

# The Little Rock Nine

In 1957, nine black students walked into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas—and into history

BY SUZANNE McCABE

## Characters

### TV REPORTER

**MRS. ECKFORD** } parents of  
**MR. ECKFORD** } Elizabeth Eckford

**ELIZABETH ECKFORD** }  
**ERNEST GREEN** } black high  
**MELBA PATILLO** } school students  
**MINNIJEAN BROWN** }

**CROWD** of white people

**NEWSPAPER REPORTER**

**GRACE LORCH**, white resident of Little Rock

**ORVAL FAUBUS**, governor of Arkansas

**DAISY BATES**, president of the Arkansas chapter of the NAACP and the students' leader

**RADIO ANNOUNCER**

**WHITE MAN** in the crowd

**PHOTOGRAPHER**

**SCHOOL OFFICIALS 1-3**

**DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER**, U.S. president

**WHITE STUDENT** at Central High School

**GRANDMA**, Melba Patillo's grandmother

**NARRATORS A-E**

All characters were real people.

## Prologue

**NARRATOR A:** In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court made a historic ruling in a case called *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Court declared that segregation (separation by race) in public schools is unconstitutional. The *Brown* decision meant black children must be allowed to attend whites-only public schools, which were usually much better supplied and equipped than all-black schools.

**NARRATOR B:** In some parts of the country, whites reacted to the Court's decision with anger and violence. They wanted to keep black children out of their schools.

**NARRATOR C:** In September 1957, nine black teens were chosen to test the waters at all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

## Scene 1

**NARRATOR D:** On September 4, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine teens, is ironing her new dress. The news is playing on TV.

**TV REPORTER:** A large crowd of angry white people has gathered outside Little Rock's Central High, waiting to see if the nine black students will show up today . . .

**MRS. ECKFORD** (from the kitchen): Elizabeth! Turn that thing off!

**MR. ECKFORD** (quietly, to his wife): I'm worried. Last night's news reports were bad enough.

**NARRATOR E:** After breakfast, Elizabeth gets ready to leave for the bus stop.

**ELIZABETH ECKFORD:** See you later, Mom. Goodbye, Pop. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.

**MRS. ECKFORD:** Before you go,



An angry white mob surrounds Elizabeth Eckford as she walks to school on September 4, 1957.

Elizabeth, let's all pray.

**MR. ECKFORD** (as they all clasp hands): Let's ask for God's blessing.

**NARRATOR A:** The Eckfords don't know that Daisy Bates is driving the eight other students to school. Bates, the students' leader, wasn't able to reach the Eckfords because they don't have a telephone.

## Scene 2

**NARRATOR B:** Walking alone, Elizabeth tries to get past a crowd of screaming white people.

**CROWD:** Get her! Get her!

**NARRATOR C:** People in the crowd call Elizabeth ugly names. A few try to trip her as she approaches the



line of hundreds of National Guardsmen surrounding the school. They had been sent by Governor Orval Faubus to stop the black students from entering the school. When Elizabeth tries to walk past one of the Guardsmen, he doesn't move. When she tries again, he raises his bayonet to block her.

**CROWD:** Lynch her! Lynch her!

**ELIZABETH (to herself):** If I can just get back to that bus stop, I'll be safe.

**CROWD (chasing Elizabeth):** We're not letting you in our school!

**NARRATOR D:** Elizabeth looks into the crowd, hoping to see a kind face. An older white woman seems to be smiling, but then spits at her.

**CROWD (pointing at Elizabeth):** Kill her! Kill her!

**NARRATOR E:** Elizabeth reaches the bus stop and sits on the bench. A microphone is thrust into her face.

**TV REPORTER:** How do you think things are going?

**NARRATOR A:** Frozen in fear, Elizabeth doesn't answer. Tears form behind her dark glasses. A white newspaper reporter sits down beside her and kindly pats her shoulder.

**NEWSPAPER REPORTER (softly):** Don't let them see you cry.

**GRACE LORCH (to the crowd as she pushes through):** Leave this child alone! Why are you tormenting her? She's in shock. Someone has to help

her! (To Elizabeth) Let's go across the street to that drugstore. I'll use their phone to call us a taxi.

**NARRATOR B:** But someone slams the store's door in Lorch's face. Just then, the bus arrives. Lorch and Elizabeth board it together.

### Scene 3

**NARRATOR C:** Later that month . . .

**TV REPORTER:** For more than two weeks, the nine black students have been unable to enter Central High. President Eisenhower has been pressuring Governor Faubus to let them go to school.

**GOVERNOR ORVAL FAUBUS (on TV):** Against my better





Three weeks after starting school, the Little Rock Nine still needed military protection.



judgment, I have ordered all units of the Arkansas National Guard to leave Little Rock. I encourage the black students to stay home until integration can be accomplished in a peaceful manner.

**DAISY BATES** (*watching with the students*): I don't care what he says. You kids are going to school.

**ELIZABETH**: Will we be protected?

**BATES**: I'll know better after I speak with the police chief.

**NARRATOR D**: When the nine students arrive at the Bates house on the morning of September 23, a radio is playing in the kitchen.

**RADIO ANNOUNCER** (*interviewing a white man outside Central High*): Do you think the black students will be able to get into the school today?

