 1916. Woodson, the son of a former slave, used his works and publications to explain the history of a people who spent 250 years in slavery and to illuminate the effects those years had on a people.⁶⁹ He pioneered a new study of black American history, not from the point of view of a victim of white oppression and racism, but as a major actor in American History.⁷⁰

In November 1946, Macon Freeman, reporter for the *Abilene Reporter News*, wrote about a major problem within the Negro School; the withdrawal of older pupils before graduating. Carter G. Woodson School counted 450 students during the 1946 school year. In first through fourth grades, there were 230 pupils enrolled, in fifth through eighth there were 154 pupils and only 66 pupils in grades nine through twelve. The 1945 graduating class only contained twenty students. Principal William E. Johnston explained, “We lose many students when they reach the age that they are able to work. We also have the problem of a large transient population, and it is so hard to keep transferring that many drop out. And then it is sometimes a problem to keep parents interest up.”⁷¹ In an article in the *Abilene Reporter-News*, Johnston outlined his plan to increase retention. First, he explained, teachers in the lower grades would highlight the necessity of education and encourage the students to set future goals. Second, teachers

⁶⁸ Jacqueline A. Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 156.

⁶⁹ Brenda E. Stevenson. ““Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves”: Carter G. Woodson’s *Journal of Negro History* “Invents” the Study of Slavery.” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 4 (2015): 698-720. doi:10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.4.0698.

⁷⁰ Goggin, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History*, 67.

⁷¹ “Withdrawal of Older Pupils Big Problem of Negro School,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 18, 1946, 2.

and administrators would be cognizant of learning gaps in transient students, and work to close those gaps. Third, Johnston explained his desire to increase student interest through extra-curricular activities. Johnston was hoping to implement a band program but found it difficult to obtain instruments. This was in stark contrast with the band at Abilene High School. Dr. Raymond T. Bynum founded Abilene High School's band in 1926, which served Abilene's white 10th-12th grade students. Woodson's would finally gain a band in 1952, after students persistently requested the opportunity to access music education. Used instruments were provided through fundraising and by donation. Members of the Lion's Club Boys and Girls committee collected used instruments to donate to the newly formed band.⁷² Previously funds were raised at the 1947 Juneteenth celebration to purchase instruments for Woodson students.⁷³

The Woodson Band played their first concert Sunday, March 8, 1953 under the direction of Leonard Bowden.⁷⁴ Bowden was the former director of an African American high school band in Mobile, Alabama. He attended Tuskegee College and held a B.A. in trombone from Chicago Conservatory of Music. "Prior to coming to Abilene, Bowden taught band at Tuskegee College, directed orchestras, re-arranged music, and served with the Navy as director of all-Negro band units in the Navy."⁷⁵ Bowden completed one year as the Woodson Band director and garnered the support of parents and students. However, he was not rehired for a second year. Bowden was teaching in Texas on a temporary certificate, which had expired. Forty-eight concerned African American parents approached the board. Mrs. L.B. Rodgers, mother of a Woodson Band member,

⁷² "Band Instruments Sought for Woodson," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 18, 1952, 7A.

⁷³ "Parade, Feast, Tennis Court Dedication Feature Juneteenth," *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 20, 1947, 12.

⁷⁴ "New Woodson Band to Play; County to Study Road Plan," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 8, 1953, 7A.

⁷⁵ "Woodson Hires Band Director," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 7, 1952, 4A.

spoke for the group, saying, "After carefully considering the affair, we found there was no mark of displeasure against Bowden by the Board, but since he is from Alabama, he will have to qualify by taking two subjects required by Texas. This he is doing successfully (by correspondence). The course is given by the Texas Southern University in Houston, and in a very short time this course will be completed."⁷⁶ Morgan Jones Jr., Abilene School Board president, explained that Bowden had been warned repeatedly to complete the necessary course work for his Texas certificate. Superintendent A. E. Wells recommended Bowden's dismissal at the April 29, 1953 school board meeting and the recommendation was accepted.⁷⁷ By 1955, the band grew from 58 students to 91 and was under the direction of J. L. Hill. After earning a B. A. in music, Hill graduated from the Naval School of Music in Washington D. C. and played in the band during his time in the army. The band won second place honors at the 1954 State Band Contest in which fifty-six bands competed at Prairie View A & M.⁷⁸ After only three years in existence the band had already become an important part of the school culture and African American community.

In 1947, a reporter with the *Abilene Reporter-News*, Earle Walker visited all Abilene elementary, junior high, and high school campuses to document the condition of education in Abilene. The series was comprised of seven articles, which ran consecutively. Walker reported on the overcrowded conditions at the majority of the campuses and attributed the problem to the city's ever-increasing population. Many of

⁷⁶ "Negros Laud Band Director as Board Seeks Replacement," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 8, 1953, 2A.

⁷⁷ "Minutes", ASBM, April 29, 1953, Book 5, 20.

⁷⁸ Burton Tanco, "Woodson Bandsmen Need No Urging to Keep Practicing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 28, 1955, 1D.

the facilities needed lighting updates and expanded facilities. However, the school in the worst condition was the Americanization School, which housed Hispanic students. In Abilene, Hispanic students faced segregation based on language and could not attend the white schools until they were fluent in English. The Americanization School was established in the 1920s with the purpose of teaching English proficiency and American culture.⁷⁹ The establishment of the school followed the national trend to assimilate immigrants in the early 1900s. Originally, the school only operated five months per year to account for students need to work in the fields.⁸⁰ This was the only school in Abilene to adhere to an alternate start date. The alternate start date continued until the school board set the start date to match other Abilene schools in 1953. The board conducted a survey of Hispanic parents and 72 percent preferred a fall start date.⁸¹ Photographer Don Hutcheson provided photographic evidence of the dilapidated state of the school, which had previously served as the city's school for Negro children. When the Abilene Colored School moved into the repurposed College Heights building, the Americanization School moved into the old Abilene Colored School. Glass panes had fallen out of the windows and were not replaced due to rotting window frames. Photographs also showed a sagging foundation and peeling paint. Walker reported that the structure was built prior to school-building laws requiring that 1/5 of the floor space be reached by natural light. School officials estimated that each room only received half of the light required by law. The Americanization School educated an average of 215 students in the seven-room structure. After graduating Hispanic students could move to their neighborhood junior-high

⁷⁹ Robert W. Sledge, *A People, A Place the Story of Abilene Volume One The Future Great City 1881-1940* (Buffalo Gap, Texas: State House Press, 2008), 186.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸¹ "Minutes", ASBM, 6 April 1953, Book 5, 13.

school.⁸² However, John R. Hutto, the Americanization School principal, explained “Most of our students do not get further education and therefore our obligation to them is greater during this period.”⁸³ Although Abilene’s Hispanic students may not have explicitly been discouraged from pursuing further education, the nature of segregation was an impediment to the economic mobility of Texas Hispanic population.⁸⁴ Those students who did continue with their education were often discouraged from pursuing college preparatory classes and instead encouraged to enroll in vocational courses.⁸⁵

The seventh article in the series covers the state of the African-American school, aptly titled “Negro School has Space Shortage.” Walker visited Carter G. Woodson School and noticed overcrowding in grades one through six. The school day was already divided with grades one through six attending the first half of the day and grades seven through twelve attending the other half. Walker highlighted the supplies available to students, which included blackboards, desks, and chairs. However, enrollment exceeded the state recommended number of thirty-five pupils per class. He pointed out that the school lacked a gymnasium for physical education, no shop for vocational training, no technology (such as a projector) for showing filmstrips of the period. Insufficient overhead lighting hindered the learning environment. The enrollment was 440 pupils taught by thirteen teachers. He concluded his findings saying that truancy was a major concern. This was the only article in the series that mentioned student behavior. The photograph accompanying the article was taken by Hutcheson and illustrated the

⁸² Earle Walker, “Mexican School Falling Apart,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 12, 1947, 1.

⁸³ Macon Freeman, “Young Latins’ School Lacks Frills and Many Essentials,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 10, 1946, 18.

⁸⁴ San Miguel Jr., “Let All of Them Take Heed,” 117.

⁸⁵ Gallaway, “Sick at Heart,” 6-7.

overcrowded conditions at the campus. The picture of a third-grade classroom showed fifty pupils seated at desks. In several rows, three students shared two desks. The actual enrollment for the class was fifty-five students, twenty more than the state recommendation.⁸⁶

After the *Reporter-News* series, the Fifty-First Texas State Legislature passed significant legislation effecting public education. The Gilmer-Aikin Laws reorganized the state's public education system. One major impact in Abilene was the plan to increase African-American teacher salaries to the level of their white colleagues. In Abilene, wage disparity continued until the 1950-51 school year when African-American teacher salaries increased to match those of their white colleagues. The school board passed the new salary schedule at the January 29, 1948 school board meeting.⁸⁷ These changes came after years of targeted efforts by the NAACP. Klarman explained how World War II changed race relations in America. He pointed the war's "democratic ideology, the civil rights consciousness it fostered among blacks, the unprecedented political and economic opportunities it created for blacks, and the cold war imperative for racial change that followed – combined to create a climate favorable to progressive racial change."⁸⁸ A shift began at the national level, which ultimately would lead to changes at the state and local level. The Gilmer-Aikin Laws also increased state power and spending in education.⁸⁹ Gene Preuss explained in his book, *To Get A Better School System: One Hundred Years of Education Reform in Texas*, that the new laws were a direct challenge to the

⁸⁶ Earle Walker, "Negro School Has space Shortage," *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 15, 1947, 1.

⁸⁷ "Minutes", ASBM, January 29, 1948, Book 1947-1953, 109.

⁸⁸ Klarman. *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 173.

⁸⁹ Gene Preuss, "The 'Father' of Texas Education: A. M. Aikin and the Modernization of Texas Public Schools," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 47: Iss. 2, Article 8. 2009, 17. Available at <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol47/iss2/8>

philosophy of local control.⁹⁰ This was a first step in equalizing education for students by eliminating the one-room rural schoolhouses by combining districts and allowed the state more control in the allocation of funds.

After the implementation of the Gilmer-Aikin laws, several court cases were filed in Texas. The first two were filed in May 1949, one in Tyler and the other in Texarkana. These two cases were similar in that they both charged discrimination against African-American children in facilities and educational opportunities. Parents of six African-American students filed suit against the Independent School District of Texarkana, Superintendent H. W. Stillwell, and six school board members. The petition asserted that Dunbar High School for Negroes was located alongside a creek that functioned as a sewer, that there were no advanced courses offered at the black school, and that the distance students had to travel to the school was unreasonable.⁹¹ The petition filed in Tyler also alleged that facilities, curriculum, and educational opportunities offered to African-American students were inadequate and inferior to those offered to white students.⁹² The parents of ten African-American students filed the petition, which asserted that students were required to travel thirty-two miles each day to attend Quitman High School.⁹³ Both cases sought equalization of facilities for African-American students. At the June 23, 1949, meeting of the Abilene School Board, Superintendent Nat Williams explained to the board members, "If we are to avoid an injunction we must

⁹⁰ Gene B. Preuss, *To Get a Better School System: One Hundred Years of Education Reform in Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2009).

⁹¹ "Negroes Seek Injunction against 'Discrimination' in Texas School," *Lubbock Morning Avalanche*, May 19, 1949, 12.

⁹² "Injunction Ban Sought at Tyler by Negro Parents," *Corsicana Daily Sun*, May 18, 1949, 12.

⁹³ "Negro Parents Charge School Discrimination," *Galveston Daily News*, May 18, 1949, 8.

improve the facilities of the colored school.”⁹⁴ The board agreed and added the question of funding improved facilities to the next board meeting and whether to use Gilmer-Aikin subsidies or a special bond.

In June 1949, due to insurmountable overcrowding, black citizens petitioned the city for use of the abandoned Americanization School. The school building was shuttered after the completion of a new school building for the Hispanic children. After a meeting of concerned black citizens at Macedonia Baptist Church, a petition was submitted to the Abilene School Board. Four members of the school board attended the meeting, Chairman Horace Condley, R. B. Leach, Mrs. George Swinney, and Mrs. Vic Behrens. The Negro Citizens Committee requested the use of the building for elementary students, as well as the playground for use by the community. The Negro Citizens Committee held a second meeting regarding the acquisition of the Americanization School on August 1, 1949 at Antioch AME Church. They also discussed the need for community recreational facilities.⁹⁵

The acquisition of the Americanization School was a temporary fix to an ever-growing problem and in the spring of 1950, a school bond passed to add an addition to Woodson. This bond to address problems at Woodson came after two more equalization cases were filed in September 1949. *Higgins v. Goodman* charged Lucille Goodman, Superintendent of Addison Public Free Schools, and the board of trustees with discrimination. The petition alleged that Addison Schools maintained an African-American grade school, which was an “old, worn, ill-conditioned, thirty-year old three-

⁹⁴ “Better Negro School Urgent, Superintendent Tells Board,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 24, 1949, 1.

