



“whatever is right and proper”

School Integration in West Virginia

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Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Mountaineer Education: A Story of Education in West Virginia 1885-1957

by W. W. Trent

Chapter XI: Integration

Indian and Negro were names only to me as a boy. I had heard stories of Indian massacres and many references to Black Dock and Aunt Sue - Negroes who had been slaves of Uncle Matthew McClung, who had reared my mother. Those Negroes, to whom McClung had given a house and a small piece of land, were referred to as though they had been members of his family. My father, a Confederate soldier, who had fought in the Seven Days Battle Around Richmond, Second Battle of Bull Run, Antietam, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, Petersburg, and many others, seemed not to have any prejudice against Negroes; neither did my mother seem to have any. But there was hatred for the Yankees and President Lincoln. I heard my mother say: "For a number of years following the Civil War, I could think of President Lincoln only as a scoundrel of the meanest kind." I do not recall that I saw a Negro before I was twelve years old. I had no prejudice.

I had my first public relationship with Negroes at thirty-six years of age when, as superintendent of the Elkins Public Schools, I supervised two Negro elementary teachers. When I had organized a Negro high school I supervised three. As State Superintendent of Free Schools, I became responsible for Negro and white pupils, teachers, schools, curricula, and buildings. To my surprise, I learned that Negro teachers were more plentiful than white teachers for their respective schools, and that they were better prepared than were the white teachers. There were few white-collar jobs available to them.

William H. Saunders, State Supervisor of Negro Schools, made a valuable contribution to the cause of education for Negroes. He was largely responsible for having Colored Institute raised to collegiate status (1915) and its name changed to Collegiate Institute. As chairman of the advisory council for the State Board of Education, he helped to assure its success. He contributed materially to elementary and secondary education for Negroes by arousing them to an appreciation of their educational needs and opportunities.

John W. Davis was elected president of Collegiate Institute in 1919, four years after its name had been changed from Colored Institute. As president of Collegiate Institute, 1919-1929, and West Virginia State College, 1929-1952, (the name was again changed in 1929) he pushed forward the work that had been promoted by

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Saunders. Under his leadership, the College became one of the best in West Virginia as well as one of the leading land grant colleges in the country. With both political parties maneuvering for the Negro vote, Davis could secure appropriations for buildings and equipment more easily than could presidents of colleges for white students secure funds for similar purposes.

Preparation for an address before the American Negro Exposition at Chicago, August 19, 1940, revealed some of the freedoms and privileges enjoyed by Negroes in West Virginia which were not enjoyed by Negroes in other former slave territory south of the Mason and Dixon Line. I was pleased to enumerate some of them to the Negroes assembled from all over the United States for this exposition. I told them that West Virginia, from its very beginning, had paid Negro and white teachers equal salaries for equal preparation and experience, and that Negro children had had the same term and curriculum as white students; thus, it became the first state of former slave territory to give equal educational privileges to the two races. A free school for Negroes was established at Parkersburg in 1866. Other firsts enumerated were:

1. To grant freedom to Negroes. This was done by an act of the legislature February 3, 1865, on the same day it ratified the Fourteenth Amendment;
2. To give the franchise. The Constitution of West Virginia, adopted in 1872, extended to Negroes the right to testify in court, to vote, and to hold office;
3. To appoint Negroes to administrative positions in the public schools. For many years prior to that Exposition, the State had a Negro as State Supervisor of Negro schools, while other states employed white supervisors. The reorganization of the school system in 1933 permitted the employment of a Negro assistant county superintendent of schools in all counties having fifty or more Negro teachers.
4. To provide aviation training for Negroes. When Congress made provision for aviation training for Negroes, West Virginia State College, a Negro institution under the supervision of President John W. Davis, established immediately courses to provide this training.

I was pleased to quote from a Special Bulletin on Negro Education, prepared by the President's Advisory Committee on Education, in reference to West Virginia, as follows:

1. Only in Kentucky and West Virginia were the holding powers of the Negro schools close to that of the white schools.
2. In West Virginia, there were, in proportion to the population groups, more than seventy-five per cent more Negro students than white students enrolled in the public institutions of higher learning.
3. West Virginia led in the expenditures for extension work among the Negroes.
4. Only in West Virginia and Missouri were the ratios of total Negro school building costs equal to, or greater than, the cost of the corresponding ratios for white.

