

“Where the Past Still Hurts”¹:
Court-Ordered Busing in Memphis City Schools

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1. Don Share, “Dilemma” from *Union*, quoted in Rushing, *Paradox of Place*, 34.

The morning of January 24, 1973 finally arrived. The city had been anticipating this day for what seemed like years. The papers had been discussing the busing controversy for weeks. It was the first day back to school after a long and uncertain Christmas break, but it was also the first day that many children would ride a bus to school. Many of them would not be going to the same school that they had attended in December, but would be attending a different school; for some the school was thirty minutes across town. Thirteen thousand children were scheduled to ride those buses, because of something referred to as “Plan A.” Eight-year old Wayne Dowdy was one of those kids.

Wayne lived in a neighborhood with a number of kids who could all walk together to school, but now his mom said he was going to a new school-nearly his whole class would be going. His brother was also going to a new school, but not Wayne’s school. They did not ride the new buses that morning, but their mom drove them to school, and she drove them every morning for the rest of the year. The next year she sent Wayne and his brother to the new school at their church, Elliston Baptist, where he was reunited with some of his neighborhood friends.²

Fifteen-year old Frank Inderbitzen did not have to go to school on the first day, because he got to stay home until his new school was ready. It was going to be in a church near his neighborhood, Graceland Baptist. He signed himself up to go to school there because all of his friends were leaving public schools. All he had to do was register with a group called C.A.B., pay a \$25 fee, and he was set for the rest of the year. They met in a church, and they had new textbooks and nice teachers. They next year, though,

2. “Interview with Wayne Dowdy,” interview by author, June 19, 2012.

Frank's school raised the tuition costs and he had to go to the public school which he had been assigned to; his family could no longer afford to pay for his schooling.³

Only half the students rode the buses on that first day. At Shannon Elementary, in North Memphis, only two students got off of the bus and walked into their new school from the Grandview Heights neighborhood⁴. Over 7,000 students left public schools in the month of January that year.⁵ The Memphis City School system continued to lose students in huge numbers, especially the next fall when "Plan Z" assigned even more students to the new schools. How did all of this happen?⁶

In 1973, the Memphis school integration lawsuit, *Northcross v. Board of Education*, resulted in a federal district court order to integrate the Memphis City Schools through busing in order to comply with the almost twenty year old *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision that had rendered segregated schools "inherently unequal."⁷ Because of the demographics of Memphis's population, the history of race relations in the city, and the timing of the court's decision, court-ordered busing in Memphis City Schools caused massive white flight, which resulted in the continuation of *de facto* segregation in the school system that still continues today.

3. "Personal Interview with Frank Inderbitzen," interview by author, July 3, 2012.

4. Jim Shearin, *First Day of Busing*, January 24, 1973.

5. "A Brief History of Memphis City Schools."

6. O.Z. Stephens, "Induced Desegregation," 22.

7. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (March 17, 1954).

The Background

In 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* held that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional, ruling that the doctrine of separate but equal had “no place” in the field of public education.⁸ The Court’s order to integrate “with all deliberate speed,”⁹ threatened the status quo of Southern society, which had relied on racial segregation for more than a half-century. In Tennessee, racially segregated education had always been the case. In the State’s 1870 Constitution, which remained unchanged in 1954, a clause required that “no school . . . shall allow white and Negro children to be received as scholars together in the same school.”¹⁰ This initiated the practice of segregation, which 1896 Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, sanctioned.¹¹ The *Brown* ruling, with its promise of equality in education, put Southerners on the defense, and they quickly began developing means of delay and resistance in order to maintain the status quo.¹² Historian Roger Biles notes “the remarkable ability of many of the region’s communities to thwart the Supreme Court’s ruling” and resist implementing Brown’s order.¹³ The public educational system in

8. Ibid.

9. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 349 U.S. 294 (May 31, 1955).

10. Tennessee Constitution (1870), art. 11, sec. 12. (Section 12 removed in 1978).

11. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (May 18, 1896).

12. Roger Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory: Public School Desegregation in Memphis," 470.

13. Ibid.

Memphis, Tennessee was no exception to this trend of resistance. In fact, it became what Mayor Willie Herenton called one of the “last bastions of segregation.”¹⁴

As was the case in much of the South, formal implementation of the integration order did not take place immediately in Memphis. At the time of the *Brown* ruling, Memphis City Schools operated a dual system entirely segregated by race. The student population was 42% black and 58% white.¹⁵ Milton Bowers, Sr., the president of the Board of Education, remarked that the Board “had been expecting this to happen a long time, but at the same time, we’ve made no plans because we feel none will be needed.”¹⁶ Bowers implied that Memphis would not be affected by the decision and even maintained that he “did not believe that such [integration] would ever be the case” in the city’s public schools.¹⁷

In an attempt to secure the future that Bowers anticipated, Tennessee, along with many other Southern states, immediately got to work on legislation that would maintain the segregated systems in spite of the Supreme Court’s ruling. In 1957, the state passed the Tennessee Pupil Assignment Law, which regulated school assignment by placing the power to grant school admissions in the hands of local school boards. Thus, in theory the

14. "Interview with Mayor Herenton," interview by author, July 12, 2012.

15. Connie Mauney, “An Analysis of Court-Ordered Desegregation in Tennessee: Facts and Opinions,” 236.

16. George Sisler, “Ruling Fails to Shock City; Officials See Little Difficulty,” *Commercial Appeal*, 18 May 1954. Found in “To Disturb the People As Little As Possible.” Duke, pg 5.

17. Ibid.

admissions policies of all schools were no longer racially discriminatory, but in practice it was entirely up to the discretion of those in charge.

Memphis City Schools continued to operate a segregated system. In 1958, Gerald Young, a black student, applied for admission to a white school that was four blocks from his house. At the time, he was attending a black school that was 10 blocks away from his house.¹⁸ This attempt to transfer marked the “first step toward litigation” in Memphis and the beginning of the city’s long struggle for integration.¹⁹ The Board denied Young’s application, refusing him admittance to the white school and using the guidelines of the Pupil Assignment Law to do so. Despite Young’s attempt, Memphis leaders continued to maintain “that local African Americans were not pushing for desegregation” and were quite satisfied with the system as it stood.²⁰ Later, exposing the ineffectiveness of the plan, the court noted in 1960 that “no Negro pupil had ever been transferred to a white school, nor had a white student been transferred to a Negro school under the operation of the law.”²¹ Thus, the Tennessee Pupil Assignment Law fulfilled its purpose, providing equal access to schools in theory, while effectively preserving segregated education.