**WHITE MAN**: No. They won't live long enough to get to the doors.

**MELBA PATILLO**: I feel like I'm going to my own hanging.

**ERNEST GREEN**: I never thought that getting inside a school could be so difficult.

**BATES**: The police chief said it will

be safer if we take a different route. Let's go. The police will meet us near the side entrance of Central.

#### Scene 4

**NARRATOR E**: Meanwhile, a black reporter and three black news photographers are walking toward the school to cover the day's events. An angry white crowd blocks them.

**CROWD**: This is *our* school! Go back where you came from!

**PHOTOGRAPHER**: We aren't trying to go to school. We're reporters!

**CROWD**: We don't care. Get out!

**NARRATOR A**: Someone in the crowd spits at them. Then . . .

**CROWD** (*shouting*): Kill them!

**NARRATOR B**: Several white men beat the reporters. They hit a

**“They’re protecting us!  
For the first time in  
my life, I feel like an  
American citizen.”**

photographer in the head with a brick and smash his camera. No one notices the black students entering Central High through a side door. For the first time, they are inside the building. Outside, the white mob riots. Inside, worried school officials discuss what to do.

**SCHOOL OFFICIAL 1**: These kids are trapped in here! What'll we do now?

**SCHOOL OFFICIAL 2**: We may have to let the mob have one of them. That would distract the crowd long enough to get the other eight out.

**SCHOOL OFFICIAL 3**: Should we have them draw straws to see which one gets a rope around the neck?

**NARRATOR C**: The nine black students, listening at the door, are shocked by what they've heard.

## Scene 5

**NARRATOR D:** The police arrive to protect the nine black students and drive them from the school through a violent white mob. Some people in the crowd have guns. When President Eisenhower learns what has happened in Little Rock that morning, he is furious.

**DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER** (*speaking on TV*): I will use the full power of the United States to prevent anyone from breaking the law of the land.

**NARRATOR E:** On the morning of September 24, about 500 white people gather outside the school. The nine black students stay home.

**TV REPORTER:** This afternoon, a thunderous noise filled the air over Little Rock as planes arrived, carrying a thousand soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division. The president has ordered them in to protect the nine black students at Central High.

**NARRATOR A:** The next morning, jeeps full of soldiers arrive at the Bates house as the nine students gather once again.

**MINNIJEAN BROWN:** They're protecting *us*! For the first time in my life, I feel like an American citizen.

**ERNEST:** With all these guns, I think we'll get to school today.

## Scene 6

**NARRATOR B:** With the military's protection, the nine black students are finally able to attend school regularly. But white students continue to attack them. One morning, someone tosses raw eggs at Melba, covering her face and hair with slime.

**MELBA:** Oh, no! Yuck!

**WHITE STUDENT:** She's here to have breakfast. Look, she's wearing eggs!

**NARRATOR C:** Upset, Melba backs out the door and runs home.

**GRANDMA:** After a nice hot bath, you can hurry back.

**MELBA:** Oh, Grandma, this is awful. I'm so embarrassed!

# POWER IN YOUR POCKET

Elizabeth Eckford faced an angry mob alone because she never got word of where to meet the other eight students. Her family didn't have a phone. In 1957, most families had just one (if any) at home, and wireless devices hadn't been invented yet.

Today, smartphones are everywhere. With a few taps, one person can alert dozens, even thousands, of others about a rally, march, or picket line. Such devices now play a powerful role in social protests around the world, from the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations in North Africa and the Middle East to recent Black Lives Matter marches in the U.S.



Live-streaming a protest by smartphone, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**GRANDMA:** Embarrassment is not life-threatening. It can be washed away with a prayer and a smile.

**MELBA:** But it's the same way I feel when they spit on me. I feel like they've taken away my dignity.

**GRANDMA:** Dignity is a state of mind, like freedom. No one can take it away unless you let them. And if you don't let them know they're bothering you, they can't win.

**MELBA:** OK, Grandma. I'll try.

**NARRATOR D:** Back at school, Melba opens a classroom door. Two white boys push it closed on her, but she just opens it again.

**MELBA** (*sweetly*): Thank you! I've been needing some exercise.

**NARRATOR E:** The boys look at each other, dumbfounded.

## Epilogue

**NARRATOR A:** With patience and determination, all but one of the

nine black students made it through the school year. After being tripped in the cafeteria, Minnijean lost her temper and dumped a bowl of chili on a white student's head. She was punished and later expelled.

**NARRATOR B:** Ernest Green, the lone senior, graduated in May 1958. As he proudly received his diploma, Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights leader, looked on from the audience.

**NARRATOR C:** In the fall of 1958, Governor Faubus closed all of Little Rock's public schools rather than allow them to be integrated. But in August 1959, Central High School reopened—to whites *and* blacks.

**NARRATOR D:** By then, the "Little Rock Nine" were world-famous. Their courage in the face of hatred and brutality earned them a place in history beside such civil rights heroes as King and Rosa Parks. ♦



Which of the personal and political challenges the Little Rock Nine faced do you think was the toughest?



Watch a civil rights movement video at [junior.scholastic.com](http://junior.scholastic.com).