In the mid-twenties, West Virginia University admitted Negro students to extension classes offered formerly for white students only. In the days of the county institutes for teachers, as far back as I can recall, Negroes and white teachers attended, with Negroes sitting in a separate part of the room. For some twelve years prior to the declaration of the United States Supreme Court outlawing segregation, May 17, 1954, educational conferences held by the State Department of Education were integrated for meals and sessions, and for a number of years prior, four private colleges - Alderson-Broaddus, Davis and Elkins, Bethany, and West Virginia Wesleyan - accepted Negro students.

On May 18, 1954, the day following the declaration of the Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools of America, Governor William C. Marland held a press conference to which I was invited. At that conference, the Governor made clear his position on integration by saying to the press: "Gentlemen, the decision of the Supreme Court is the law of the land and we shall abide by it." My agreement with the Governor, announced by radio and television, brought immediate response and censure.

A letter dated that same day, evidently written that evening and signed, "The white people of the McDowell area," read in part: "Thru the years, you have gained our vote of confidence in each and every election. In the last 24 hours, that confidence has been blasted." A letter from St. Albans, dated the 19th, said: "Use your head man. * * * There's an election not too far in the future. I would move somewhere else but frankly I don't know where." Ten citizens from McDowell County expressed their convictions thus: "We, as white citizens of the United States and voters in the West Virginia elections, feel that abolishing segregation in the public schools in West Virginia has the impact of the atomic bomb on all principles of democracy we believe in."

Because the school people of the State expected word from me, I prepared a letter of instructions and suggestions and requested approval or disapproval from Attorney General John Fox. He wrote: "Your proposed letter meets with my interpretation of the law, and if I may be permitted to say so, I think you have covered the matter in excellent style." This letter of June 1, 1954, addressed to county superintendents with copies sent to members of county boards of education, West Virginia Board of Education, and the Board of Public Works, read as follows:

By unanimous vote, the Supreme Court of the United States declared segregation in the public schools of the United States unconstitutional. It deferred the issuance of a decree indicating the manner in which schools should be reorganized in compliance with its decision. This postponement gives school authorities time to re-adjust as the number of buildings available, the number of teachers now employed, and other conditions permit. As segregation is unconstitutional boards of education should, in my opinion, begin immediately to re-organize and re-adjust their schools to comply with the Supreme Court decision. In some instances where there are few Negro pupils, the integration may be effected by the opening of the school year 1954-55. In areas where there are a large number of Negro pupils and where all buildings at this time are accommodating a maximum number of pupils and, in some instances a number too large for convenient accommodation, considerable time may be required before segregation is entirely eliminated.

In the areas where both Negro and white schools are overcrowded, each race is requested to give boards of education time for re-adjustment. It may be well in these areas - since the school authorities cannot know what schools the Negroes and whites will wish to attend - for pupils not transported to return to the schools they attended last year. The assignment of pupils to various school buildings would be easier if boards of education could ascertain from parents the schools that they would have their children attend. In the absence of that information, boards of education in the areas where school buildings are congested, may find it necessary to ask all pupils to return to the schools which they attended last year except those pupils who are transported. Since transportation of Negro pupils has been expensive, boards may choose to drop that transportation and permit the pupils formerly transported to attend schools in the communities where they live.

As you know, the employment and assignment of teachers is the legal responsibility of county boards of education. It is my hope that teachers previously employed by county boards of education may be retained. The return of pupils in congested areas to the schools they attended last year will contribute to this end. Should teachers be assigned to congested areas to the positions they held last year and the attendance fail to develop, either in schools attended by Negro or white pupils, boards of education may, under the law, discontinue these schools. The law is specific in giving boards the authority to close schools not needed and when the enrollment of any school falls below twenty pupils for two consecutive months, to send these pupils to another school and discontinue pay to the teacher of the school eliminated.

Because both races are indicating a willingness to cooperate, to prove their patience by giving time for readjustment, and to respect school authorities, neither force nor legal action should be necessary to effect compliance with the decision of the Supreme Court.

My statement that "both races are indicating a willingness to cooperate" was denied immediately. A letter from Greenbrier County, dated June 2, and signed by husband and wife, read in part: "The people weren't asked whether they wanted segregation in the schools or not. We weren't even given a chance to vote on this issue. * * * Putting them [Negroes] in our schools, our children are going to think it is alright to marry them which would be very wrong. * * * if God meant for the races to mix, He would have made us all one color."