⁹⁵ Erma Holt, “City Schools ‘Big Business’ with Million-Dollar Budget,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, August 2, 1949, 1.

room frame building.” The petition contended that the structure was a fire hazard and had “grossly unclean outside toilets, no library, or adequate furniture.”⁹⁶ The suit was brought by five parents on behalf of their twelve children and sought an injunction to stop the spending of \$25,000 bond until the African-American school was brought up to the quality of the school for white students.⁹⁷ *Butler v. Wilemon* was a suit brought against G.C. Wilemon, superintendent of Waxahachie Public Free Schools, and the board of trustees. Six parents representing twelve children charged the district with discrimination against African-American students. The suit asked for “equal and adequate schools for Negroes, both in courses offered and in physical equipment.”⁹⁸ Specifically, the suit requested that the same courses be offered and the provision of equal laboratories and teachers. C. B. Bunkley and U.S. Tate, NAACP Regional Special Councils represented the plaintiffs, in both cases. The cases were similar in that both highlighted the vast discrepancies between facilities provided for the education of white and African-American students.⁹⁹

Fearing that the planned addition at Carter G. Woodson would not provide equal education for Abilene’s black children, a coalition of black citizens’ organizations presented the school board with a petition in December 1950. The coalition asked for the building of a separate accredited high school. Other requests included new comfortable classroom seating, a band instructor and instruments, a commercial department and typewriters, a physical education space for boys and girls, a laboratory for science with

⁹⁶ “Negroes Protest School Facilities,” *Denton Record-Chronicle*, September 14, 1949, 1A.

⁹⁷ “Texas Parents File Suits Against School Board: Hurl Discrimination Charges, Ask That Funds Be Enjoined,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 24, 1949, 11.

⁹⁸ “Texas Negro School Discrimination Heard,” *Abilene Reporter News*, November 16, 1949, 14.

⁹⁹ “Texas Parents File Suits Against School Board: Hurl Discrimination Charges, Ask That Funds Be Enjoined,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 24, 1949, 11.

the addition of physics and chemistry to the curriculum, a football stadium, a lounge and toilet facilities for teachers, and the addition of a library. School board president, Horace Condley asked the board not to review the bids until the school board studied the problem. Condley wanted to ensure whatever was built would stand up in court as providing equal educational facilities. It was the consensus of the board that the school district would be forced to face the issue of racial segregation eventually, and the trustees felt that if the building of a separate junior and senior high school would stave off a court battle on this subject for several years it would be worth the investment.¹⁰⁰

Four members of the Abilene School Board and Superintendent Nat Williams met with a group of fifteen African-American school patrons and teachers to discuss the need for a new building. The committee impressed upon the board the need to expand educational programs that included music, science, and consumer courses. The group unanimously endorsed the 6-6 plan, which would place first through sixth grade in the elementary school and seventh through twelfth grade in the Junior and Senior High School. However, the board realized another bond election would be necessary to complete the project.¹⁰¹

Not everyone in Abilene agreed with the plan to spend more funds on the building of better facilities for Abilene's black community. Mr. J. Floyd Malcolm wrote a letter to the editor after the 6-6 plan was proposed. He explained what actions he would take if he was a member of the school board. Malcolm wrote, "I would tell the Colored people that I would do my utmost to provide their school with all subjects for which they could find

¹⁰⁰ "Board Stands Pat on School Dances," *Abilene Reporter-New*, January 9, 1951, 1-2.

¹⁰¹ "School Board Hears Negroes Hopes for New High School," *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 16, 1951, 2.

sufficient number of qualified students to warrant the tax payers putting that subject to their school.”¹⁰² He explained that it would not be justifiable to provide a chemistry lab and teacher for a single student. “I would put the monkey on their back to prove they could provide the students, and then I would take steps to provide the facilities and at the same time be fair and just to them.”¹⁰³ Several days later Mrs. Beulah B. Childress answered Malcolm’s letter. “Now our school (Woodson) is a part of Abilene. I’ve heard a chain is as strong as its weakest link. We have only asked for the things any fair-minded, right-thinking citizen will agree is justly due our own folks.”¹⁰⁴ Those serving on the school board concurred with Childress’ assessment. The board as a whole wished to provide equal facilities in order to ensure compliance with the law. Childress took exception with Malcolm’s statement regarding sufficient numbers of qualified students to warrant the taxpayers’ expense. She highlighted the fact that all citizens paid taxes, regardless of race. Childress continued, “Yes, we are proud of our school and for that reason we are seeking improvement. I am sure you will agree that any person or thing that simply holds its own isn’t making progress.”¹⁰⁵

The campaign began in December 1950, yielded results in March 1951. The Abilene School Board approved plans to build an additional segregated school. The Abilene chapter of the NAACP, Negro Ministers’ Alliance, the Negro PTA, the Negro Chamber of Commerce, and interested Negro Club of Women and Citizens were instrumental in convincing the board to move forward with the plan. The new school would provide a gymnasium, science labs, home economic labs, and a shop for

¹⁰² “Malcom Says He’s Not a Fit Candidate,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 29, 1951, 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “Woodson School Improvement Upheld,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 4, 1951, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

vocational training. The board's approval of the new plan fulfilled two purposes. First, the board desired to give African-American pupils a new and equal facility that matched that enjoyed by whites. Second, they believed that the granting of the new school might deter the Negro community from seeking to end segregation. Specifically, they thought it might delay integration for a decade. Interestingly, the school opened in 1953 and despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, schools in Abilene remained segregated until Dyess Elementary became the first integrated school in January 1963.

As the new high school neared completion, a number of concerned black citizens met to discuss the naming of the new facility. Proposed names were Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, and Ralph Bunche. However, black citizens voted to name the school Mary McLeod Bethune High School. Bethune was an inspirational educator, founder of the National Council of Negro Women, and served as president of the National Association of Colored Women. The committee felt strongly that the library should receive the name Eugenia Pickard, after the Abilene resident who left her estate for building a new school for Abilene's black community. Mrs. Pickard's estate originally totaled \$5,000, which was not sufficient for the construction of a school. After several years of accruing interest, the total neared \$14,000, which was sufficient for the building of a library. After much discussion, the decision to use the money for a library was approved.¹⁰⁶

The school was not named after Ms. Bethune because approximately one month after the black citizens voted, Earle Walker, reporter with the *Abilene Reporter News*, informed the school board of what he believed to be Bethune's subversive qualities. He

¹⁰⁶ "Pickard: Her Name Lives On," *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 12, 1981, 36.

explained his findings in an article, “Mary McLeod Bethune’s Background of Activity.” Walker explained that although Bethune was an outstanding figure in education and politics, she was barred from speaking at several schools because she belonged to “subversive organizations.” Walker clarified that he requested information on Bethune from the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This committee was established to investigate suspected communist activities in 1938. The committee supplied a sixteen-page document detailing her activities. Walker detailed her speaking engagements at several communist affiliated organizations and her service on the board of directors of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. These allegations were made primarily by Representative Martin Dies and were proved false.¹⁰⁷ However, the allegations alone led the Abilene School Board instead to name the school Carter G. Woodson High School and the previous campus became Carter G. Woodson Elementary. The board agreed to name the library after Eugenia Pickard and decided that a school librarian would run the library during school hours and a public librarian would run the facility for the public after school hours. Before the building of the Eugenia Pickard Library, black citizens did not have access to a public library. Black schoolchildren could check out books from the Woodson School library, however there were no books available for general circulation. The construction of Woodson High School fulfilled the hopes of many in the Abilene African-American community. However, at the same time, Abilene was building a new high school for their white students. The new Abilene High School cost the city \$2,446,256 and could accommodate approximately 2,000 students. Woodson High School cost the city \$250,000 for 300 students, with 188 attending the first year.

¹⁰⁷ Joyce A. Hayden, *Mary McLeod Bethune and Black Women’s Political Activism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 187.

Both white and black students received new facilities; however, the expenditures showed how unequal the system was. The district spent \$833 per student on the black facility and \$1,223 dollars on the white facility.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ “Abilene’s Multi-Million Dollar High School,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, August 28, 1955, 1B.

CHAPTER III

Education in the Wake of the *Brown* Decision

Abilene's Carter G. Woodson High School opened in the fall of 1953 with 188 students in attendance. Nine months later, the Supreme Court issued its unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), finding that racial segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. The years since the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision illustrated that "separate but equal" was in fact terribly unequal. White schools benefited from more funding, better-educated teachers, and newer facilities and supplies. The very nature of segregated schools ascribed an inferior status to African American and Hispanic children. Many school districts, including Abilene, participated in last minute efforts to stave off integration. The opening of the second Woodson campus typified these efforts as the local district attempted to show that it had established "equal" education facilities. Reactions to the *Brown* decision varied by geographic region, state, town, and even within homes. This chapter will discuss the immediate impact of the *Brown* decision and the failure of Abilene Schools in implementing a desegregation plan.

In Abilene, school officials cautioned citizen to stay calm and be patient as administrators sought to deal with the *Brown* decision and its implications. Across the state and country, front-page news articles on May 18, 1954, announced the U. S. Supreme Court's controversial order. However, the court decision only served to overturn the standard established by *Plessy v. Ferguson*; the court did not set any deadlines for compliance. White school officials across Texas waited with trepidation to hear from the state on how to proceed. A. E. Wells, superintendent of Abilene Schools, was quoted in the *Abilene Reporter-News* following the decision. "I hesitate to say [anything about the

Brown decision] until the Texas Education Agency and the state's attorney general interpret the decision," he said. "Whatever anybody else were to say now wouldn't necessarily prove reliable."¹⁰⁹ Superintendents in the surrounding communities concurred with Wells' "wait and see" mentality. Olaf G. South, Sweetwater's superintendent, reiterated Wells' cautionary statement that local citizens should wait on state clarification. He explained that gradual change would be a necessary course of action. He also highlighted his concern for the African-American teachers whom he felt would suffer adverse effects from the decision to integrate. Superintendent South offered a self-serving take on the situation, pointing out that in the Sweetwater School District, white and black teachers worked collaboratively and enjoyed equal pay. He also explained that he believed that African-Americans would prefer to keep their schools in their neighborhoods. His statement regarding the neighborhood school concept would prove partially true. Many black communities wanted to keep their neighborhood schools. However, that was only part of their desire. They wanted their neighborhood schools to be fully equal to nearby white schools and believed that such equality would come only through integration.

Superintendents across the state received their answer when J.W. Edgar, Texas Commissioner of Education, counseled public schools not to integrate. Edgar sent a letter to districts across the state on May 24, 1954, which required districts to operate as usual.¹¹⁰ In June 1954, Edgar attended the Southern Governors segregation meeting as Governor Shivers' representative. He would recommend that desegregation be achieved through "local control." Shivers said, "Texas position will be: we're hopeful that when

¹⁰⁹ "Wells Keeps Mum on Court Ruling," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 18, 1954, 1.

¹¹⁰ Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools*, 37-38.

the Supreme Court hands down rules after its October hearing (on how to put its decision into effect) they will give enough leeway for solution of this problem.”¹¹¹ Shivers believed that the matter of desegregation needed to fall to local school district and communities, who he felt would choose to continue segregation. Without a compliance deadline, Texas authorities did not see any necessity to take action.

At the time of the *Brown* decision, Abilene Schools reported enrollment rates at 529 black students and 9,050 white students. The school district maintained the typical dual system of education. African American students attended the Woodson Schools, non-English speaking Hispanic students attended the Americanization School, now named Houston, and white students attended the remaining campuses. Following the *Brown* decision Earle Walker wrote an article for the *Abilene Reporter-News* titled “Negro Schools Stack up well in the Key City.” It is clear that the newspaper wanted to highlight the “equal” opportunities available in Abilene. It is important to note that these so-called equal opportunities only existed due to the recent completion of the new Woodson High School facilities. Walker asserted that whites and African-Americans had equal facilities, equipment, and technology. He explained that African-American schools and white schools faced similar problems, namely Abilene’s population growth. The overall tone of the article was paternalistic and condescending as Walker attempted to prove “some facts about the way Abilene has cared for its Negro school children.”¹¹² The evidence provided was anecdotal and neglected blatant inequalities such as the sharing of facilities. Woodson Elementary and High school shared a library, gymnasium, and

¹¹¹ Bo Byers, “Local Control on Desegregation Urged: Shivers to send Edgar to Meeting,” *Lubbock Morning Avalanche*, June 4, 1954, 1.