In March of 1960, the parents of 18 black children, represented by NAACP lawyers, filed suit in federal district court against the Memphis Board of Education, alleging that the city “maintained and operated a compulsory biracial system,” in which

18. Mauney, “Desegregation in Tennessee,” 244.

19. Daniel Kiel, “Exploded Dream: Integration in Memphis City Schools,” 270.

20. Kira Duke, “To Disturb as Little as Possible,” 11.

21. *Northcross v. Board of Education*, 302 F.2d 818 (United States Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit June 25, 1962).

“certain schools are designated for Negro students only and staffed by Negro personnel, and certain other schools are designated for white students only and staffed by white personnel.” Furthermore the suit claimed that the zoning for schools was manipulated to uphold segregation and that the Pupil Assignment Law did “not provide an adequate remedy for the relief” that they sought. The plaintiffs asked the Court to order the Board to stop operating a biracial system, or else to “submit a plan for the reorganization of the schools on a unitary, non-racial basis.” The case, *Northcross v. Board of Education*, began hearings in 1961 with district Judge Marion Boyd presiding.²²

Boyd initially ruled in favor of the school board, finding that the Pupil Assignment Law was an “effective and adequate remedy” for desegregating the system, a decision that the plaintiffs quickly contested.²³ In addition to the appeal of Boyd’s ruling, the NAACP recruited black students to apply for transfers, finally succeeding in getting 48 to do so. This recruitment was an effort to test the validity of the Pupil Assignment Law, and whether it provided black students with access to white schools. At this point the school board recognized that it “had to begin at least token desegregation in order to show the Federal Court officials that it was acting in good faith” in terms of complying with the *Brown* decision.²⁴ The Board accepted thirteen out of the forty-eight transfer applicants, allowing them to attend four previously all white elementary schools.²⁵

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Kiel, “Exploded Dream,” 272.

These thirteen black first-graders integrated white schools in the fall of 1961. In hope of preventing any violent reactions and desperate to avoid a public fiasco like what had happened in Little Rock four years before, city and school officials did not release information about the plans for integration to the public until after successful completion. Thus, city leadership “facilitated the peaceful desegregation of the four schools,” and successfully integrated the system.²⁶ After this token desegregation in October of 1961, the Board filed a motion with the court asking that the plaintiff’s appeal be dismissed. They based their request on the 13 students as evidence that they had complied with integration orders, claiming that basis that “the issues involved in the appeal have now become moot.”²⁷ The defendants also noted to the Court that the desegregation was “accomplished through the cooperation of the members of the Negro race, the news media, and public officials of Memphis,” and further, “that it was accomplished without fanfare or strife, and that it has been generally accepted by all of the citizens of the community.”²⁸

However, the Sixth Court of Appeals, in 1962, found that Boyd’s decision in favor of the Board the previous year was “contrary to the evidence and clearly erroneous.”²⁹ The appellate court and declared that the Pupil Assignment Law did not

26. Duke, 17.

27. *Northcross v. Board*, 302 F.2d 818, 820 (United States Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit March 23, 1962).

28. *Ibid.*

29. Robert M. McRae, *Oral History of the Desegregation of Memphis City Schools, 1954-1974*, 41.

constitute an adequate plan for desegregation, and that the responsibility to desegregate went to the Board, not the black students. The court found that the public schools in Memphis were operating a dual system that was at odds with *Brown*.

In response to this ruling, the Board changed the school-zone lines, thereafter claiming to have abolished dual lines that were based on race. They also developed a plan for integration, which it submitted August 31, 1962 to the district court. The plan provided for the desegregation of grades 1 through 3 in 1962, and added one grade per year in the following years, completing integration by 1971. Later the Board modified the plan so that the integration of 6th grade would be complete by 1964. Judge Boyd approved this plan in 1963.³⁰

The plaintiffs again appealed Boyd's ruling, claiming that "the new zones were formed by irregular lines or by gerrymandering so as to preserve segregation,"³¹ as well as "claim[ing] that this [new Board plan] d[id] not comply with . . . the current interpretation of . . . all deliberate speed."³² In response, the Court of Appeals determined in 1964 that it had heard "persuasive evidence" that the new zones were not promoting integration and did not approve them.³³ The Court also asserted that they were not

30. Kiel, "Exploded Dream," 275.

31. *Northcross v. Board*, 333 F.2d. 661, 662 (United States Court of Appeals, Sixth Circuit June 12, 1964).

32. *Ibid.*, at 664.

33. *Ibid.*, at 663.

“prepared to say that [the zoning] ha[d] been arbitrarily done in order to retain the maximum amount of segregation.”³⁴

As for the plan of gradual desegregation, the Court stated that, “the Board is to be commended” for accelerating the year of sixth-grade integration, “of its own volition.”³⁵ But it also noted that “it has been ten years since the first *Brown* decision,” and “considering the time that has elapsed since . . .” then, they declared “that the desegregation of the Memphis schools should be completed before 1970.”³⁶ It then proposed a schedule, and said on the basis of the Board’s cooperation in voluntarily accelerating, “we think the Board might and probably would adopt [their] schedule . . .”³⁷ Thus, the court modified Boyd’s decision and ordered that the Board desegregate Junior High schools in 1965 and Senior High in 1966. It also required some changes to the transfer guidelines, so that students could not transfer out of a school in which they were the minority into one in which they would be a majority.³⁸

In 1966 the District Court approved the plan and the Board adopted its modifications. One provision of the plan included unrestricted free transfers between schools. The plaintiffs, still unsatisfied, particularly with this provision for free transfers

34. *Ibid.*, also at 663.

35. *Ibid.*, at 664.

36. *Ibid.*, at 664-665.

37. *Ibid.*, at 665.

38. *Ibid.*, at 667-668.

as well as the failure to address complete faculty desegregation, filed an injunction, hoping to prevent the board from implementing the new plan.

Then, in May 1968, about a year after Boyd denied the plaintiff's request for an injunction, the Supreme Court issued a game-changing decision. In *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, the Court established that "it is incumbent on the school board" to facilitate desegregation, and that the district courts have the responsibility to monitor their progress.³⁹ In performing this responsibility, the Supreme Court held that district courts should require practical evaluations of the plans.⁴⁰ Evaluations emphasized quantifiable data and statistical results as integral factors in determining a system's progress toward integration. *Green* abolished the legality of freedom of choice plans, finding that they only served "to preserve some semblance of the old segregation."⁴¹ Furthermore, this decision emphasized data and statistical results in determining the actual state of desegregation in a particular school system. With these new tools in place, the plaintiffs had the opportunity to move forward again, and in July of 1968, they filed for further relief based on the *Green* ruling. In the request, the plaintiffs asked specifically for the complete desegregation of faculty, the cancellation of all transfers that reduced desegregation, a survey and report of local school facilities that

39. *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* 391 US. 430, 439 (United States Court of Appeals, Fourth Circuit Appellate Court May 27, 1968).