Commenting on my letter, as reported by Associated Press under date of June 2, a Huntington lawyer wrote:

Your advice and directive to school authorities in the several counties to put into effect non-segregation practices in the public schools in September invites and directs them to engage in open and flagrant violations of the laws of the State. * * * If you have been quoted correctly in the press release of June 2, it would appear that you are now preparing to set at naught, by ex chathedra pronouncement and executive fiat, the very document you have sworn to uphold.

On June 3, I returned to Herbert K. Baer, Secretary of the West Virginia Board of Education, an application for out-of-State aid from a Negro, a new applicant, and

gave as my reason the declaration of the Supreme Court. I did advise, however, that as long as appropriation permitted, I would approve applications from students who had previously shared that fund. At the end of the year 1954-55, since no new appropriation had been made, I discontinued aid. Pathetic appeals had to be answered: "No funds."

On June 9, I flew with Governor Marland to Richmond, Virginia, for a conference with governors of the southern states. Neither the Governor nor the pilot knew until later that, at seventy-six years of age, I was taking my first flight. When Governor Marland learned that I had taken my first flight in a single-engine plane, he said: "If I'd known that was your first flight, I would have done less piloting."

At this conference, each governor revealed the attitude of his state and told what steps had been taken. Following Governor Marland's statement that West Virginia would abide by the declaration of the Supreme Court, we felt that we did not belong in that group. With that feeling, we left the conference at noon on the second day.

In compliance with an opinion of the Attorney General of the State, the West Virginia Board of Governors, controlling West Virginia University and Potomac State School of the University; and the West Virginia Board of Education, controlling the colleges formerly maintained separately for Negro and white students, ordered that the University and all colleges within the State should, after that date - June 9, 1954 - admit "any qualified student." By November 1954, all colleges in the State, except one, formerly maintained for white students, had enrolled Negro students. No Negro applications had been made to Glenville State College - the one not having Negro students. In the two colleges formerly maintained for Negroes, there were enrolled 185 white students - 182 in West Virginia State College and 3 in Bluefield State College. The total number of Negro students enrolled in colleges formerly maintained for white students was, at that time, 93.

With the opening of the school year 1954-55, twenty-nine of the fifty-five counties desegregated in part or in full; ten counties had no Negro pupils; and sixteen counties postponed action. The 435 schools in the counties desegregating had enrollments of 1,008 Negro pupils and 44,588 white pupils. In these schools, 15 Negro and 897 white teachers were teaching integrated classes. To serve these schools, 88 integrated school buses carried 538 Negro and 3,421 white pupils.

Disturbances occurred in the counties of Greenbrier, Marion, Barbour, and Boone. In Barbour and Boone, they were of little moment. In Greenbrier, because of a strike by students, picketing, and threatened bloodshed, the board of education rescinded its former action approving integration. In Marion, where the Annabelle School was picketed by white parents to prevent teachers from entering the school, Judge J. Harper Meredith, in granting an injunction on a petition from other parents, referred to the picketing as "a rebellion against the government, which cannot be tolerated." He told those present at the hearing, including the county board of education and superintendent of schools, Joseph J. Straight: "It cannot continue and I won't permit it to continue. If necessary, I will fill the jail until their feet are sticking out the windows."

In October 1954, the West Virginia Education Association for white teachers and the West Virginia State Teachers' Association for Negro Teachers, by a resolution, adopted unanimously by both organizations, united under the name of the West Virginia Education Association in which organization teachers of both races have equal rights and equal opportunities. At the first State-wide meeting of delegates of the Association, held in Charleston May 6-7, 1955, a Negro was elected to the Executive Committee. The integration of these two associations, having been effected without disturbance, indicated a determination on the part of the teachers of both races to work together for better educational facilities for all the children of all the people.

On May 4, 1955, the Kanawha County Board of Education employed a Negro to teach a special "sight-saving" class for children with impaired vision. Concerning this action, County Superintendent Virgil Flinn said: "This is the first time to my knowledge that a Negro teacher has been employed in Kanawha County to teach white children." Later in that same month, the annual State meeting of West Virginia Club winners assembled in Charleston as an integrated group. Contests in the respective counties had been previously segregated.

A resume of integration for the year revealed that the former State Supervisor of Negro Schools had become one of the regular assistants without reference to race; that the use of "N" in the West Virginia Educational Directory to designate Negro schools, teachers, and pupils had been discontinued; that fifteen fewer Negroes had been employed by county boards of education; that nineteen Negro schools had been closed and the pupils transferred to integrated schools; that 897 white and 15 Negro teachers had taught in integrated schools; that 88 buses had transported, at the same time, pupils of both races; and that sixteen counties had not begun desegregation.