¹¹² Earle Walker, “Negro Schools Stack up well in the Key City,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 23, 1954, 1.

auditorium. Woodson Elementary employed a part-time principal, R. B Hayden, overseeing eleven teachers, while other elementary schools employed full time principals. E. F Green, who was employed full time, led the high school. The article included a photograph by David Barros of Mrs. Allie Ward's first and second grade classroom, which showed modern desks and was not overcrowded. This was a stark contrast to the photographs taken seven years prior, which showed the overcrowded conditions at Woodson Elementary.¹¹³

Walker later conducted an informal survey of Abilene residents in which he asked about their opinions on racial integration. The first article reported the perspective of twenty-five members of the black community. When asked whether they were in favor of the *Brown* decision, eighteen were for the ruling, four against, and three did not comment. Those who had a favorable opinion towards the decision believed that integration would increase understanding and would provide better job and educational opportunities for black youths. A few of those interviewed voiced concern about what would happen to African American teachers. Mrs. Sam Curtis, president of the Negro Parent-Teacher Association and co-owner of Curtis-Starks Funeral Home said, "By being together, pupils will get the same instruction. I believe a Negro student who has gone through a mixed school stands a better chance of a good job. He will have passed the identical work as white pupils. One point I wonder about, though, is whether most Negro teachers will be out of jobs when the change happens."¹¹⁴ Others in Texas echoed her thoughts, and when segregation finally ended employment became a major concern for many black educators in Abilene. Mrs. R.W. Stafford, wife of a past Woodson principal,

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Earle Walker, "Negroes Glad School Ban Out," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 26, 1954, 1.

commented on the historic *Brown* decision, “I certainly think the change is for the good of the country as a whole,” she said. “I believe that both races will benefit. It is my opinion that Negro children will get better school advantages if the two races are together. I believe the Negro teachers who are prepared will continue to have jobs under the change, because the country is short on teachers. Those who are not prepared shouldn’t be teaching anyway.”¹¹⁵ Abilene school records indicate that those teaching in the Woodson Schools were well qualified and held a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. Many held master’s degrees in their fields.¹¹⁶

The next article shared the opinions of eighteen white citizens. Unlike the previous article, only a few of those interviewed agreed to have their names printed in the paper because the issue of integration could be very divisive even among family members. One mother, overheard by her son saying she opposed integration, called the newspaper and removed her name from the publication. Each of the people interviewed was asked if they were in favor of admitting African-Americans to white schools. Thirteen favored continuing segregation, four opposed, and one refused to discuss the issue. John Danilson, author of the article, explained that he believed Abilene would go along with the Supreme Court decision peacefully, but that not all citizens agreed with the decision. One father was quoted, “The court decides what is law, what else can we do?”¹¹⁷ The majority of parents favored continuing to support Negro educational facilities. Mrs. Roy E. Hodgins, the mother of a second grader at College Heights Elementary said, “As long as we have equal facilities, I believe everyone will be happier

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ “Minutes”, ASBM, August 23, 1954, Book 6, 87.

¹¹⁷ John Danilson, “White Parents Oppose Mixing,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 28, 1954, 1.

apart.”¹¹⁸ She also explained her concern over further integration in public spaces such as theaters and neighborhoods. She feared it might lead to inter-racial marriage, which she opposed. One proponent for integration was Mrs. Dwayne Kelley, a service member’s wife and mother to a two-year-old daughter. Mrs. Kelley previously lived in non-segregated German air force base. She said, “Non-segregation works out fine. It’s perfectly all right with me to have it in public schools.”¹¹⁹ Despite Kelley’s positive view, the overriding sentiment of the white citizens interviewed was that “separate but equal” was for the best.

Robyn Duff Ladino, in her book *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High*, clearly articulated the ideology of white southern segregationists. Ladino explained that by the late 1950s this ideology was a firmly entrenched part of white southern society. A primary facet of the ideology was fear of change. This fear drove southern segregationists to hold tighter to the status quo, which included maintaining state and local control of schools.¹²⁰ Governor Alan Shivers and Attorney General John Sheppard’s action exemplified this ideology. Shivers was outspoken about his views against integrated schools and suggested that any attempt to substitute federal control for state and local control would be alarming.

The Abilene School Board followed the lead of many Texas districts and waited for the governor and the state legislature to chart a path forward on education policy. While the school board waited, a group of concerned black citizens took action. Citizens organized the Negro Civic Club of Abilene and petitioned the school board to end

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools*, 27.

segregation at the Abilene High campus for the 1955-56 school year. The new two-million-dollar high school had recently been completed and was opening for white tenth through twelfth graders. The Negro Citizens Council requested that within a year all elementary and junior high schools integrate, and they petitioned for Carter G. Woodson High to become a desegregated junior high. President of the local NAACP chapter, Ben Curtis, explained that the black community would not regard it as discrimination to maintain a junior high school where the present African-American high school stands. He reiterated the need to have the school open to all children -- white, black, and Hispanic -- in the neighborhood. He also maintained that the school must be supplied with equal equipment, supplies, and staff as all other Abilene schools.¹²¹ Petitioners also wished for a guarantee that Negro teachers would keep their jobs. The petition said, "We know our Negro teachers have ability. We expect our Negro teachers to hold their positions. We realize that Negro high schools and Negro colleges have always been inferior to white high schools and white colleges. As evidence of their ability, we would be very much pleased if every Negro teacher in Abilene within seven to eight years from this date had a degree from a white college or university regardless of what degrees the Negro teachers have at the time."¹²² They also requested the creation of an interracial committee to advise Superintendent Wells and the school board on how to end segregation properly. The group clearly outlined their desire to see artificial boundaries broken down. The petition specifically said, "We would not want any artificial boundaries set up but would wish all children in [the] neighborhood to attend schools in his neighborhood, except all

¹²¹ Earle Walker, "Petition Opposes 'Artificial' Zones," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 19, 1955, 1.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Negro High School students should go to the formally white high school.”¹²³ Ben Curtis, Mrs. W. H. Butler, Jesse C. Harris, Henry L. Cumby, Hartzell Jackson, Charles L. Gilmore, Rev. A. M. C. Mackey Jr., Marie Caver, and Mrs. A. C. Bennell signed the petition.

Superintendent A. E. Wells’ initial responded to the petition by issuing an assurance that the board was not going to attempt to evade the Supreme Court’s decision. He explained, “In the history of the world, no country has been able to legislate the customs and beliefs of its society successfully. Therefore, much thought and study must be given to the decision.”¹²⁴ After discussion, the board unanimously voted to continue segregation and issued a public statement, which was printed in the *Abilene Reporter-News* the day after the meeting. “The School Board has started studying implementation in Abilene of the Supreme Court decision regarding desegregation. It is the unanimous decision of the board that the changeover in the educational system cannot be made by September 1955, in Abilene.”¹²⁵ The statement discussed the strengths of Abilene’s school system and highlighted the scholastic and athletic awards won by both races. It emphasized that the school districted operated harmoniously and followed the laws of the state of Texas. The school board explained that a change to the operation of the school system would be disruptive and would lead to disorganization, as it “involved more than merely changing boundaries or moving students from one building to another.”¹²⁶ The statement extended an invitation for opinions from any qualified individual or group and explained that the board would “seek advice and aid from qualified and representative

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ “Minutes”, ASBM, July 25, 1955, Book 5, 137-138.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

individuals of both races at the appropriate time.”¹²⁷ The board concluded by requesting patience and warning that the board would not tolerate any undue pressure or disruption to the operation of the school system.

The Abilene School District refused to implement an integration plan, which, due to the Supreme Court’s lack of a deadline, made it feasible for the board to pursue delaying tactics. Abilene’s black community did not give up the fight for equality in the education system and continued its efforts through organizing and petitioning the school board. There is evidence of white resistance to black activism. After the Negro Civics Club approached the school board with their petition, an editorial ran in the *Abilene Reporter News*. The letter reprimanded the black community for working with the NAACP, whom the author referred to as a “busy body group.” The primary concern stemmed from the organization’s negative reputation among white southerners, and the letter admonished black leaders for allying with what some considered a divisive organization.¹²⁸ Abilene’s chapter of the NAACP had been organized on December 10, 1950, at Mount Zion Baptist Church.¹²⁹ During the branch’s early years of operation, an article in the November 1953 issue of *Political Affairs* magazine linked the local chapter of the NAACP to the communist party.¹³⁰ In response to the article, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Abilene Reporter-News*. He explained, “We cite this record in order to make clear that the mention of the NAACP in a communist publication should not confuse readers of your paper and cause them to

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ “Leave the NAACP Out,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 21, 1955, 4B.

¹²⁹ Earle Walker, “Integration asked at AHS: Abilene’s NAACP Active in Politics, Civic Drives,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 12, 1956, 7A.

¹³⁰ “Source Unidentified: More Red Propaganda Sent Here: FBI, Police Investigate,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 19, 1953, 1A.

believe or even suspect that the NAACP itself has any alliance whatsoever with the Communist Party.”¹³¹ Wilkins included two leaflets, one which included comments from FBI Director Edgar Hoover, which endorsed the NAACP and the other was an article from the December 1951 *American Magazine* which outlined the failure of the Communist Party to enlist any “but infinitesimal support from Negroes during its 30 year campaign.”¹³²

Many white Americans viewed the NAACP as a subversive and possibly communist organization. This was a falsehood designed to discredit the organization, which was challenging the southern status quo. Texas Attorney General John Ben Sheppard sought to stop the organization from operating in Texas. In *Texas v. NAACP*, Sheppard won a temporary injunction against the NAACP. In a Tyler, Texas courtroom, Judge Otis T. Dunagan issued a temporary restraining order, which later turned into a permanent injunction. However, stipulations put into effect by the judge allowed the NAACP to continue operations.¹³³ Undeniably, the white dominated power structure wished to make all decisions without input from black community members.

Abilene entered the 1955 school year with no plan to integrate. Surrounding rural districts followed Abilene’s lead and continued to maintain their dual systems. Ninety miles away in San Angelo, Texas, the school district made a very different decision and began integrating their schools immediately following the *Brown* decision. G. B. Wadzeck, superintendent of San Angelo Schools, quietly formed a committee to create an integration plan. The committee included Frank Pool, president of the school board, L. A.

¹³¹ “NAACP Repeats Anti-Red Attitude,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 4, 1953, 10B.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Behkan, *Fighting Their Own Battles*, 53-55.

Raibon, NAACP president, and several other community leaders and teachers.¹³⁴ Mary Frances Butler Owens, teacher at San Angelo's segregated Blackshear High School, was asked to serve on the committee. Owen's explained that San Angelo was a progressive town. Committee members were asked to take a pledge of secrecy in order to not arouse dissent in the community.¹³⁵ The plan was announced in the local paper, informing students of where they would attend and teachers of where they were assigned. Owen's moved from Blackshear to Glenmore Elementary and explained that there were no problems beyond the usual getting to know new people.¹³⁶ San Angelo, however, was not the norm and the majority of Texas schools began the 1955 term segregated.

Integration moved faster in Abilene's institutions of higher education, McMurry College, for example, granted special permission for Mrs. R. W. Stafford to enroll in two graduate courses in advanced English and elementary education during the fall 1955 school term. However, college president Harold Cooke made it clear that the admittance of Mrs. Stafford did not represent a policy change for the school.¹³⁷ McMurry continued to enroll black students on "special basis" and in 1958, one graduate and two undergraduate students attended the school part-time.¹³⁸ The first regularly enrolled black student, Walter Morris Backer began his four-year degree in 1959. He became the first black graduate in 1963. Two years later, Abilene Christian University enrolled its first

¹³⁴ Mark Kneubuhl, "San Angelo a Progressive Community in Civil Rights Era, Residents Remember," *San Angelo Standard Times*, January 21, 2008, NewsBank. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.shsu.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWSdocref=news/11E51395FA37EE40>

¹³⁵ Dundra Butler, "Teacher has Left her Mark," *San Angelo Standard Times*, July 03, 2010, archive.gosanangelo.com/opinion/dudra-butler-teacher-has-left-her-mark-ep-440664305-357209581.html

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ "Abilene Negro will Enroll for McMurry Grad Courses," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 17, 1955, 8A.

¹³⁸ "Negro College Students Here on Part-Time Basis," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 25, 1958.

black graduate student, and Hardin-Simmons University followed suit the next year. Both ACU and HSU graduated their first black students in 1964.¹³⁹

Although the Abilene colleges followed a more progressive integration plan, the public school system continued business as usual, operating under a dual system of education. The Negro Citizens Council and the NAACP continued to work towards desegregation, and soon pressure from the opening of Dyess Air Force Base would be added to the situation. During 1955 and 1956, Abilene's citizens lived through a time of political and social unrest, as white officials attempted to continue traditions and policies, and African-Americans and Hispanic Americans pressured for change.