40. *Northcross v. Board of Education of Memphis City Schools* 312 F. Supp 1150, 1152-1152 (United States District Court, Western District Tennessee May 1, 1970).

41. J. Harvie Wilkinson, *From Brown to Bakke*, 108-110.

would provide data, and the development of a new desegregation plan created with the help of the Desegregation Center of UT.⁴²

Another change occurred in the *Northcross* case when Judge Boyd stepped down and Judge Robert M. McRae took over his cases. In November of 1968, Judge McRae ordered the board to complete the survey the plaintiffs had had requested. Based on the findings of the report, Judge McRae declared, in May 1969, that the Board's current plan for desegregation was not sufficient and ordered specific guidelines pertaining to faculty desegregation for the board to implement. That September, the local NAACP followed up with a list of 15 demands of the School Board.⁴³

On October 9 and 10 of 1969, forty thousand black students boycotted school to show their support for the NAACP and its demands of the board.⁴⁴ The Board, in a retaliatory step, called off a proposed meeting to discuss the problems with the NAACP. The NAACP responded in kind, issuing an official call for boycotts . . .

Soon thereafter, the Supreme Court ruled on another landmark case for integration. The case, *Alexander v. Holmes*, held that dual systems were no longer acceptable.⁴⁵ Following this decision, in November, the plaintiff took *Northcross* back to the Court of Appeals, asking for a unitary system. In May of 1970, the Supreme Court

42. McRae, 56-7.

43. Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom*, 45.

44. *Ibid.*, 47.

45. *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* 396 U.S. 1218 (September 5, 1969).

granted the appeal and issued an implementation order.⁴⁶ The next year, two more landmark cases occurred that impacted the Memphis desegregation story, *Swann v. Charlotte Mecklenberg* and *Davis*.⁴⁷ These cases set the precedent for the use of court-ordered busing in desegregation attempts. By June of 1971, the Court of Appeals had applied these rulings to the Memphis case.

Following the Circuit Court's instruction, McRae ordered the Board to formulate plans for acceptable integration. The Board developed and filed with the court Plan A and Plan B. Plan A called for the busing "of an estimated 13,789 students".⁴⁸ In April of 1972, McRae accepted Plan A, and instructed the Board to implement it. The Board, claiming that they needed more time to implement such a complicated plan, successfully deferred busing to the beginning of the second semester.⁴⁹ Buses began rolling January 23, 1973.⁵⁰

The Response

Memphis had one of the strongest oppositional reactions to busing in the South. Massive numbers of white students abandoned the school system. Initial studies on busing in the 1970's emphasized the magnitude of Memphis resistance when they considered the city's data, along with that of Atlanta, to be so extreme that it skewed

46. *Northcross v. Board* 397 U.S. 232 (March 9, 1970). (*per curiam*).

47. *Swann v. Charlotte Mecklenberg* 402 U.S. 1 (April 20, 1971) and *Davis v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County* 402 U.S. 33 (April 20, 1971).

48. Wendy Thomas, "City Schools Integration Timeline."

49. McRae, 73, 38.

50. Kiel, "Exploded Dream," 14.

overall conclusions, rendering them inaccurate. Vocal opposition in the city was widespread and active, and its participants ranged from city leadership and upper-class elite whites, all the way across the board to poor, blue-collar, working-class whites.

White leadership in Memphis was particularly involved in the fight against busing. Not only were members of the school board open about their opposition, but the sentiments went all the way to the top. The mayor, Wyeth Chandler, publicized his opposition in numerous ways. He led the City Council in efforts to thwart the busing plans. Judge McRae recalled that “the main thrust of the obstructionist tactics,” employed by Chandler and other city officials, “consisted of unlawful attempts by allegedly legal means to prevent the school buses from rolling.”⁵¹ Such tactics included the City Council, which consisted of 10 white members and 3 black members, passing an ordinance that required “stringent new safety regulations for buses,”⁵² as well as an attempt to enforce an old, forgotten city ordinance that required certain certifications of anyone operating a bus in the city.⁵³ However, neither of these maneuvers to avoid busing was successful, as both met with federal court injunctions.⁵⁴

In addition to attempts at “legal” methods of preventing busing, Mayor Chandler also urged Memphians to resist the court-ordered plan. He attended rallies of oppositional organizations and told parents, “I cannot and will not urge any parent to send his child

51. McRae, 11.

52. John Egerton, *Promise of Progress: Memphis School Desegregation, 1972-1973*, 22.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

into a ghetto school.”⁵⁵ After the City Council ordinances failed, Chandler maintained that he would enforce the law and protect the city’s children, but openly remained committed to preventing busing. He said, “It appears we temporarily may have lost the fight . . . But I hope you won’t give up the fight until we have restored sanity to the neighborhood schools.”⁵⁶ Chandler was clearly not going to give up easily.

Capturing Chandler’s attitude, a cartoon in the local paper depicted a caricature of the mayor placing thumb-tacks under the wheels of a school bus. The title of the drawing read “Political Inspection Station. W. Chandler, Proprietor.”⁵⁷ The city was well aware of the determination the mayor exhibited in seeking to thwart the desegregation plan. City leadership continued to attempt to thwart busing. The Council at times refused to provide gasoline to run the buses, or else it withheld funds from the school system because the Board had used the money to pay for gasoline. The City Council amended the City Charter in 1973 so that it could not legally levy taxes that would fund transportation for desegregation.⁵⁸ Another of the Council’s ploys involved a proposed resolution that would allow the Council to take away from the Boards appropriation all funds that went toward busing. McRae deemed the resolution void, as it inhibited the fulfillment of the Constitution, but the Council continued to come up with ways to make trouble.⁵⁹

55. Ibid.

56. Egerton, 22.

57. Draper Hill, “Political Inspection Station” Cartoon. *Commercial Appeal*, 1973. Reprinted in Egerton “Promise of Progress.”