In the counties integrating, 86 elementary schools, 12 junior high schools, and 37 senior high schools had accommodated pupils of both races. In nearly all of these counties, there were few Negro pupils. Those with one school were integrated when the pupils of that school were transferred to schools formerly non-integrated. In a few cases, Negro high schools with two or three teachers were closed and the pupils and some of the teachers sent to integrated schools. The counties not integrated are located in the eastern and southern portions of the State where there was race prejudice or a large number of Negroes.

My advice and suggestions to county superintendents, June 1, 1954, were strengthened by a second decision of the Supreme Court, May 31, 1955. In speaking to county superintendents at the annual Department conference held at Jackson's Mill, July 19, 1955, I advised counties which had not begun desegregation to begin at once and that they who had been waiting for another decision of the Supreme Court had that decision on May 31. I added jokingly that I was pleased that the Supreme Court had upheld my advice of the former year.

Letters opposing integration were fewer than they had been the year before, but no more tolerant. One woman, who had been graduated from Glenville State Normal School in 1893, said in a letter dated August 18: "It [desegregation] means the death knell of the public schools. * * * The Negroes should never have been freed.

Old Abe Lincoln got what he should have been looking for." On September 2, a resident of Charleston wrote: "No official who has 'jumped the gun' and stirred up this anger and bitterness can never expect to receive any further support at the election polls no matter what political party backs him."

The beginning of the school term in September 1955 revealed further progress toward integration. The number of Negroes attending Shepherd College increased because Storer College at Harpers Ferry had closed. In the absence of a college for Negroes in that part of the State, the legislature had previously appropriated to the State Board of Education \$20,000 a year to pay the tuition of Negroes from the State attending that college. Without that indirect aid, the college closed.

In keeping with an act of the legislature of 1955, the school for the Deaf and Blind at Institute did not reopen in the fall of 1955. The children had been transferred to the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind at Romney which, by this action, became an integrated school. Fayette, Kanawha, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Raleigh, and Wyoming counties had integrated in part. Raleigh, a few days after school opened, because of controversies and opposition, postponed desegregation to a later date. Kanawha, which for the first year integrated the first three grades only, estimated that when integration was complete it would be able to close 28 Negro schools. Two years later, the Charleston Gazette, June 9, 1957, estimated that the county, by integrating, would save \$250,000, and that many other counties would save correspondingly.

Through the compromise of a suit brought in the Federal District Court against Greenbrier County by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, that county agreed to begin desegregation in January, 1956, with the beginning of the second semester. Commenting on the compromise, Judge Ben Moore, who took the position that changes could not come overnight, said: "Discrimination must not be eliminated in a manner to create discrimination of another sort." In the counties of McDowell, Summers, Cabell, Raleigh, Harrison, Logan, and Mercer, suits were pending or threatened for non-integration or for moving too slowly in that direction. Following the compromise in Greenbrier, court action was avoided in other counties by agreements for beginning integration or for more rapid progress toward it. A few days after the opening of schools, students in Matoaka High School and in schools in the surrounding communities staged boycotts. There was much loud talk and some egg throwing, but no serious violence. By the last of the month, all students were back in integrated classes. There were a few outbursts in other counties but the duration of each was short and of little concern to the general public.

At the end of the year 1955-56, only five counties had not taken steps toward integration: Berkeley, Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, and Jefferson. In some, if not all of these counties, Negroes had asked that action be postponed. Their schools were good and teachers feared losing employment. In the counties integrating within the year, forty-eight fewer Negroes had been employed.

Prior to the opening of the fall term of 1956-57, the industrial School at Lakin had been closed and the boys transferred to the Industrial School at Pruntytown, which previously had admitted white boys only. Negro girls had been transferred from the

Industrial School at Huntington to the previous all white Industrial School at Salem. Hardy and Grant counties began desegregation with the opening of the fall term. Berkeley, Hampshire, and Jefferson remained segregated.

Statistics gathered by the State Department of Education in October and November 1956, revealed that the number of Negroes (not including Kanawha County) teaching in integrated schools was 141; that the number of Negroes employed was 33 fewer than for the previous year; and that 22 counties had completed integration, 21 had partially integrated, 3 had taken no action, and 9 had no Negro pupils. Within the two years following, Berkeley, Hampshire, and Jefferson counties began desegregation. The action of these counties in beginning desegregation (the last to begin) gave the State credit for having complied with the declaration of the United States Supreme Court.