¹³⁹ Don Bedichrek, "First Black McMurry Graduate wants to Contribute to Abilene," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 26, 1976, 10D.

CHAPTER IV

The Integration of Abilene Schools

In 1951, as the Cold War with the Soviet Union heated up, Abilene was selected as the site of a new military base. The installation, Dyess Air Force Base, became operational in 1956, drawing thousands of new residents to the area. In order to provide for the education of children of Dyess personnel, a new elementary was built. Initially, the Abilene School Board planned to open the campus on an integrated basis because its construction followed the Supreme Court's reaffirmation of the *Brown* decision in May 1955. However, state opposition to integration among white leaders soon complicated the school board's plans.

The United States military desegregated in 1948 under Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981, and Dyess service members came to the new base from across the nation and other countries, where segregation was not the norm. Base housing and facilities were integrated, and one hundred percent of the Dyess Elementary students would come from the base. This led school board officials to believe that this campus would offer the smoothest transition. However, this plan would not come to fruition due to the political climate and leadership in Texas government. After the *Brown* decision, Governor Alan Shivers and the State Democratic Executive Committee (SDEC) initiated several pro-segregation measures, which were brought before voters in the 1956 election cycle. Voters decided on a referendum calling for state "interposition" against integration, stronger laws against interracial marriage, and a law against "compulsory attendance" in desegregated schools.¹⁴⁰ Three months prior to the opening of Dyess Elementary and

¹⁴⁰ Charles Waite, "Price Daniel, Texas Democrats, and School Segregation, 1956-57" (East Texas Historical Journal Vol. 48, Issue 2), 115-117.

shortly after Dyess Air Force Base became operational, House Bill 231 and House Bill 65 passed the state legislature. It was HB 65, which suspended the Abilene School Board's first movement toward integration. This bill required a referendum and voter approval before a school system could integrate. The Abilene School Board believed that due to the size of the black population in Abilene, a referendum to end segregation would have very little chance of passing. The Dyess initiative, therefore, came to an abrupt end, much to the disappointment of African-American service members, who were promised an integrated school. Black children from the base continued to be bussed miles across town to the Woodson campuses. This chapter examines the years between the initial *Brown* ruling and the integration of Abilene schools, a process that began in 1963 and was completed in 1970.

Across the southern United States white resistance to integration increased in the late 1950s. The 1957 Little Rock Crisis, in particular, provided an event that white resisters could use to support their states' rights platform. Many white southerners viewed President Eisenhower's use of federal troops as an abuse of power and a violation of state authority. Price Daniels, the thirty-eighth governor of Texas, took note of events in neighboring Arkansas and pushed for an emergency school closure bill, which would shut down Texas public schools if they were occupied by federal troops. The bill easily passed on November 22, 1957 and gave the governor the authority to temporarily close schools if necessary. The political climate continued to support segregation until pressure from the NAACP, federal agencies, and national legislation induced compliance.

From 1956 to 1962, Abilene school saw continual growth, which taxed the infrastructure. The 1956 school year opened with 12,693 students attending twenty-two schools. The district added thirty-one new teachers to address the 1,220-student increase.¹⁴¹ Enrollment increased to 13,279 in 1957, and the district had to redistribute attendance to avoid implementing a half-day schedule at several elementary schools (despite the addition of Dyess and Johnston Elementary).¹⁴² While enrollment was increasing, so was pressure to integrate Dyess Elementary. Pressure came from both African American air force officers and the federal government. The dilemma placed the school board in a difficult position because Dyess Elementary was located on state land and could not be integrated without a city vote. This did not stop service members from contacting Superintendent Wells. Colonel Louis A Roches III forwarded a letter written by five African American mothers living on Dyess Air Force Base on September 27, 1957. The mothers explained that they believed that Texas school law should not apply to their situation because they lived in a separate community governed by military regulations. They highlighted the integrated life their children were part of outside of school and asked that their children be permitted to attend school with their neighbors. Superintendent Wells appealed to the Texas Education Agency, but was informed that the location of the school precluded the inclusion of black students based on House Bill 65.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ "As Enrollment Soars: Abilene Public Schools' Faculty Increased by 31," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 16, 1956, 7A.

¹⁴² "Overcrowded Schools: Students Record Transfer Begins," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 4, 1957, 3A.

¹⁴³ S. K. Gallaway, "A History of the desegregation of public schools in Abilene, Texas, during the Wells administration, 1954-1970." P.H.D. Dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1994.

In 1962, Superintendent Wells received correspondence from Assistant Secretary James M. Quigley of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). The letter explained that under Section 10 of Public Law 815 and Section 6 of Public Law 874, federal funds totaling \$250,000 could be withheld if the children living on Dyess Air Force Base did not begin attending an integrated school by the 1963-64 school year.¹⁴⁴ Letters continued to arrive from concerned black parents living on Dyess Air Force Base but the school board remained bound by the guidelines of House Bill 65, which made it impossible for the students to be admitted to a white campus.

Finally, eight years after the *Brown* decision, in December 1962, Texas Attorney General Will Wilson declared HB 65 unconstitutional. His decision came after the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals decision in *Sandra Craig Boson v. Dr. Edwin L. Rippy*, which decided that holding an election should not be a condition of a desegregation plan.¹⁴⁵ Wilson's declaration allowed the school board to move quickly in order to keep federal tuition payments for service member's children. The board held an emergency meeting on January 14, 1963, and revisited the earlier plan to integrate Dyess Elementary. The school board decided to integrate the campus on January 21, 1963, at the start of the spring semester.¹⁴⁶ Thirty-eight African-American children began attending Dyess Elementary. Initial public response was mixed with Dyess personnel praising the school board's actions with some local residents speaking out against the mixing of races. Morgan Jones, school board president, explained that he was pleased, to be able to honor a promise made to black service members to provide an integrated

¹⁴⁴ "Integration Law Declared Illegal: Effects May Be Felt Here," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 11, 1962, 1.

¹⁴⁵ "12-Year Dallas Plan Approved," *Longview News-Journal*, December 1, 1960, 1.

¹⁴⁶ "Minutes", ASBM, January 14, 1963, Book 7, 137-142.

school. Dyess parents were thrilled with the decision and thanked the school board for being a part of allowing equality to move forward in Abilene.¹⁴⁷ Overall, integration progressed smoothly without any major incidents.

After the smooth integration of Dyess Elementary, the Abilene School Board moved forward with its stair-step integration plan for the 1963-64 school year, which insured the district would not lose necessary federal funding. The initial integration plan was limited to African American students living in the boundaries of white elementary and junior high campuses. African-American students were not required to transfer to the school, and some initially chose to continue attending at the Woodson Campuses. Overall, the integration process progressed smoothly with only one minor incident reported at Crockett Elementary. Principal Alex Edwards reported that a white parent objected to his son attending class with black students and requested a transfer. No action was taken, and there were no further incidents reported at Crockett. Preston Parker, Locust Elementary Principal, reported that students sat together at lunch and no one asked to be moved.¹⁴⁸ On Tuesday morning, September 3, 1963, grades one through seven became integrated. Fifty-two African-American students enrolled in schools other than the two Woodson campuses. Three African-American students enrolled at Lincoln Junior High, five at Madison Junior High, thirty-nine at Dyess Elementary, two at Crockett Elementary, and three at Locust Elementary. The school board required that students live in their respective schools boundaries, and these were the only African-American students living outside the attendance boundaries of the two Woodson

¹⁴⁷ "Board Approves Integration Plan," *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 15, 1963, 1.

¹⁴⁸ "School Enrollment Is 'Up' despite Last Year's Exodus," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 4, 1963, 12A.

campuses. The board explained that neither Woodson campus had any white students living inside their respective boundaries. This was untrue, however, as several white students resided in the Woodson Elementary school zone. The white students transferred to Elmdale Elementary, which was the closest white school.¹⁴⁹ The school board consolidated the Houston (Americanization School) and the Woodson boundaries and students living in either area could select the school of their choice. Several schools experienced overcrowding and some boundaries had to be redrawn. Woodson High School reported an enrollment of 370 students in the 1963-64 school year. Woodson Elementary reported 607, and Houston Elementary's enrollment was 123. The district educated 19,026 students spread over 32 schools.¹⁵⁰

The year Abilene began integrating coincided with the first African American graduate from McMurry College. Walter Morris Baker graduated from Ranger High School before enrolling as the first black students at McMurry College. He graduated in May 1963. Barker said, "McMurry was the first college in town to have blacks, and the first to graduate blacks. They were progressive enough to see the values of cultural exchange."¹⁵¹ Barker went on to earn a Master's degree from Harvard University and a PhD in psychology from Ohio State University in 1976. Hardin Simmons University and Abilene Christian University followed suit enrolling their first black students the year after McMurry and graduating black students in May 1964.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ "School Enrollment Rises Above Last Year's Total," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 13, 1969, 1B.

¹⁵⁰ "Public Schools Gain 312 in Week to Total 19,026," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 11, 1963, 1.

¹⁵¹ Don Bedichek, "First Black McMurry Graduate Wants to Contribute to Abilene," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 26, 1976, 10D.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

Abilene schools increased in size heading into the 1964-65 school year. The district consisted 32 schools with 19,000 students. The eighth grade successfully integrated during the 1964-65 school year. School officials reported 125 African Americans enrolled over 11 predominantly white schools compared with 56 over 11 the previous school year. Superintendent A. E. Wells said, “We have had no problem of any [kind] in our integrated schools. The boys and girls have gotten along exceptionally well together.”¹⁵³ However, the Woodson campuses continued to increase in enrollment with Woodson High increasing 80 students for a total of 380 and Woodson Elementary increasing from 607 to 625. The majority of the African-American and Hispanic population resided in the Woodson attendance zones, and therefore could not attend integrated schools. With boundaries remaining unchanged, integration proceeded at a slow pace.¹⁵⁴

Heading into the 1965-66 school year the district needed to comply with the newly passed Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation was inherently unequal, change had proceeded slowly and by 1964 had only achieved incremental success. Many districts, Abilene included, had adopted stair-step integration plans, which included the maintenance of racially identifiable schools. The Civil Rights Act required that school districts take specific step and placed deadlines on the end of segregation. Title VI of the act prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any entity that accepted federal financial assistance. Schools that had not complied with the act faced the loss of

¹⁵³ Bill Shell, “More Students, More Integration,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 5, 1964.

¹⁵⁴ “Minutes”, ASBM, January 14, 1963, Book 7, 137-138.

necessary federal funds. Schools could lose funding for guidance, counseling and testing programs. Funding for vocational and technical education programs, library services, and national school lunch programs were also threatened. Districts would lose adult basic education programs and the Education Improvements of Handicapped Children and Youth programs. After the passage of the act, Texas Commissioner of Education J. W. Edgar required each district to submit a report on the status of integration. Districts were required to complete a questionnaire and mark one of four categories. “(1) The school district is in full compliance with the law. (2) The district is under final court order for desegregation. (3) The district has its own locally initiated plans for desegregation. (4) The district is not in compliance with the Civil Rights Law.”¹⁵⁵ Abilene responded by submitting their stair-step integration plan, which had advanced from first through eighth grade.¹⁵⁶ While waiting for a response from Commissioner Edgar, the board decided to accelerate their integration plan.

On Monday April 26, 1965, the Abilene School Board approved a new integration plan, which would put them into compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Prior to the approval of a new plan, a school board committee reviewed three integration options. Plan I and II would have the district integrated by the 1966-67 school year, while Plan III set a quicker integration plan, which would have the district in compliance immediately. Most of the details of a new composite plan were settled during an off-the-record meeting, which the board voted unanimously to approve. Although immediate desegregation would be accomplished, both Woodson campuses would remain racially

¹⁵⁵ “On Civil Rights: Area Schools Comply with New Law,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 14, 1965, 1-2A.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

identifiable.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Abilene's plan for compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 received full acceptance by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.¹⁵⁸

As full integration moved forward at all campuses except Woodson, the number of students attending the Woodson campuses declined. Due to the declining attendance, the school board decided at the May 22, 1967 meeting to close Woodson High School in June 1968.¹⁵⁹ The closing of Carter G. Woodson Junior and High School created a difficult atmosphere in the black community. Since Woodson opened in 1953, Woodson teachers, students, and staff created a rich tradition and strove to provide a dynamic learning environment filled with multiple opportunities. The Woodson band won several prestigious awards, the football team was formidable, and the home economics and mechanical programs were superb.