58. McRae, 112.

59. Ibid., 119.

Citizens Against Busing

The most vocal opposition to busing in Memphis was the organization Citizens Against Busing (CAB), which opposed court-ordered busing, but not necessarily the principle of integration itself. CAB initially formed in the spring of 1971 in a middle-class white Memphis neighborhood. The organization became considerably popular in the middle-class white community in Memphis, and changed leadership in 1972.⁶⁰ Ruth Saed, who served as the group's publicity chairwoman, recalled that the renewed organization got started in 1972 under the leadership of Whitehaven businessman Ken Keele. Saed attended a meeting in her neighborhood at Sea Isle Elementary that Keele organized as a forum for parents to discuss busing and the issues surrounding it. After the meeting, Keele, Saed and another woman from the neighborhood, Kay Taylor, stayed behind and discussed the situation. Keele was interested in forming a group that would find alternatives to busing. These three organized CAB and then went into the communities that were affected by the proposed busing plans to see what solutions they wanted.⁶¹

The motive behind the organization's desire to find an alternative, according to Saed, was the lack of a definite plan. They were opposed to busing because they just "didn't know what was going on," they felt like the school board didn't have a plan and the unknown created a feeling of fear in many parents throughout the city. Everything seemed to them very "up in the air." Thus, the founders of CAB tried to address the

60. Chisum, "CAB Displays Political Impact Potential."

61. "Interview with Ruth Saed," interview by author, July 19 2012.

problem proactively. These concerns seemed to worry a lot of parents, and CAB and its viewpoint became very popular throughout the city. Leaders such as former Mayor Henry Loeb and the current Mayor Wyeth Chandler “were very much involved” in CAB. Particularly, Loeb was “a major input in fundraising” for the organization and in getting it started.⁶²

To gain publicity, Saed and the CAB officials organized events that would grab not just local, but national media attention. One such event was the burial of a school bus in the Frayser area to symbolize a funeral for “neighborhood schools.” The group’s slogan became “happiness is walking to your neighborhood school,” a mantra which they painted on signs to sell as a fundraiser. These signs decorated many yards throughout the city, particularly in areas that were projected to be affected by busing. CAB officials also organized a march to the Board of Education, where they brought a goat to eat the school reassignment papers. In addition to their media stunts, CAB held large rallies that attracted an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 people, including Loeb, Chandler, and several School Board members.⁶³

The Private School Trend

When busing finally became a reality, Memphis parents had to make decisions about what they would do. While some fled to the steadily growing suburbs of Memphis that operated a separate school system, many white Memphis parents responded to the court order by fleeing the public schools in favor of private schools. Turning to private schools when facing integration was not a new response.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

The South in the years after *Brown* saw many forms of resistance, from violent protest to state-approved plans for Massive Resistance. In many places, as the public schools integrated, communities responded by opening up private, often church-affiliated, schools to preserve segregation. The prevalence of these schools increased in the 1960s, as more and more Southern places could no longer defer desegregation. The practice saw even more considerable growth after the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voter Registration Act in 1965.

The *Memphis World*, a local black newspaper, showed concern about this trend, first noting it in 1966 in an article entitled “The South Eyes More Private Schools to Combat Desegregation Efforts.”⁶⁴ The article acknowledged that, “often the real basis for formation of private schools is difficult to determine,” but then quoted an executive secretary of one such school who stated: “However, I must admit integration and federal control of the schools was the impetus for the private-school movement.”⁶⁵ The paper appears increasingly concerned with the movement, the next year reporting that across the South “private segregated schools enroll about 40,000 pupils.”⁶⁶ Then, in 1969, *The Memphis World* observed the issue with utmost , reporting that, “the private schools may

64. “South Eyes More Private Schools to Combat Desegregation Efforts.” *The Memphis World*. November 12, 1966.

65. *Ibid.*

66. “Private Segregated Schools Enroll About 40,000 Pupils.” *The Memphis World*. November 11, 1967.

jeopardize public education in the region.”⁶⁷ These articles reveal that black Memphians were aware of the private school trend and its hazardous effect on public education years before Memphis joined the movement in significant numbers.

Memphis, late to get on the desegregation train, was also late to join the private school trend. While a few schools, including Evangelical Christian School (1965) and Bishop Byrne High School (1965), did open in the 1960’s, the city did not experience significant private school growth until after *Swann* authorized busing in 1971.

Private Schools in Memphis Area	New	Total
Existed Before 1954	-	31
Opened 1954-1970	13	44
Opened 1970	2	46
Opened 1971	8	54
Opened 1972	10	64
Opened 1973	26	90

Before 1970, Memphis was home to 44 private schools, 13 of which had opened in the sixteen years since *Brown*. In 1971, 54 private schools operated in Memphis. Then, in 1972, after the court had ordered Memphis City Schools to adopt a busing plan, but before the plans had been instituted, 64 private schools were located in Memphis. Ten private schools

had opened in a single year. Between the fall of 1972 and the fall of 1973, 26 more private schools opened up, bringing the city’s total to a massive 90 schools that served 33,000 students.⁶⁸

67. “SRC Reports on Segregated Private Schools in South.” *The Memphis World*. October 25, 1969.

68. Jimmie Covington, “Private Schools Show Effects of Competition, Slowing Flight.”

In 1975, an article in the *New York Times* explored the South's private school phenomenon. The article explained that there was "a long tradition of private schooling in the South . . .," however, the schools had functioned as "the exclusive educational retreat of a handful of upper-class white youngsters whose parents were dissatisfied with the region's poverty-stricken state schools."⁶⁹ That is, until desegregation efforts encouraged private schools as refuges from interracial education. Memphis private schools reflected this pattern, with the older schools existing as a part of this elite system. In his report of the Memphis desegregation battle, John Egerton affirms this option, noting that "the city contained a large number of private schools" and that "the more affluent have other private schools in Memphis to choose from."⁷⁰

These alternatives did not exist for any except the upper echelon. Ken Keele, president of the opposition organization Citizens Against Busing (CAB), remarked, "choice is what only the wealthy have."⁷¹ The middle and lower class whites had less control over their children's educations. Thus, when the desegregation decision came about, the white elite had no worries about how it would affect their children, "because they continued to support exclusive schools whose tuition and fees were out of reach

69. Drummond Ayers, "South's 'Seg' Schools Are Now Part of The System," 1976.

70. Egerton, 32-3.

71. *Ibid.*, 18.

even for most middle-class whites.”⁷² However, lower and middle class whites did not have established alternatives without “considerable tuition fees.”⁷³

The lack of options, however, did not prevent extensive flight from public schools. When the elite schools were unavailable, one former student recalled that “the Baptists [and other church groups] mobilized and filled the gap,”⁷⁴ and soon, “private church-affiliated schools mushroomed across the landscape.”⁷⁵ “. . . and suddenly the private school tradition spread to include the offspring of middle-class whites and, in some instances of gritty economic sacrifice, the children of working-class whites.”⁷⁶ The number of private schools in Memphis went from forty in 1968 to ninety in the fall of ’74, when their collective enrollment reached about 33,000.⁷⁷

These new schools, unlike their older, elite counterparts, tended to cater to a range of economic levels. The CAB schools catered to the working class ways, and the Commercial Appeal reported in the days just before busing that the president of CAB advertised “that anyone dissatisfied with the court order . . . could enroll their children in the CAB schools.” He added that, in an effort to accommodate everyone, “no tuition

72. Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History*, 69.

73. Biles, 480.

74. Tuohy, “Giving,” in *In a Heartbeat*, 77.

75. Biles, 480.

76. Ayers, “South’s ‘Seg’ Schools.”

77. Jimmie Covington, “CAB Schools Elicit Varied Ratings.”

would be charged at first”⁷⁸ This provided an opportunity for those who previously could not afford the choice, and spokesperson Ruth Saed said, “We are mainly interested in the people who cannot afford the more affluent private schools,” emphasizing “We are working to serve the community which cannot afford \$600 per child.”⁷⁹ The organization’s president, according to reports, even “expressed some resentment against the efforts of some churches to open private schools that are too expensive for working-class people.”⁸⁰

Other schools that opened in Memphis targeted families who fell somewhere between the blue collar and the wealthy elite. Though this private school phenomenon swept through not just Memphis, but the South, as the New York Times reported in ’74 that “many urban systems . . . remain segregated due to white flight to suburbs and burgeoning private all-white acad[emie]s, the Times also noted that “the growth of [such] white acad[emie]s [is] seen centered in Memphis.”⁸¹

Within a few years of this trend in Southern cities, experts began to predict that “the ‘segregation academy’ movement will be short-lived because low-income families in the South cannot sustain the cost of tuition.”⁸² William Caldwell, attorney for the Legal Defense Fund in Memphis, said of the city’s problem, “eventually things will stabilize.”

78. "CAB Plans 2 Schools By Jan. 24."

79. "Jimmie Covington, "CAB Schools Elicit Varied Ratings."

80. Egerton, 18.

81. Drummond Ayers, "Survey of Southern Schools," 1974.

82. Charles T. Clotfelter, "School Desegregation, 'Tipping,' and Private School Enrollment," 29-30.

In the spring of 1973, Caldwell predicted that, “by the end of next year, a lot of whites will be back. The alternatives won’t survive for any except the wealthiest few. . .”⁸³

However, time would prove his predictions wrong, and by 1976 headlines across the nation were claiming, with an eye toward Memphis, that the “South’s private schools [are now] entrenched”⁸⁴ and that the “South’s ‘seg’ schools are now part of the system.”⁸⁵

Emphasizing the economic/class aspects of the phenomenon, many argued “that the ‘segregation academy’ movement will be short lived because low income families in the South cannot sustain the cost of tuition”⁸⁶ The alternatives won’t survive for any except the wealthiest few . . .”⁸⁷ How then did this trend, reported nationwide to be “particularly notable in Memphis,” come to exist in the city? Studies of the white flight phenomenon concluded that “the proportion and social-class level of minority students, [as well as] . . . the cost and availability of schooling alternative” were important factors that influenced the amount of white flight that occurred as a response to school integration.”⁸⁸ One study found that in Charlotte, NC, a high “income alone explained 54% of white abandonment of the public schools after integration.”⁸⁹ That is, one

83. Egerton, 26.

84. “South’s Private Schools Entrenched.”

85. Drummond Ayers, "South's 'Seg' Schools Are Now Part of The System."

86. Clotfelter, 29-30.

87. Egerton, 26.

88. Robert G. Wegmann, "White Flight and School Resegregation," 392.

89. Ibid.

significant factor in white leaving the schools was “a family’s financial ability to exercise . . . options” and put their child in a private school.⁹⁰ In terms of income, studies revealed that, because of tuition costs, the rate of flight from public schools varied positively with income.⁹¹ That is to say, the higher a family’s income, the more likely that family is to turn to private alternatives for education. In 1969, data indicated that 40% of families with children in private schools nationwide earned incomes above \$15,000.⁹² A study of Mississippi private schools found in 1970 that “the proportion of white families with income over \$25,000 ha[d] a significant influence on private school enrollment.”⁹³ However, the study also found that desegregation, more so than income, influenced Mississippi’s private school enrollment.⁹⁴ Therefore, families, despite their income, were often sending their children to private schools when their public schools became integrated.

Memphis private school enrollment resembled that of Mississippi.⁹⁵ Whereas in other places, reports indicated that “the only practical alternative to public schools . . .

90. Amy J. Barger, "The Cost of Myth-Making: Racial Tension and School Desegregation in Memphis," 3.

91. Everett Cataldo et al., "Desegregation and White Flight," 4.

92. Clotfelter, 48.

93. Ibid., 47.

94. Ibid.

95. For information on the Mississippi private school story, see Michael W. Fuquay, "Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1971."

[was] a segregated private school, [which was] an expensive . . . proposition.”⁹⁶

Memphis, a more affordable alternative materialized. Leigh Ann Tuohy, an alumna of one such alternative, recalled that, “the Baptists mobilized and filled the gap.”⁹⁷ Because most of the white students who fled Memphis’ public schools could not afford the tuition of the city’s elite private schools,⁹⁸ the new private schools that cropped up catered to their financial needs. These schools targeted what one former administrator called the “more blue collar,” those of a lower economic status than the city’s private schools traditionally served.⁹⁹ New Memphis private schools were able to supply this demand and working class families were able to participate in the flight from public schools.

Emphasizing the financial status of these new schools’ demographics, many recalled the economic sacrifices their families made for their educations. Tuohy remembered that “sending my brother and me to private school was a major hardship for my parents, and it put nearly constant financial pressure on them.”¹⁰⁰ Motives for leaving the public schools varied considerably. While some opponents to busing or integration objected on a purely white supremacist standpoint, other sought to maintain the status quo because they had worked hard to rise into the middle class, and didn’t “want to open

96. Cataldo et al., 4.

97. Tuohy, 78.

98. Biles, 480.

99. “Interview with Joseph Clayton.”

100. Tuohy, 70.

the rights of passage into that society to others.”¹⁰¹ Also, in lower class communities, people who already had very little did not like “the prospect of black competition on equal footing.”¹⁰² In Memphis, because of the private schools catering to the working class, this demographic participated in white flight in a way that was not possible elsewhere.

The Explanation

The roots of Memphis’ intense reaction to busing and the factors that make the city such a unique environment, particularly susceptible to such a response, are embedded in the city’s history. Factors that affected and created the culture of Memphis include the city’s geographic location, as well as its history of race relations. These, in addition to the unfortunate timing of the court-order in respect to events leading up to it, contribute to the white abandonment of public schools in 1973.

Memphis, situated on the Mississippi River at the northern edge of the Mississippi Delta, has a unique geographic location. It is the only urban area in an expanse that stretches 200 miles in all directions.¹⁰³ Because of industrialization and urbanization, many people from the surrounding rural areas relocated to Memphis to find work.¹⁰⁴ These rural migrants were both black and white, but the whites were “previously impoverished and working-class . . . , who had migrated primarily from the surrounding

101. Egerton, 16.

102. *Ibid.*, 12.