At the beginning of the 1967-68 school year, declining attendance created a staffing problem at Woodson High School, which was brought to the attention on the school board at the September 11, 1967 school board meeting. Howard Caver, Woodson band director, informed the Abilene Board of Education that he was being asked to teach courses, such as Texas History, for which he was not qualified. He explained to Superintendent Wells that he had not taken a history course since high school. Principal D. W. Porter explained that with only eighty-eight high school students in attendance it was necessary for teachers to teach more than one course. Wells asked the other four present Woodson teachers about their schedules. Science teacher George Forkerway was also teaching Texas history; Nancy Stovall was assigned three history courses after taking

¹⁵⁷ "Total Integration to Start in June," *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 27, 1965, 1B.

"Minutes", ASBM, 12 May 1965, Book 8, 17.

¹⁵⁸ "Abilene, Big Spring Get Integration Plan Approval," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 6, 1965, 1.

¹⁵⁹ "Minutes", ASBM, May 22, 1967, Book 8, 201-202.

a major in English and a minor in French. Two other teachers were only teaching in their field. Wells stated that he did not want unqualified teachers in positions and that the situation would be addressed.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, teachers at Woodson were concerned with job security as Woodson was set to close the next year. In the end, Caver told the board, “the teachers at Woodson are eagerly trying to help these kids.” However, “We’re not sure that we have the confidence of the board; you might say we’re teaching scared.”¹⁶¹ Caver explained that their concern stemmed from their interpretation on the school boards’ statement regarding the closing of Woodson High School at the end of the 1968 school year.

Amid the debate over the Woodson School closure, Howard Caver, the school’s band director, opened a bi-weekly newspaper, *The Community Bulletin* with his wife Clara. The newspaper reported on church and community events, civil rights, black history, political races, educational changes, and the job market. The newspaper functioned as the black voice for Abilene’s African American community, which was often misrepresented in the city’s local white paper.

The *Community Bulletin* opened on August 19, 1967, and the inaugural issue stated, “Abilene has long needed another voice in the field of mass communications to present more viewpoints of today’s world. This is the purpose of *The Community*.” The office was located at 609 Ash Street, and the newspaper highlighted the existence of the Abilene Human Relations Committee, formed by Mayor Ralph Hooks with the assistance of Reverend Raul Young. The purpose of the committee was to have an organized and

¹⁶⁰ Lynn Taylor, “Woodson Teacher Says Not Qualified for Course,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 12, 1967, 1.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

official body to bring grievances, discuss problems, and recommend solutions for problem that arose between the races. The committee was composed of four Hispanic, four African-American, and four white citizens. The African-American members were listed as Mr. Leo Scott, Reverend T. G. Oliphant, Mr. Howard Caver, and Mrs. Montgomery Ashford.

The black community wanted Woodson to become an integrated Junior High, which would have required less bussing and provided a continuation of a campus with a deep history. White citizens and the school board discounted this idea because they were unwilling to send white students to a previous “colored” school. In the May 4, 1968 issue of *the Community Bulletin*, an editorial ran mentioning the existence of a petition in the city of Abilene asking for the integration, rather than the closure of Woodson Junior and Senior High School and advocating that integration should be a two-way street.¹⁶² The burden of integration should not rest entirely on the African American community. The Afro Leadership Conference presented the referenced petition and an accompanying request to the Abilene Board of Education on May 13, 1968. The first petition dealt with the inclusion of African-American history in the school curriculum. The board members responded that they would rather see African-American history interwoven into regular history courses than to have a completely separate course. The representatives of the Afro Leadership Conference agreed that this would be preferable if there were teachers who were capable and willing to take on this task. The second petition was for the integration

¹⁶² Clara and Howard Caver, “Sign the Petition to Make Woodson an Integrated Jr. High Instead of Totally Closing it Down,” *Community Bulletin*, No. 37, May 4, 1968, 5. *The editorials and articles in the Abilene Reporter-News provide an abundance of information from the perspective of the white community. However, the paper lacked a diverse voice, as white reporters staffed the paper and published letters to the editor primarily offered only a white perspective. Through this perspective, it is clear that the majority of Abilene’s white citizens resisted integration. The closing of Carter Woodson High School offers a telling example of white resistance to integration.*

of Woodson Junior High School. The Afro Leadership Conference desired that the Woodson building become an integrated junior high for the neighborhood. The board explained that the building was not large enough to house an adequate junior high. Due to this unfavorable response, the Afro Leadership Conference released a statement, which ran in the *Community Bulletin*. The statement made two criticisms of the Abilene school district. First, the Afro Leadership Conference questioned the hiring of a white Physical Education teacher when an African-American P.E. teacher from Woodson Elementary had not been given a definite position at an integrated campus. It was noted that this action constituted a violation of the civil-rights guidelines. The second criticism dealt with the hardship created by the closing of Woodson High School. The Afro Leadership Conference explained that the hardship was greater on the disadvantaged youth, who instead of going ½ mile to school, would have to go 3 to 6 miles to school. This would mean an extra 30 cents a day for transportation per child, which was also a violation of the civil rights act.¹⁶³ The Afro Leadership Conference gave the school board a chance to rectify these problems before reporting them as civil-rights violations.

In response, the *Abilene Reporter News* claimed that the Afro Leadership Conference was threatening the school board and inciting divisiveness during an otherwise peaceful transition. Caver replied by reminding the readers of the *Community Bulletin* that the Afro Leadership Conference had simply made a statement to the board, not a threat. He pondered the question as to why any time a black person attempts to correct a wrong they receive the label troublemaker, hothead, or even a communist.¹⁶⁴ On

¹⁶³ Clara and Howard Caver, "Abilene Reporter News Tries to Brand Afro Leadership Conference," *Community Bulletin* No. 39, May 18, 1968, 5.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

May 25, 1968, the *Community Bulletin* included an editorial titled “This is Democracy and Christianity at Work in Abilene.” Woodson High School, a \$500,000 facility, was destined for closure not integration and the black community mourned the loss of the important community institution. When the black citizens approached the school board and explained the hardships the closure would create, the board members refused to listen. Taxpayers wanted to know what plans were for the expensive facility, but the board refused to answer. Mrs. Christine Bushell, a Woodson parent, wrote, “No, the pompous members think fast, adjourning the meeting before the agenda is completed. That’s democracy in Abilene.”¹⁶⁵ She reiterated the need for city officials to listen to their constituents.

Leading up to the closing of the school, the *Community Bulletin* reported on the final Negro History Week program to be held at the school. Texas State Senator Barbara Jordan addressed the students, faculty, and community guests in the Woodson High Auditorium. The review of her speech was excellent. Caver explained that she held the audience “spell bound with her well-chosen, well-meaningful, well-spoken words.”¹⁶⁶ She encouraged African-Americans to support their country and become involved in civic affairs. She emphasized the need for all Americans to work toward freedom and equality for all.

Howard Caver highlighted the need to continue the tradition of teaching black history even after integration. He said, “In order for a people to achieve in all areas or fields of endeavors, they must be motivated. That is, they must have something pushing

¹⁶⁵ Bushell, Christine, “This is Democracy and Christianity at Work in Abilene,” *Community Bulletin* No. 40, May 25, 1968, 5.

¹⁶⁶ Clara and Howard Caver, “Senator Barbara Jordan Astounds Negro History Audience,” *Community Bulletin* No. 28, February 24, 1968, 4.

them or encouraging them to achieve. One of the best know methods to motivate a people, if presented correctly, is one of instilling self-pride and self-assurance in the people.”¹⁶⁷ Abilene School Board continued in their plan to close Woodson High and in 1968, the final Woodson students graduated.

Adam Olphant spoke at the final graduating ceremony for Woodson High School. He was a graduate of Woodson himself with the distinction of being valedictorian. After graduation, he earned a degree in engineering from George Washington University. He spoke strongly and his words brought vigorous applause. Oliphant said, “The time has come when black men no longer need to make excuses. You no longer have to be ashamed of your kinky hair, your big feet, and the beautiful black pigment of your skin. Because God made it that way and I understand he likes it.”¹⁶⁸ He encouraged the graduates to keep moving forward, and he expressed his concern over the closing of Woodson High School saying “the only way for Negroes to find their identity is to have something to identify with.”¹⁶⁹ In an interview, before he spoke he was asked about the riots surrounding the death of Martin Luther King Jr. in April. He was asked about his feelings toward the ensuing violence. Oliphant was quoted, “I’m more concerned that the time is past where Negroes are saying to the larger society, ‘give me my rights!’ That has come through the realization that rights cannot be given, cannot be bought or sold nor transferred from individual to individual, but are just as much a part of everyone’s birthright as is the color of their eyes.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Clara and Howard Caver, “With Negroes Pushing for Integration, Why this Holding on to Negro History Week by Negroes?,” *Community Bulletin* No. 26, February 10, 1968, 5.

¹⁶⁸ Tom Kershaw, “Don’t Apologize, Woodson Grads Told,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 1, 1968, 1.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Merle Watson, “Says Adam Oliphant: Riots Good or Bad? He Judges Them by Results,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 2, 1968, 13-A.

The Community Bulletin conducted a survey of children concerning African-American history month. The survey was designed to evaluate what the average black student knew and understood about their ancestors and black history in general. The findings were that: “(1) Negro children have learned about their race through Negro History observances at their schools and the news media, mostly television. (2) Most children believe that Negro History should be integrated into American History. (3) Until number 2 above, is accomplished, integrated school systems should observe Negro History Week. (4) The children are more race conscious and have more race pride than perhaps their parents had when they were young. (5) The young Negro children have an optimistic outlook on present and future opportunities of their race.”¹⁷¹ Reverend Willie Mae also spoke at the graduating ceremony. He encouraged school attendance as means for achieving success. He told the graduating class, “One day maybe the governor of Texas will be Negro, but he won’t be a Negro who is unprepared. One day maybe the mayor of Abilene will be a Negro. But he won’t be a Negro who is unprepared.”¹⁷² Abilene’s first black mayor, Anthony Williams, was sworn in during a standing room only ceremony June 26, 2017.¹⁷³

After the board went forward with the closing of Woodson High School, Abilene schools received warning from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) that deficiencies existed in the district. These deficiencies should not have come

¹⁷¹ Clara and Howard Caver, “Survey of Children Concerning Negro History,” *Community Bulletin* No. 27, February 17, 1968, 4.

¹⁷² Tom Kershaw, “At Woodson High Baccalaureate: Negro Graduates Told ‘Keep Marching,’” *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 27, 1968, 1B.

¹⁷³ “The Success Story that is Anthony Williams,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 27, 2017. www.reporternews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/06/28/success-story-anthony-williams/432126001.

as a surprise to the members of the Abilene School Board, as Howard Caver, representing the education committee of the Taylor County NAACP, brought the concerns to their attention at the February 24, 1969 board meeting. Caver's primary concerns were the recruitment of African-American and Hispanic teachers and administrators, the promotion policies in regards to African-American and Hispanic staff, the integration of African-American history in social studies, and the fact that Woodson Elementary remained segregated.¹⁷⁴

The HEW report was more specific in detailing the deficiencies. Carl Flaxman, regional director of the office of Civil Rights for HEW in Dallas, listed three deficiencies in his February report. The first was that the district continued to maintain two "racially identifiable schools." Woodson Elementary and Houston Elementary continued to be totally segregated. The second deficiency was the maintenance of an all-black bus route, busing African-American students from separate school zones to the segregated schools. The third deficiency was that there could be greater progress in the desegregation of professional staff. These deficiencies put \$1,076,017 in federal funds at risk. The report gave the district an April 1 deadline to submit a plan to rectify the deficiencies. Still dealing with the negative reactions incited by the closing of the Woodson High Campus, the board felt they were being placed in a difficult position.¹⁷⁵ Superintendent Wells responded to the deficiencies by explaining that the Houston campus was already set for closure due to low enrollment. He explained that the identified bus route was in Woodson's district, but was located two miles from the campus. The school board bussed

¹⁷⁴ "Minutes", ASBM, February 24, 1969, Book 9, 54-56.

¹⁷⁵ Jon Standefer, "Schools' 'Areas of Concern' Educators Face Major Problems in changing Times," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 13, 1969, 7.

the students so that they would not have to cross the railroad tracks at East Highway 80. Well's admitted that there were white students living in the area who transferred to Elmdale Elementary and were bussed as well. He also highlighted that eleven black faculty were already employed in the district.¹⁷⁶ Board member Herman Schaffer suggested that, "we should encourage the Negroes to move out of their ghetto."¹⁷⁷

Following the HEW report, the school board formed an advisory panel to study the issue. After a request for more time, the HEW deadline was moved to May 1, and the school board moved forward with the formation of a multiracial committee. Each ethnicity was asked to submit six names to the school board and three were selected from each list. Oscar Velasquez, of the American GI Forum, Ben Aguirre and Joe Hernandez, Community Action Program staffers, were selected to represent the Hispanic community. Howard Caver, Upward Bound counselor, Frank Mason, coordinator of the Goodloc Center and NAACP president, and Reverend T. G. Oliphant, pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, represented the African-American community. Jack Corey, an attorney, Dr. Zane Travis, a physician, and Reverend Raymond Schaeffer, pastor of First Assembly of God, were chosen to represent the white community. Elbert Hall, former school board member, was appointed as the non-voting committee chair.¹⁷⁸ The school board entertained three alternatives to correct the deficiencies. The first was to expand the boundaries of Woodson Elementary to include the Radford Hills subdivision. This would have required 60 white children to change schools. Superintendent Wells explained that the average household income in the Radford Hills area was significantly higher than the income in

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Merle Watson, "C-C Panel Backs Education Report," *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 11, 1969, 11.

¹⁷⁸ "Minutes", ASBM, April 28, 1969, Book 9, 76.

the Woodson area, and he believed their parents would have sent them to a private school operated by Abilene Christian College.¹⁷⁹ This alternative would have been seen as a serious burden by the white community, but would have fulfilled the HEW stipulations. Interestingly, the board did not mention the white students already residing in the Woodson district, who were bussed to Elmdale Elementary. The second alternative was to combine the Houston and Woodson district, which would have only integrated two races. However, since Hispanic students were classified as white, it would have created an “integrated” campus. The advisory committee supported this option because it continued the operation of a neighborhood school. Despite the support from the minority community and the advisory panel, the HEW ultimately rejected the plan because it did not fulfill the requirements and continued the maintenance of a racially identifiable school. The third, and chosen option, was to close Woodson Elementary and send the students to other school based on where they resided within the new boundaries. This alternative fulfilled the requirements of the HEW, but significantly affected the black community, as their neighborhood school closed.¹⁸⁰

After the school board made the decision to close Woodson Elementary, the local chapter of the NAACP sought an injunction to stop the closure. Mason and Caver explained that although the board blamed HEW for the school closure, it was not the entire truth. The board was not required to close the school and once again, the white power structure chose to lessen the impact on the white community at the expense of the African-American students. Ultimately, the injunction failed, and the final Woodson

¹⁷⁹ Jon Standefer, “15 Years Later, Integration Snags on Woodson,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 5, 1969, 1.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

campus closed in 1970. The Woodson faculty and community held a retirement reception and program honoring Raymond B. Hayden, principal of Woodson Elementary, for his service to Abilene Schools. Hayden spent a total of 53 years in the Abilene schools, first as a student and then as a teacher and administrator. Hayden first enrolled in Abilene Colored School as a third grader and completed his education in the tenth grade. He then enrolled at Prairie View College, where he received his teacher certification. At 19, he began teaching under Principal R.W. Stafford and eventually completed a bachelor's and master's degree in education. After more than half a century in Abilene, he and his wife moved to Indianapolis to work in that school system.¹⁸¹ Throughout the integration process, concerns for black teachers, administrators, and staff were voiced. Superintendent Wells and the school board promised that qualified teachers had nothing to fear. Principal Hayden would not be the only black educator to move out of the Abilene District in order to find better opportunities, however.

After the closing of Woodson Elementary, the former students were absorbed by College Heights, Valley View, and Taylor Elementary. At the September 14, 1970 school board meeting, Bernice White appealed to the board to provide bus transportation for the transferred students. White explained that many now had to walk long distances and cross busy streets, such as Walnut, Pine, Hickory, and Grape.¹⁸² Superintendent Wells explained that the school district followed state bus laws, which only allowed for the busing of students who live two miles from the school or public bus stop. Jess Garcia also briefly addressed the board regarding his concern that, due to white families moving out of the Locust Elementary attendance zones, the school was becoming primarily a "black

¹⁸¹ "Hayden Reception to Close 42-Year Career in Schools," *Abilene Reporter-News*, August 24, 1969, 1H.

¹⁸² "School Vandalism Costs Increasing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 15, 1970, 2A.

and Latin School.” He explained that local Hispanic and black groups were meeting to discuss the problem.¹⁸³

The process of integrating Abilene schools spanned five and a half school years. During the integration period, the black community advocated for their children and worked to keep the Woodson Schools open. Despite the resistance, the Woodson campuses closed and the schools’ students were incorporated into the surrounding schools. The integration process also involved the incorporation of black administrators, teachers, and staff into the formally white campuses. This added a layer of complexity to the desegregation process, as black educators sought equitable positions in the district.

¹⁸³ Ibid.
“Minutes”, ASBM, 14 September 1970, Book 9, 204.

CHAPTER V

Changes for Black Administrators, Teachers, and Staff

The employment of Woodson staff and teachers held the attention of many blacks and whites in the Abilene community. Many were concerned that the teachers, administrators, and staff would not be placed in positions commensurate with their qualifications and experience. The April 20, 1968 edition of *the Community Bulletin* included a letter from Reverend Willie Mays enumerating the concerns of the black community. Sadness, anxiety, and fear for the future were listed as feelings that many Woodson staff, administrators, and teachers were feeling. Mays wrote, “In the City of Abilene, where numerous persons are striving to enrich the lives of the population; in the city where men and women of all races are working together for the good of the whole, a large segment of the population is anxiously waiting to see what forward step the Abilene school system will take in regards for a smooth transition for students and Woodson teachers.”¹⁸⁴ Mays concluded his letter with optimism for the future and a statement of hope and belief that the Abilene School Board would move forward with a progressive attitude. This chapter explores the treatment of Woodson staff, teachers, and administrators after the closing of the Woodson campuses.

As the date neared for the closing of Woodson High school, *the Community Bulletin* highlighted the achievements of many of the Woodson teachers. Mrs. Nancy Stovall headed the English department at Woodson High School. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from McMurry University in 1966 with a Bachelor’s degree in English and a minor in French. She taught 7th grade Texas History and English, as well as 10th, 11th, and

¹⁸⁴ Clara and Howard Caver, “Five More Weeks before the End of Woodson Jr.-Sr. High School,” *Community Bulletin* No. 35, April 20, 1968, 5.

12th grade English. She co-sponsored the senior class, sponsored UIL one-act and the Spelling and Debate Teams.¹⁸⁵ Mrs. Sarah Whitmill taught math at Woodson for both junior and senior high students. She graduated as the valedictorian of her senior class of Giddings High School in Giddings, Texas. She then double majored in math and English at Texas College in Tyler and graduated magna cum laude in 1963.¹⁸⁶ Whitmill moved to a math position at Franklin Junior High, which was commensurate with her position at Woodson.¹⁸⁷ Mrs. Willa Timms worked as the reading instructor at Woodson High School for six years. She received her specialized training from Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, through the Ford Foundation and the Southern Education Association. Timms was one of the most highly qualified reading instructors in the Abilene School District.¹⁸⁸ She earned her bachelor's degree in Music Education from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. She then went on to complete a second degree in Elementary Education from Abilene Christian College and in 1968 she was pursuing a master's degree in English and Elementary Education from ACC. She moved to Lincoln Junior High as a language arts teacher.¹⁸⁹ She explained that she was pleased with the transition and enjoyed working with the students and teachers at Lincoln. Woodson High School Coach James Valentine was both qualified and highly sought after. After serving his country during World War II, he earned his bachelors of science in physical education

¹⁸⁵ Clara and Howard Caver, "Dedicated Teachers are Still with Us," *Community Bulletin* No. 20, December 30, 1967, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Clara and Howard Caver, "Math + School = Mrs. Sarah Whitmill," *Community Bulletin* No. 23, January 20, 1968, 1.

¹⁸⁷ "Ex-Woodson Faculty Members Now Range Afar After Closing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, Sept 27, 1968, 1B.

¹⁸⁸ Clara and Howard Caver, "Reading is the First of the Three R's," *Community Bulletin* No. 24, January 27, 1968, 1.

¹⁸⁹ "Ex-Woodson Faculty Members Now Range Afar After Closing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, Sept 27, 1968, 1B.

and biology. He continued his education at Texas Southern University and Abilene Christian College. Outside of his work at Woodson, he was in charge of the only city-owned swimming pool. He had seventeen years of teaching experience with his work at Woodson beginning in 1956. He coached Woodson to the district championship in 1958, and his Woodson High track teams were always top competitors in the district.¹⁹⁰ Hazel Owens, the girls' physical education teacher, graduated from Anderson High School in Austin, Texas, and received her bachelor's degree from Huston-Tillotson College. She began the Rammettes, the school's drill team, in 1964 and sought to teach coordination, leadership, fellowship, poise, and self-discipline. Owens moved to Franklin Junior High as a member of the Physical Education department.¹⁹¹ Each of the Woodson teacher profiled exemplified the quality of African American teachers present in the district.

After the closing of Woodson Junior and High School several contentious employment situations were brought before the Abilene School Board. There was significant angst over the reassignment of Woodson High principal D. W. Porter and his lack of assignment was challenged at the July 29, 1968 school board meeting. Every member of the Woodson High School staff was promised a position within the Abilene Public School system. Personnel director Robert Fielder said that he had personally consulted with all the teachers affected and "assured them that if they were doing their jobs and were qualified teachers, there would be a place for them within the Abilene

¹⁹⁰ Clara and Howard Caver, "Best Football Strategist in Texas," *Community Bulletin* No. 25, February 3, 1968, 1.

¹⁹¹ "Ex-Woodson Faculty Members Now Range Afar After Closing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, Sept 27, 1968, 1B.

Public Schools.”¹⁹² D. W. Porter’s letter to Superintendent Wells was read during the meeting. The following is an excerpt for Porter’s letter.

Since the summer of 1966, I have asked myself the question ‘what would you like to do in the field of education and be satisfied when your school is closed?’ for I could see more clearly every day the end was near. I have particularly thought in terms of specifics since the final action of the board of education in May (1967). Being a person dedicated to the arts of teaching and learning as it relates to boys and girls, and those who motivate a learning situation. I cannot help but feel that I would enjoy most a position where the greatest need exists: possibly with impoverished youth, regardless of race, who often find themselves so far behind their peers. I believe that such help would be most fruitful with children in the early years of their school life. Therefore it is in this area (during the first six grades) that my first preference would lie.”¹⁹³

Porter was eventually given the assignment of assistant director of curriculum for the district. However, shortly after this assignment, at the August 26, 1968 school board meeting, Porter tendered his resignation because he had already accepted a position as a high school principal in the Winner-Hutchins school district near Dallas. The *Abilene Reporter News* explained that this “surprised” the board, which thought he was content with his new assignment. However, *the Community Bulletin* reported, “Contrary to the *Abilene Reporter News* headline, school officials were not surprised at the resignation of principal, D. W. Porter.”¹⁹⁴ In fact, Porter signed his contract with Winner-Hutchins before he was offered the position of assistant director of curriculum. Porter was not offered this position until three days before administrators were to begin working. Caver

¹⁹² Lynn Taylor, “Negro Students to Get Holiday,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, April 9, 1968, 1A & 11A.

¹⁹³ Lynn Taylor, “School Board challenged about Porter’s Position,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 30, 1968, 2B.

¹⁹⁴ Clara and Howard Caver, “School Administration and School Board Not Surprised at Resignation of D.W. Porter,” *Community Bulletin* No. 47, August 31, 1968, 1.

explained that once again Abilene was losing a well-qualified person due to the board's slowness to act.¹⁹⁵

Another situation arose surrounding the transfer of Howard Caver, Woodson High School's former band director. At the May 27, 1968 meeting of the Abilene School Board, Caver expressed his opinion that there was discrimination in the hiring of a new Abilene High School band director. The board cleared the room and went into executive session to hear Caver's concerns.¹⁹⁶ When the Abilene High School band director James Pollard resigned, the board hired W. A. (Tony) Anderson, a white director, as his replacement. Anderson had previously worked at Midland High School as their band director for five years. Caver alleged that Anderson's hiring was racially motivated. His closed hearing lasted two hours and concluded with the board maintaining their decision to hire Anderson. Caver argued that the board should follow the guidelines of the desegregation rules. Personnel director Robert Fielder explained that Caver was appointed to direct band programs of five elementary schools. Caver, however, desired to remain at the secondary level.¹⁹⁷ In July 1968, Caver criticized the board for not having him in a position by the standard April 15 date. "Caver then suggested that the board re-evaluate its attitude towards 'black students and teachers.'"¹⁹⁸ Caver resigned from the Abilene Public School System and accepted a position with the Upward Bound Program at McMurry College.¹⁹⁹ Caver continued to be involved with the Civil Rights Movement

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ "Minutes", ASBM, 27 May 1968, Book 8, 292.

¹⁹⁷ Lynn Taylor, "Bias charged in naming of New AHS Band Leader," *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 28, 1968, 1.