103. Robert Gordon, *It Came From Memphis*, 3.

104. For a more detailed explanation of in-migration contributing the Memphis’s growth, see M. Pohlmann’s *Opportunity Lost*, Ch. 2, particularly the subheadings “Moderate Growth” and “Urbanization” on pg. 25-6.

Delta counties with little education and hardly any marketable skills.”¹⁰⁵ The one thing that these rural white migrants did bring with them was a “deep hatred of Negroes.”¹⁰⁶

Christine Gale, a white woman who grew up on a sharecropping cotton farm in Marmaduke, AR,¹⁰⁷ recalls the conservative values that pervaded Southern rural culture in the 1960’s and 70’s. During picking season, black seasonal workers would come through looking for work, and according to Gale, “a lot of the neighbors were...hateful and mean people” who would “holler and chase [the black workers] off.” The conservative attitudes of the rural population, who Gale recalls were staunchly opposed to working on Sundays and even today often maintain that, “women should be home barefoot and pregnant,” included beliefs about racial inequality. Gale characterizes these attitudes as a harbinger of the “status quo” and being “stuck back decades ago.”¹⁰⁸ In small towns, you just didn’t talk about uncomfortable things, especially the Civil Rights Movement.

In his work on urban history, political scientist David R. Goldfield characterizes Memphis as “the most rural (in terms of its population) of major southern cities...”¹⁰⁹ Sociologist Wanda Rushing furthers this characterization by adding that Memphis is

105. Lovett, 110.

106. Ibid.

107. Marmaduke, AR is a rural town in the Arkansas Delta, just forty-five minutes away from Memphis.

108. "Interview with Christine Gale." All of the preceding quotes and information from Gale are in this interview.

109. David Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities*, 52.

located “at the intersection of ... many geographical and political borders...” and therefore, both symbolically and culturally, Memphis represents “the capital city of the Mississippi Delta.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, when this rural population whom Gale describes as virulently racist, migrated to Memphis, they often retained their rural, conservative values on race relations even in the city, and were more ardently opposed to integration. These migrants, who had “significant demographic impact” on the City of Memphis and “brought [with them] their distinctive cultural baggage...”¹¹¹ may have been “‘dirt poor’ and inadequately educated...” but in the social structures of Memphis, “they were at least ‘white’ and thus might rise out of poverty in the next generation...”¹¹²

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, despite the influx of residents with racially conservative values from rural areas, Memphis maintained the image of peaceful race relations. This image was largely due to the reigning Crump Machine and subsequent leadership, as well as the use of censorship. Until 1968, a pivotal year for the City of Memphis, middle and upper-class white Memphians, for the most part, were oblivious to racial tensions and the black community’s plight.

Edward H. Crump was an influential political boss in Memphis during the period before integration and Civil Rights. His political machine controlled the city government almost exclusively from approximately 1910 until his death in 1954. During its reign, the Crump machine garnered support from a broad constituency that consisted of African-Americans, middle-class whites, as well as organized labor. In order to effectively govern

110. Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*, 5-6.

111. Goldfield, 51.

112. Lovett, 111.

the diverse Memphis population, Crump had to at least appear to consider the views of all Memphians, including the African American community. In exchange for political support, Crump supplied some basic amenities for African Americans, though always within the framework of segregation.¹¹³ Wayne Dowdy, a Memphis historian who has concentrated some of his studies on Crump, explains that Crump successfully gained support from the African American community by recognizing black concerns “while remaining indifferent enough not to alienate white voters” In this way, Crump preserved the structure of white superiority while simultaneously pacifying blacks with public services.¹¹⁴

Part of Crump’s plan to maintain order among the diverse Memphis population relied upon maintaining peace and decreasing racial tensions, making the appearance of harmonious race relations crucial to the success of his organization. To this end, Crump “took steps to avoid conflict with the black community” even in the absence of public dissatisfaction.¹¹⁵ The result was that Memphis “blacks gained unprecedented access to power in the segregated South,” as long as they paid homage to white supremacy.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the city projected a sense of harmonious race relations, and the white community continued unaware of the plight of black residents.

113. Dowdy, “A Good Tammany Hall Tennessean.”

114. Dowdy, "Crump and the Mayors of Memphis," 81.

115. Dowdy, “A Good Tammany Hall Tennessean,” 91.

116. See note 113 above.

The Crump machine continued to select the mayoral candidates until Crump's death in 1954. The election of Edmund Orgill in 1955 signified the end of the Crump machine's control, and without a leader who could incorporate "the city's contradictory impulses—rural and urban, progressive and provincial..." highly factional politics became the norm. The new political reality disrupted the governance of Memphis and allowed racial tensions to appear more blatantly obvious.¹¹⁷

The subsequent mayors, particularly Orgill, also "recognize[ed] the need to quiescent race relations"¹¹⁸ and attempted to continue Crump's legacy of harmonious race relations in Memphis. They continued to employ censorship and other methods of the Crump machine in an effort to do so. Exhibiting the effects of these attempts, life-long Memphian Henry Turley, who grew up during the Civil Rights era, recalls how, "for a long, long time it [the movement] went straight over [his] head." In 1958, just a few years after the *Brown* decision, his mother just "came in and announced" that the ninth grade Turley "would do better in a private school." His family, she told him, had decided "that they were gonna make some economic sacrifices" so that he could attend the newly opened, elite private school for boys, Memphis University School (MUS). Whatever his parents' intentions, Turley found in MUS a sheltered environment that blocked out the city's racial tensions for its students, much like the city leadership attempted to do for its citizens.

In retrospect, Turley realizes that "...it [the movement] should have been foremost in [their] minds..." and that they "should have talked about it and its significance for

117. Dowdy, "Crump and the Mayors of Memphis," 96.

118. Biles, 472.

[them].” But, like the majority of Memphis’s white population, influenced by Crump’s legacy, they remained ignorant to black struggles and “they just didn’t talk about it.”¹¹⁹

The mayors who served after the Crump machine, however, lacked the complete political control that the machine had wielded, and the complete censorship of racial tensions ultimately became impossible.

In 1961, as a response to the *Northcross* suit, the Memphis City School Board of Education quietly implemented integration with the breaking of the color line by 13 black first graders as a means of superficial compliance with *Brown*. Still falling within the era of controllable tension, the City and Board officials worked hard to keep the story out of public awareness. The media, used to the tradition of censorship, cooperated with the school board and refrained from publicizing the events until after the schools had been successfully integrated, in order to avoid or defuse tensions.¹²⁰ The complete absence of violence during initial integration reflects “the meticulous planning in advance of the event by the community elite,”¹²¹ who followed in Crump’s footsteps of keeping racial problems under the radar.

President John F. Kennedy, fooled by these attempts to create a cooperative image, “lauded Memphis for its peaceful toppling of segregation in the schools, noting that the city ‘reflected credit on the United States throughout the world.’”¹²² Memphis

119. “Interview with Henry Turley.”

120. Biles, 474.

121. Ibid.

122. Ibid., 471.

effectively “continued to avoid the disorder rampant elsewhere. For all intents and purposes, the Bluff City seemed a model of peaceful integration, a genuine success story, and a triumph of moderate leadership.”¹²³

As the 1960’s progressed and the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, however, the task of keeping racial tensions out of the public eye became more difficult. In 1968, the Sanitation Strike drew national attention, as Mayor Loeb refused to compromise with city’s black sanitation workers. The workers went on strike and Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis to help the demonstration. During his final visit, King was assassinated and the City’s tensions exploded.

Memphian Jocelyn Wurzburg, like most of Memphis’ white population, remembers that she was entirely out of touch with the black citizens’ plight before King’s death. Afterward, she attended an event that sought to explain to Memphians why King had been assassinated, as well as educate the community about the Sanitation Strike.¹²⁴ Exemplifying the extent of the white community’s obliviousness to race issues in the city, Wurzburg explains that before this event, she “thought it [the Sanitation Strike] was a union management problem . . . [and] that this union was coming into Memphis and taking advantage of unsophisticated black workers for the money.”¹²⁵ She had been entirely unaware of the struggles through which the black workers were going and their own initiative and desire in the push for unionization.

123. Ibid., 471-2.

124. Memphis Cares organized this event at Crump Stadium in an effort to inform the black and white communities of Memphis.

125. "Interview with Jocelyn Wurzburg."

James Lanier, who was a professor at the private Memphis college Southwestern when King was assassinated, explains that white Memphians attempted to continue ignoring the problems. He recalls that the college, like the rest of the Memphis white community, initially “tried to open the next morning as though nothing had happened...[and] tr[ie]d to go along with life as usual.” but that was no longer possible.¹²⁶

King’s assassination in downtown Memphis forever changed the Bluff City, and the white students at Southwestern were not the only ones who felt it. Eddie Mae Hawkins, who came to Memphis from rural Mississippi and lived downtown at the time, remembers that, “...with the assassination of Dr. King, a whole lot of things just changed, look like, overnight.”¹²⁷ Part of this change that Hawkins identifies, was that the white community, as the student body at Southwestern had exemplified, could no longer ignore the problems of the blacks. Stokely Carmichael, after King’s death, declared on national radio that

white America killed Dr. King last night. She made a whole lot easier for a whole lot of black people today. There no longer needs to be intellectual discussions, black people know that they have to get guns. White America will live to cry that she killed Dr. King last night. It would have been better if she had killed Rap Brown and/or Stokely Carmichael, but when she killed Dr. King, she lost.¹²⁸

This foreboding image of black retaliation against whites in a reaction against an event that took place in Memphis created an intense new fear in the City’s white

126. “Interview with James Lanier.”

127. “Interview with Eddie Mae Hawkins.”

128. "Year In Review."

community, who, until recently, had believed that their city exemplified model race relations. Tennessee Senator Howard Baker identified these new fears when, in response to the “rumors that there ha[d] been extensive gun purchases,” cautioned Tennesseans that “if [the rumors] are true, [he]...very much hope[d] that [such actions] would be an example of futility of violence, whether by white or by black.”¹²⁹ Baker’s plea to the community to abstain from violence is a testament to the presence of a new, overt racial tension that developed in Memphis.

Within the span of a few short months, white Memphians witnessed more racial discontent and violence than they had ever previously experienced. The City leaders could no longer conceal the racial tensions, as black Memphians increased in their sense of purpose and quickly became more visible in their unhappiness. Civil Rights activism developed more overtly in black, but also some moderate white communities in Memphis.

The fight for integration in Memphis had begun eight years earlier with the filing of the Complaint in *Northcross* in the local federal district court. With the help of the local branch of the NAACP, the parents of 18 black school children filed a suit against the Memphis City School Board of Education on March 31, 1960. The plaintiffs sought “permanent equitable relief” from the Board because it continued to operate a segregated school system, thereby defying the *Brown* decision.¹³⁰ Though the Board denied its complicity in the segregation of the schools, it subsequently admitted 13 black first graders in that fall of 1961.

129. Ibid.

130. Pohlmann, *Opportunity Lost*, 64.

In 1962, the United States Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals sent the *Northcross* case back to the United States District Judge Marion Boyd for reevaluation because Judge Boyd had initially sided with the defendants claiming that the Board was not at fault because the plaintiffs had not exhausted the opportunities of the Tennessee Pupil Assignment Law as a means of acquiring transfers. After being forced to return to the case, the Board provided the court with a “stair step plan” for integration, which Judge Boyd approved. The plaintiffs again appealed the decision, and the Court of Appeals again held that that the plan was too slow.

Upon remand, the Board attempted to delay integration with a series of tactics including gerrymandering the school district borders to fall along race lines. However, in 1966, the court directed the Board to supply a modified plan. In this revised plan for integration, the Board revised its student assignment and transfer plans. In February, of 1967, the plaintiffs challenged the Board’s intentionally slow plan, but the case saw no further action until the following summer, after King’s assassination.

In September, 1968, the NAACP submitted 15 Demands to the Board. The demands, issued just 3 months after King’s assassination, represent the renewed vigor of the black community in Memphis. Contemporaneously, Judge Robert M. McRae replaced Judge Boyd as the presiding judge in *Northcross*. In November, 1968, Judge McRae ordered that the survey, which the plaintiffs had requested from the Board, take place. Then, in 1969, McRae decided that the current plans were not enough. However, the plaintiffs were dissatisfied because the decision had not taken into account the NAACP demands and filed for reversal.

In 1969, Maxine Smith and the NAACP decided to increase the pressure on the white community. They helped organize the Black Monday Boycotts in an effort to force the Board to accept their demands. Herman O'Neil, an activist who was instrumental in the organization and mobilization boycotts, recalls that "the city was very ripe for direct action," particularly because "Dr. King had been assassinated and the kids were looking for something concrete to do, short of rioting." In relating the participants' desire to do something in response to Dr. King's assassination, O'Neil reveals how crucial the event was for subsequent events action in the City.¹³¹

The Black Monday boycotts were nonviolent protests in which the leaders called upon the black students in the city schools to stay absent from school for about eight consecutive Mondays in the fall of 1969 in order to pressure the Board into complying with their demands. On October 13, 1969, the first day of the boycotts, "negro public school students" according to the *Memphis World*, "played a major role in making Black Monday a success. Nearly all of them — about 62,000 — stayed at home."¹³² The extreme absenteeism did eventually affect the Board, which agreed to appoint two non-voting black members.