¹⁹⁸ Lynn Taylor, "School Board challenged about Porter's Position," *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 30, 1968, 2B.

¹⁹⁹ "Ex-Woodson Faculty Members Now Range Afar After Closing," *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 27, 1968, 1B.

in Abilene by serving as the vice president of the local chapter of the NAACP. He used his voice at both city council and school board meetings to fight for equality in Abilene. Caver worked alongside NAACP president Frank Mason to ensure that the black community, students, and teachers were being given equal opportunities. At the June 22, 1970 school board meeting, the concerns put forth by Caver and Mason were addressed. The first request was that the organ from Woodson Elementary be given to the Carver Recreational Center, so that it could continue to be utilized by the community. The board agreed that if a community petition requesting the organ with at least 200 names be presented to the board, that they would grant the request. Caver presented such a petition during the July board meeting containing 290 names and the board granted the request.²⁰⁰ Caver and Mason also discussed the treatment of black students by some teachers, especially in elective courses. They explained that no one was actively stopping students from enrolling in band, choral, or orchestra; however, students did not feel welcome in the courses. Superintendent Wells said that a sensitivity workshop was planned and that coaches, elective instructors, and new teachers would be included in the summer training session.²⁰¹ The idea of feeling included was discussed further by the multi-racial Community Relations Committee. Mason explained that when a particular race has been excluded for so long and have experienced repeated rebuffs, it becomes difficult for that group to freely take part in activities without a specific invitation.²⁰²

Caver also became the first black citizen to run for a city council position. He ran in the 1970 election against Joe Leal, a furniture salesperson, and Robert Hunter, the

²⁰⁰ "Minutes", ASBM, 27 July 1970, Book 9, 186.

²⁰¹ Merle Watson, "Recruitment of Minority Teachers Said 'Continuous,'" *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 23, 1970, 2A.

²⁰² Joy Martin, "Races Talk—and Listen—to Each Other," *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 22, 1970, 10G.

president of development at Abilene Christian College. Although he lost the election to Robert Hunter, he paved the way for future minorities to run for local offices.²⁰³ Joe Alcorta became the first minority elected to the city council in 1973 and five years later Leo F. Scott became the first African American council member.²⁰⁴

Following his city-council loss, Caver resigned his position in Abilene and accepted the directorship of Upward Bound at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma, ending his activism in Texas.²⁰⁵ In a final letter to the editor of the *Abilene Reporter News*, Caver expressed optimism for the future of Abilene and race relations. He wrote, “I leave this city with a ray of hope that this progress continue and that it will penetrate down through the administrators and teachers. Let’s look at our situation with a dual consciousness; we’ve come a long way, baby, and we still have a long way to go.”²⁰⁶

Joy Martin chronicled the climate of Abilene Public Schools in October following the closing of Woodson Junior and High School, and she wrote that most teachers said the environment since integration was pleasant and amicable. “One teacher, however, made a careful distinction. Mrs. Molly Brewster, Lamar Elementary teacher of the mentally disabled, in her fifth year in formally all-white schools said ‘I don’t consider it integration but desegregation.’ ‘Desegregation is a legal thing which may be forced; integration is a personal thing in which each makes his own choice. Integration will take a while for some – both Negro and white – really to accept.’”²⁰⁷

²⁰³ “Howard Caver Resigns Post,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, May 8, 1970, 1.

²⁰⁴ “The Success Story that is Anthony Williams,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 27, 2017. www.reporternews.com/story/opinion/editorials/2017/06/28/success-story-anthony-williams/432126001.

²⁰⁵ “Reception Honors Cavers,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, August 6, 1970, 3B.

²⁰⁶ “Caver Leaving Here ‘With Ray of Hope’,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, July 29, 1970, 4A.

²⁰⁷ Joy Martin, “Integration Climate Developing, Teachers Say,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 10, 1969, 1B.

While African-American educators were reassigned or chose employment outside the district, Hispanic teachers found it difficult to find employment in Abilene. Joe Hernandez, a native Spanish speaker and graduate of Abilene High and McMurry, first applied for a Spanish teaching position in 1964. He was told repeatedly that there were no jobs available. When he heard that a position was available at Madison Junior High, he went to visit the principal, a former teacher of his. “The principal, according to Hernandez, said that he had requested a native speaker of Spanish in May and had been told none was available.”²⁰⁸ Hernandez explained that his application had been on file for months. The principal interviewed him and immediately offered him the position. Hernandez emphasized that he wanted to be accepted for what he was—a Mexican American who is proud of his culture, “When people say ‘Joe’s different—he’s not like the other Mexican American kids: he’s made it because he’s different,’ they’re saying something I do not like—how am I different? I am not an Anglo, don’t try to make an Anglo out of a Mexican.”²⁰⁹

Despite the relative ease with which Abilene faced integration, racism still permeated white society. Mayor J.C. Hunter Jr. said “race relations in Abilene: on the whole, [are] good—our problems have been very minor. I think we might attribute at least a part of our lack of problems to the quality of our minority group citizens.”²¹⁰ Hunter’s statement ignores the fact that Abilene ISD only employed four minorities in leadership position. In 1969, there was one African-American elementary principal, one

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Joy Martin, “Races Talk—and Listen—to Each Other,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 22, 1970, 10G.

African-American counselor, and one Hispanic counselor.²¹¹ The district continued to have low numbers of minorities in all positions. Discrimination in hiring practices and the harsh treatment of Hispanic students by white teachers and staff led to a series of school walkouts in Texas. A consistent demand of boycotting students was the hiring of more Hispanic teachers, counselors and administrative staff.²¹² School Administration's response often pointed to the lack of qualified minority applicants. Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. explained that the vocational training that was emphasized for Hispanic students "reinforced the existing subordinate position of Mexican – Origin population by limiting rather than broadening employment opportunities."²¹³ Segregation proved to have a long-lasting effect on American society.

²¹¹ Joy Martin, "Integration Climate Developing, Teachers Say," *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 10, 1969, 1B.

²¹² Guadalupe San Miguel Jr., *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2001), 114.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

CONCLUSION

Racial Tensions after Integration

Due in part to the smaller minority population in many West Texas towns, integration progressed slowly in place like Abilene. Texas law allowed white city and school officials to delay integration by requiring a referendum vote. Without the necessary numbers, segregation remained. The minority population in Abilene was so small, in fact, that gathering enough votes to win a referendum was impossible. As a result, in 1963, Abilene remained the largest segregated school district in West Texas. Segregation remained until Texas law changed at the end of 1962, and then only Dyess Elementary was integrated due to the threatened loss of federal funds. Even after state law changed and a referendum was no longer required, integration progressed slowly and was not completed until the closure of Houston and Woodson Elementary Schools in 1970. The black community had previously requested that Abilene High be the first integrated school. Once an integration plan was implemented, desegregation ran solely on the district's terms. Although a multi-racial committee was organized, its opinions were largely ignored. Abilene's African American community continually expressed its wish to keep Carter Woodson High School open as an integrated junior high. Racial tensions were inevitable as the burden of change was placed on the minority students and their families. Progress should not have necessitated the loss of black institutions and traditions.

Once desegregation began, there were several instances of discrimination against African-American and Hispanic students, which led to school protests. The first demonstration occurred on October 20, 1969 when Hispanic students walked out of class

at Franklin Junior High and Abilene High School. Students walked out in protest to several instance of discrimination. The students marched toward Mann Junior High to encourage other Hispanic students to walk out. The protesters were intercepted by the Abilene Police and persuaded to assemble at Sears Neighborhood Center at Sears Park.²¹⁴ The protest grew with more students remaining absent from school on Tuesday and Wednesday. Amidst the student walk out, Superintendent Wells was out of town at a conference. A phone interview was conducted with Wells, in which he said, “This protest is a pattern that is common in many of the schools today, and I regret it happened in Abilene. I sincerely believe that it is all uncalled for and when the facts are really known, I doubt if it can be justified.” He also explained, “the children who walked out of school have placed themselves in the same position as any child playing ‘hookey’ and the means they are attempting to use to gain their wishes is certainly not the right procedure to accomplish their desires.”²¹⁵ George Santana, district chairman of the G. I. Forum, told the *Reporter-News* that Larry Ramires from the Department of Justice in Washington D.C. was scheduled to arrive in Abilene Wednesday evening to investigate the protest.

The student walkout continued on Friday October 24, 1969. Gloria Bryand, an Abilene High student and one of the leaders of the demonstration, told the *Reporter-News* “We will not go back until our grievances are heard by the school board.”²¹⁶ Fernando Calderon, spokesperson for some student’s parents, said the walkout occurred because of an incident of discrimination at Franklin Junior High. Calderon alleged that a Hispanic

²¹⁴ Brenda Greene, “Latin Walkouts Are Told to List School Grievances,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 22, 1969, 1B.

²¹⁵ Tom Kershaw, “Latin Students List Grievances,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 23, 1969, 1A.
“City Hall Protest Planned by Latins,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 23, 1969, 1A.

²¹⁶ Tom Kershaw, “Latins Adamant: School Ban Continues,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 24, 1969, 1A.

student was given a part in the school play. But, when a white student refused to play the lead alongside the young man, the Hispanic student was removed from the cast list.

Principal H. A. Owens told the *Reporter-News* that it was a rumor that had been investigated and proved false.²¹⁷

The afternoon of Thursday October 23, 1969 there was a four and half hour meeting between an Abilene Public School teachers committee and Hispanic adults. The meeting ended in a “stand-off” with Hispanic representatives demanding a special meeting with the board to air their grievances.²¹⁸ After the unsuccessful meeting, about 300 students and a few adults marched peacefully to Abilene High School administration building chanting, “We want our rights.”²¹⁹ Reverend Joe Salas explained that the students wanted to show superintendent Wells that, “we’re not just playing hookey.”²²⁰ A small group of students entered the building and left three requests. First, they requested student council representation for Chicanos, which was the chosen name for the group. The second request dealt with discrimination the students alleged was occurring on school campuses. They asked that they be allowed to speak Spanish on school grounds and not be penalized for doing so. Last, they requested the right to return to classes and makeup any missed work. The current district policy was that all work missed due to an unexcused absence receive the grade of zero. Abilene Police Officers provided safe passage for the protesters.²²¹

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Tom Kershaw, “Wells Sees Students, Hopes Solution Near,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 26, 1969. 1A

“Walkout Students Aren’t ‘Expelled’,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 26, 1969. 1-A

“Chicanos in March for ‘Rights’,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 26, 1969. 14A

Mark Smith, attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense (MALD), said he found no fault with the city or police but that the school board “thinks the way to answer a protest is with a club.”²²² Smith was sent to Abilene by MALD to look into the protest and the board’s response. MALD got involved when the protesters were threatened with expulsion. The threatened expulsion made the issue a civil rights matter. Smith explained that MALD would drop the case if the students were not expelled, as their right to protest was covered under the First Amendment. Several students had attempted to return to school on Friday morning and were barred from their classrooms.²²³ The *Reporter-News* explained that several students reported that board trustee Dr. Herman Schaffer had threatened them with expulsion. Along with attorney Mark Smith, two representatives of the Civil Rights Section of the Department of Justice were in Abilene “to try and head off any possible violence, such as that occurred in California, recently when ‘Chicano students burned down a school.’”²²⁴

Dr. Schaffer responded to the expulsion allegations in a statement to the *Reporter-News*, “First, they were not expelled. They are welcome back in school anytime they want to come. Second, we do not need any outside agitators to come here. If Mr. Smith came in here because they were expelled, then he can leave, because they never were expelled. Thirdly, I think that Mr. Smith has no right to quote me if he did not attend the meeting (Tuesday night) at which I spoke. And fourthly, I think the *Reporter-News* shouldn’t have published the statement if they were not at the meeting and shouldn’t have taken the word of a man who quoted me when he wasn’t at the meeting.”²²⁵ He went on

²²² Tom Kershaw, “School Trustees Faulted,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 25, 1969, 1A.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ “Walkout Students Aren’t ‘Expelled’,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 26, 1969, 1A

to explain the district policy, which required suspension for student who disturbed the operation of school. He explained that he informed the students that they would be faced with suspension if they did not return to school. Escoe Webb, Abilene High principal, explained that the students could be readmitted to school if their parents accompanied them and if they merited re-admittance.²²⁶ On the seventh day of the strike the school board held a two-hour meeting with representatives of the Mexican American parent council. The board would not budge on the issue of unexcused absences, but took several other requests under advisement.²²⁷ Some requests by the committee were: more representation for Hispanic students in student government, the addition of bilingual courses, a cultural sensitivity course for administrators and teachers, the employment of additional Hispanic teachers and counselors, and a representative from the Mexican American parents council at all school board meetings.²²⁸ On Saturday November 2, 1969, a casual meeting occurred between the school board and four spokespeople from the Hispanic community, two adults Joe Salas and Valente Ramirez and two student representatives, Gloria Bryand and Johnny Sanchez.²²⁹ The school board responded to each submitted grievance with the aim of persuading the students to return to school. The students requested the allowance to speak Spanish on school grounds without suspension, punishment, or ridicule. The board explained that there was no written policy prohibiting students from speaking Spanish.²³⁰ Their statement did not address the actions of teachers and students who may have ridiculed the students. The students repeatedly requested

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ "Minutes", ASBM, 2 November 1969, Book 9, 121-122.