These boycotts also had an influential effect on the unsupportive white community. Historian Gail Murray, in noting that these boycotts "played into white

131. Thomas, "Black Mondays Signaled New Day." The preceding quotes from Mr. O'Neil come from this article.

132. "Black Mon. In Bluff City!," *Memphis World*.

stereotypes of blacks not being interested in education,” identifies the effect that these boycotts had on the white community.¹³³ They increased fears and stereotypes, much like the Sanitation Strike the previous year had done , and these fears influential on white conduct during the next three years when court-ordered busing was implemented. Ultimately, these fears contributed to the decision of many white parents to vacate the Memphis public schools.

Following the boycotts, in 1970, the NAACP pushed the School Board to reexamine its integration policies. This step came at a crucial time for the white community, whose fears were still raw and unsettled from the unfamiliar events of the previous two years. In her study of white activism in Memphis, Kimberly Little acknowledges the proximity of these events when she comments that “as Memphis reeled in the aftermath of King’s death...Memphis’s activists shifted their attention to proposed busing...”¹³⁴ Conservative white resistance to the black community’s push for educational equality was strong, particularly because they were “fresh from the catastrophe... of the sanitation strike.”¹³⁵

In a decision that would have monumental implications for desegregation in Memphis and other Southern cities’ school systems, the United States Supreme Court handed down the decision in *Green v. School Board of New Kent County [Virginia]*, which dismantled the constitutionality of so called “freedom of choice” plans. With such plans deemed insufficient for achieving integration, the plaintiffs in *Northcross* filed a

133. Thomas, "Black Mondays Signaled New Day."

134. Little, "Busing in the Memphis City Schools," 130.

135. *Ibid.*, 131.

motion for further relief based on *Green*. They demanded complete faculty desegregation, cancellation of all transfers that reduced desegregation, a survey of local school facilities and a subsequent report of their statuses, as well as a new plan for desegregation with the help of the Desegregation Center of the University of Tennessee.

In 1971, within three years of King's assassination, plans for court-ordered busing in Memphis City Schools, began circulating. Court-ordered busing changed the course of the city's public school integration. Until this point, Memphis shared its narrative of desegregation and resistance with most other Southern cities. However, the Memphis story takes "a unique turn in 1973 with the beginning of busing" when, "instead of preparing Memphians for the tumultuous change" the city's senior leadership, including Mayor Wyeth Chandler, "continued to balk" at the institution of busing, and even encouraged resistance.¹³⁶ While these instances of resistance, particularly in the form of "white flight," were not unique to Memphis, the extent of the resistance is significant. The "effects [of white flight] were most crippling..." in Memphis, as "an informally segregated system emerged" with predominately, if not entirely, white private schools. These schools, which sought to preserve segregated education, "succeeded in Memphis like no where else."¹³⁷

Because the overtly public racial disquietude had just begun to emerge only three years prior to the implementation of busing, the white community's fears were fresh and raw. This white community, particularly the lower middle class, staunchly opposed busing, and fought "tooth and nail" to keep the practice out of Memphis City Schools.

136. Daniel Kiel, "Goal of Diversity is Elusive."

137. *Ibid.*

Reiterating the tensions of the time that impacted parents involved in CAB, Ruth Saed recalled that there had been some recent “rioting in the city because of a tragic death of a young black man” at the hands of the police, and that the heightened racial tensions affected the reaction as well. She said that, “that [incident] caused a lot of tension in the areas where our children would possibly be going to school.”¹³⁸

Finally, in 1972, federal court judge Robert M. McRae approved the school board’s Plan A and ordered the board to implement the plan in September of 1972. Because of more appeals and stalling tactics from both sides, busing didn’t begin until the following semester, in January of 1973. “Once integration became a genuine threat, the majority of white students took to their heels and left behind an almost totally black student population.”¹³⁹

“Once integration became a genuine threat [in January, 1973], the majority of white students took to their heels and left behind an almost totally black student population.”¹⁴⁰ Those who couldn’t afford the city’s already established, elite private schools formed groups of opposition like CAB.

The white students who left the Memphis City Schools either moved out of the city limits so that they could attend the Shelby County Schools or enrolled in a private school within the city. “There is a long tradition of private schooling in the South... But until the mid-1950’s, Dixie’s private day academies and boarding schools were the exclusive educational retreat of a handful of upper-class white youngsters whose parents

138. “Interview with Ruth Saed.”

139. Biles, 472.

140. Ibid.

were dissatisfied with the regions poverty-stricken state schools,¹⁴¹ and therefore the “elite and very wealthy whites never worried about Brown’s forcing their children to integrate by class or race because they continued to support exclusive schools whose tuition and fees were out of reach even for most middle-class whites.”¹⁴²

“While some white students fleeing the public schools to refuge in these established, prestigious academies, most could not afford the considerable tuition fees.”¹⁴³ At this point, the “. . . private school tradition [suddenly] spread to include the offspring of middle-class whites and, in some instances of gritty economic sacrifice, the children of working-class whites,”¹⁴⁴ and the number of “local private schools increased from forty in 1971 to eighty-five in 1974.”¹⁴⁵ These new private schools were typically connected with local Protestant churches that began to “mushroom” across Memphis.¹⁴⁶

In Memphis, with the proliferation of these schools whose tuition accommodated the lower middle class, the trend toward private school education continued until “Memphis possessed one of the nation’s largest private school enrollments by the 1980s.”¹⁴⁷ These schools which enrolled an almost exclusively white student population.

141. Ayres, “South’s ‘Seg’ Schools.”

142. Lovett, 69.

143. Biles, 480.

144. See note 140 above.

145. Lovett, 91.

146. Biles, 480.

147. *Ibid.*, 483.

Leigh Anne Tuohy, who attended one of these new Christian schools, explains that hers was “established as a direct result of racial fear and an almost wholesale unwillingness by Memphis white to mingle their precious children with blacks.”¹⁴⁸ Despite claims otherwise, Tuohy indicates that her school was set up “specifically to oppose integration.”¹⁴⁹ Her family, like many other Memphis families in the same situation, struggled with the tuition and was under “nearly constant financial pressure” so that she could attend private school.¹⁵⁰

Because of the migration of a large portion of the population of Memphis from the rural areas around it, the conservative, rural influences pervaded the Memphis middle class white’s views on race relations. These rural influences, when combined with the intense fears that the Sanitation Strike, King’s assassination, and the Black Mondays created, resulted in a phenomenon of white flight whose severity is unique to Memphis. Middle-class private schools, as opposed to the traditional elite private schools, developed in the city to supply the middle-class desire to avoid integration and enabled this group to permanently abandon the public school system. The white abandonment left the Memphis City Schools with a student population which is 90% black. In the end, busing in Memphis created two separate, and inherently unequal, educational systems rather than integrating the existing public school system in the City.

148. Tuohy, 77.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid., 79.

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