²³⁰ Tom Kershaw, "Chicanos to End Boycott, Plan to Wear Armbands," *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 2, 1969, 1-A.

more representation in student government. In their written grievance they specifically requested, “one Chicano elected for every twenty Chicanos, elected by Chicanos.”²³¹ The board’s response included an explanation of the operations of the student council. The by-laws were developed by the student body and required that officers and representatives be nominated by students and elected by popular vote. They did agree to have the student council study how they could ensure that all ethnic groups were equally represented.²³² The board agreed that the Mexican American council could have a representative at board meetings and further explained that any group or individual had the same board meeting attendance privileges. In regards to hiring more Mexican American teachers and counselors the board responded, “The Abilene Public Schools has made and is continuing to make every effort possible to hire good Mexican American faculty members at every level, including the high school.”²³³ The students requested an in-service workshop in cultural sensitivity. This request was already in the process of being fulfilled through a new human relations program. The board explained that the program would use all ethnic groups and study both historical and cultural backgrounds of different ethnic groups.²³⁴ The request for bilingual programs was also in the process of being fulfilled with the board explaining they had requested a program from Texas Education Agency (TEA). The students specifically asked that teachers “be warned that pejorative remarks about any ethnic group will not be tolerated and that they will promote respect of different cultures.”²³⁵ The board explained that the Abilene Public Schools

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

never condoned language that harm or ridicule students based on ethnicity. The students requested a student-community-teacher committee be established to formulate grievance procedures. On this point the board agreed and asked that all secondary principals immediately implement a program to establish more efficient and open communication channels.²³⁶ The board also agreed to break down the current drop out study by ethnicities and disseminate the information to the Mexican American council. The last request dealt with the addition of a guidance program to help non-English speaking students enroll in appropriate programs. The board agreed to have non-English speakers evaluated in their own language.²³⁷ Although the board agreed to many of the student's grievances and the students agreed to return to school the following Monday, they did so with the stipulation that they would wear brown armbands to protest their return under the unexcused absences policy.

The boycott concluded after nine days and on November 3, 1969, when the students returned to school wearing brown armbands in silent protest. At Abilene High School, seventy-seven students received re-admittance slips during the first hour. As a reason for their absentness, students wrote in "sick at heart."²³⁸ At Mann Junior High School, Principal J. H. Nail estimated that 30 Chicano students returned wearing armbands. When superintendent Wells was informed of the students wearing armbands he said that an agreement between members of a parents-student committee and the board stated they would not wear armbands and would instead make a PA announcement about the walk out. However, students asserted they were not part of that agreement. Mark

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ "Chicanos Return 'Sick at Heart'," *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 3, 1969, 1A.

Smith, MALD attorney, explained that the students were not trying to provoke the administration with their armbands, but that they wanted to make a statement that not all issues had been resolved.²³⁹ He also explained that a suit would be filed in federal court protesting the students receiving unexcused absences, which required zeros to be given for all work missed during the boycott.

Three weeks after the students returned to school Reverend Salas addressed the board for their lack of progress. The board explained that some progress had been made and Salas was pleased with their report. He invited superintendent Wells and the board to attend a meeting at the Sears Neighborhood Center in December.²⁴⁰ However, the board was advised not to attend the meeting due to the pending litigation against Wells and the board.²⁴¹ The board also discussed moving forward with plans for a Human Relations Commission, which was later adopted by the board on January 26, 1970. The board also reported on the progress being made on the grievances submitted by the Hispanic students. Dr. Joe Starnes, assistant superintendent, explained that school principals were instructed to counsel their teachers and staff that no child was to be punished or ridiculed for speaking Spanish on school grounds. He also informed the board that six Mexican American teachers and one councilor had been hired for the school year. He explained that the board was still waiting on TEA approval for funding to hire bilingual teachers. In the interim, it was decided to hire a Spanish-speaking paraprofessional to fill the gap. The meeting closed with the reading of a letter from Roberto Gonzalez, acting Chief of the

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Roy A. Jones II, "Salas Demands Action by Board," *Abilene Reporter-News*, November 25, 1969.

²⁴¹ Merle Watson, "School Board is Advised to Delay Chicano Meet," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 9, 1969.

"Minutes", ASBM, 8 December 1969, Book 9, 129.

Dallas Education Branch of Office for Civil Rights, in which the district was praised for their progress towards compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The letter also listed areas of improvement, which included “staff training directed toward a better understanding of the various educational need of minority race students, and continued affirmative recruitment and promotion of minority personnel.”²⁴²

On June 9, 1970 testimony opened in the lawsuit brought against superintendent Wells and the school board. Judge Leo Brewster presided over the case. Brewster was appointed by President John F Kennedy in 1961 and had been involved in several civil rights’ cases. His first case, as a freshman judge, was the controversial Fort Worth desegregation suit, in which he ruled, the school must integrate immediately.²⁴³ Pete Tijerina, MALD lawyer, replaced Mark Smith as the plaintiff’s attorney. Plaintiffs in the suit were Johnny and Leticia Sanchez, Gloria Bryand, Anna Flores, Leticia Santana, and Richard Aguirre. The students claimed that under the U. S. Constitution, they had the right to protest without punishment. They alleged that the treatment of their absences as unexcused was a punishment.²⁴⁴ Gloria Bryand, a seventeen-year-old Abilene High School student, testified that the nine days of zeros so adversely affected her grades that she could not recover and thus dropped out of school in February 1970. Leticia Santana, a twelve-year-old Franklin Junior High student, explained that she was sick during the walkout; however, she did attend several rallies at the Sears Neighborhood Center. When she presented a note from her parents stating she was ill, her absences remained unexcused. Superintendent Wells testified that school policy was followed and that the

²⁴² “School Human Relations Plan Adopted by Board,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 27, 1970, 2A.

²⁴³ Gallaway, “Sick at Heart,” 6-7.

Kathryn Duff, “U. S. Judge’s ‘Where Action Is’,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, October 18, 1970, 1-2B.

²⁴⁴ “Testimony Due in Chicano Trial,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 9, 1970, 4A.

board was not seeking to punish the students.²⁴⁵ The court case concluded with the jury ruling in favor of the school district. Following the verdict, Judge Leo Brewster chastised Mark Smith for instigating more dissension and encouraging students to remain out of school. Brewster said, “it was unfortunate, the children fell into the hands of a rabble-rouser who came down here from Lubbock.” He continued, “I sympathize with people here with problems, but the way to settle problems is in the framework of democracy.”²⁴⁶ Brewster laid much of the blame on Mark Smith and MALD for encouraging the students to remain out of school. He commended the plaintiffs’ new attorney, Peter Tijerina, for agreeing to drop several charges in order to focus on the absence issue.

Another racial disturbance occurred in the fall of 1971, this time it dealt with residual tensions from the closing of Carter G. Woodson High School and the treatment of students after the integration of Abilene High School. On November 16, 1971, a fight occurred between approximately fifty black and white students, which initiated a series of school board probes, decisions, and actions.²⁴⁷ The fight began during a break period at Abilene High School. Also disrupted were adult education classes at the Woodson High School campus on November 18, which resulted in the closing of the program for several weeks. The classes resumed after they were moved to Abilene High School. In addition, a school board meeting was disrupted on November 29. Shortly after the meeting began a crowd of black, Hispanic, and white youth and adults pounded on the locked doors of the

²⁴⁵ “Boycotting Students Felt ‘Punished,’ Girl Testifies,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 10, 1970, 1A.

²⁴⁶ Brenda Greene, “Absentee Lawyer Criticized by Judge,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, June 13, 1970, 1A.

²⁴⁷ Eddie Kennedy, “Unrest, Bond Headline Schools,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, January 13, 1972, 1B.

Administration Building doors. Board President Bill Wright adjourned the meeting and reconvened at the Abilene High School cafeteria.²⁴⁸

Racial tensions resurfaced in February 1974 after the celebration of black history week. During the celebration, the 1938 film *Green Pastures* was shown in English and Social Studies courses. Black students felt that the movie showed a derogatory and stereotypical view of black people. Abilene High Principal, Billy Graves, agreed that the movie did “show blacks in rather stereotypical roles.”²⁴⁹ The movie is an adaptation of Marc Connelly’s Pulitzer prize-winning play “The Green Pastures.” The film was composed of an all-black cast and is presented as a Deep South folk tale. A Black English vernacular was used throughout the film.²⁵⁰

Students were also concerned by the number of black student suspensions compared to white students, the presence of police officers on the school grounds, and the lack of black students in leadership positions. Enrollment at Abilene High was 1900 students with 160 claiming African-American as their race. Three separate fights occurred over the course of the week. One fight between two young women ended with the black sophomore female, Anneita Anderson, taken to the hospital for injuries inflicted by a knife-wielding white female student.²⁵¹ Tensions escalated after four students, one white and three black were suspended for fighting on Monday of the next week. Wednesday six more students were suspended for fighting. Graves blamed integration and hard feelings that continued after the closing of Carter G. Woodson High School. The situation intensified when seven of the students, six black and one white were not

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ann Flores, “15 Students Draw AHS Suspension,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 22, 1974, 12A

²⁵⁰ Tammy Heise, “The Green Pastures (film),” *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2013, 1.

²⁵¹ Ann Flores, “15 Students Draw AHS Suspension,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 22, 1974, 12A.

allowed to attend school after their initial three-day suspension. Graves simply continued to re-suspend the students. A committee of black community members was formed and approached the school board with a list of grievances. The black advisory board wanted the school board to know about “real and legitimate” problems black students faced at Abilene High School. The black advisory board submitted a list of ways in which to improve education for black students. This list included allowing black students to help plan black history month, including black contributions in American history, and having an ombudsman work to mediate concerns between black students and administration.²⁵² The school board heard several grievances submitted by black parents and students who were concerned about their education and what they considered to be unjust actions taken during the disturbances at AHS. In all, thirty black community members attended the school board meeting. Milton Balanciere acted as the primary spokesperson for the group. He asked for clarification of the policy on students who were still suspended. He requested that black representatives on the student advisory committee be elected rather than appointed. He reiterated the request for an impartial observer to aid in communication between students and administration, and he requested some way for black students to preview films related to their race before they are shown to the entire student body.²⁵³ Eventually six of the seven students received an individual hearing in front of the school board. The white student, who injured a female student with a knife, withdrew from Abilene High School to attend elsewhere.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Ann Flores, “Board Audience on AHS Sought,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, February 27, 1974, 12C.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ “Five Suspended Blacks Withdraw,” *Abilene Reporter-News*, March 14, 1974, 11C.

The Abilene School Board and superintendent Wells were faced with shifting cultural norms as integration progressed across the state. Although they often handled problems from a place of misunderstanding, they eventually implemented programs, which aided in cultural understanding. Governor Shivers and Attorney General Sheppard implemented legislation, which allowed school districts to delay integration. Like many West Texas towns, the smaller percentage of minority population allowed integration to move slowly and with less volatile interactions than in other parts of the South. However, this allowed the minority population to be taken advantage of because their voice was small. When individuals attempted to raise that voice, they were branded “instigators of racial tension.” When Abilene finally pursued an integration plan, the city chose an alternative that lessened the impact on the white community and disregarded the desires of the black community. After closing both Woodson campuses and completing integration, Abilene Public Schools made several steps towards increasing minority employment and promoting cultural awareness. Despite these step, it was 1973 before a minority was elected to the school board and racial tensions remained.

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EDUCATION

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Bachelor of Arts (May 2015) in Secondary Education, McMurry University, Abilene, Texas.

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ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Secondary Social Studies Teacher, Woodson Center for Excellence, August 2015- present. Responsibilities include: preparing curriculum and lessons, grading, and instruction for U. S. History since Reconstruction, World History, World Geography, Government, Economics, Sociology, and Psychology.

Secondary Social Studies Teacher, Mercy Ships Academy, August 2012-2014. Responsibilities included: preparing curriculum and lessons, grading, and instruction for Ancient Civilizations, Bible: New Testament, Economics, and Comparative Politics.

ACADEMIC & PROFESSIONAL AWARDS

Abilene Independent School District, Secondary Teacher of the Year, 2016-2017.

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