

1963 A YEAR OF DECISION FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IN COOKEVILLE, REGION

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The first half the 20th century was a trying period for African Americans throughout the United States, but especially in the South. Those in Tennessee, an Upper South state, fared better than their brethren in the Lower South. Still, condescension, segregation and discrimination were rigidly in place while African Americans struggled to gain parity with whites throughout the state. As elsewhere in the South, educational opportunities were directly related to race. Public schools were racially segregated and more often than not, there was a disparity in the allocation of resources.



While the focus here is on desegregation of public schools in Cookeville, where Darwin School, a comprehensive black school for grades one through 12 was established in the Depression Era, a glimpse into what was happening in the surrounding countries shed light on the full impact of desegregation in Cookeville. It is important to note that African Americans in neighboring Clay, Overton, and White counties cooperated with local white authorities to establish schools for black children. Free Hill School of Clay County catered grades one through eight, as did Longview School of Livingston, located in Overton County. Wallace Smith School of Sparta, Clay County, was more complex. Established as an elementary school shortly after World War I, Wallace Smith School became a high school before World War II. After World War II the enrollment decreased substantially resulting in school losing its high school department and teaching only grades one through eight. By the mid 20th century, African American students in search of high school education in Clay, Overton and White counties, by local arrangement, were attending Cookeville's Darwin School. Periodically, even Jackson County and DeKalb County, which did not have high schools for blacks, by local agreement, sent African Americans students to Cookeville. Thus, developments in Cookeville would have repercussions throughout the Upper Cumberland region.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed down the Brown Decision, which ruled that racial segregation in the public schools was unconstitutional. In Tennessee public schools in Oak Ridge were immediately desegregated in the fall without incident or fanfare. Of course Oak Ridge, though located in Tennessee's Anderson County, was not your typical community. Created as part of the Federal Project to create an atomic bomb, Oak Ridge was subject to federal rather than state jurisdiction. Two years later the public schools of Clinton, Tennessee, also located in Anderson County, were desegregated. Unlike Oak Ridge, school desegregation in Clinton was highly publicized and the "meaner sorts" intervened to disrupt a peaceful transition. Yet, even amidst the uproar in Clinton, which eventually required military intervention to maintain the peace, there were some who chose to abide by the federal law – even when they disagreed with it.



(Photo: Darwin School, pg. 218 of the book Pictorial History of Putnam County Tennessee by First American Bank).

In Tennessee, besides Oak Ridge and Clinton, only a handful of schools abided by the federal mandate to desegregate. Ironically, parochial schools in Nashville, Father Ryan's and Cathedral, voluntarily desegregated. It would take court orders and plea bargaining to force desegregation in the larger cities of Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga, where most public schools were still segregated in 1963.

The African American presence in Cookeville and the Upper Cumberland has historically been neglected and is rarely highlighted unless something sensational occurs. The burning of Darwin School in January 1963, addressed below, is such a sensational event. This does not mean that African Americans in the region were non-contributors, as in the region were non-contributors, as some would naively assert. Historically, people of color have been a viable part of the local communities and their contributions should be gauged relative to societal constraints placed upon minorities in general and African Americans in particular.

School desegregation is an area where African Americans were not only affected, but where they were active in bringing about a long awaited change. In the Upper Cumberland, change was slow and just as deliberate as elsewhere in the South. While there may not have been the high profile activism (and the associated strong white reaction) found in other parts of the American South, there certainly were intense moments and some locals became catalysts for change.

In spite of the historic Brown Decision, which initiated school desegregation, schools in Cookeville, Putnam County, and the surrounding Upper Cumberland, remained racially segregated until January 1963. In that year, the all-black Darwin School of Cookeville was mysteriously destroyed by a fire, which some consider the work of an arsonist. The destruction caused by the fire was so complete that local authorities made arrangements to continue school for Darwin students in the local black churches. Grades one to six were taught in the Rollens Chapel Cumberland Presbyterian Church auditorium; seventh and eighth graders were taught at Trinity Baptist Church; and grades nine to 12 were taught at the Wright's Chapel United Methodist Church. There was one other development, which went unpublicized. A handful of African American students were admitted to Cookeville's formerly all-white Central High School.

The destruction of Darwin School by fire was catalyst for change. It initiated discussion of remedies to



compliance with federal law in the matter of public educations. Some wanted to rebuild Darwin School exactly as it was before the fire; a few wanted to rebuilt the school with enhancements to meet the increasing African American student population. Others, to reduce the construction costs, suggested rebuilding the portion of the building that housed the elementary grades and arranging, by local agreements, for African Americans high school students to either attend an all-black high school in Hartsville, Lebanon or Warren County. These remedies would have continued racially segregated public education. A more progressive faction suggested that Putnam County black students be integrated into the formerly all-white schools. This latter suggestion raised further cause for concern because Darwin's high school

students were not all from Putnam County. Some were bused in from neighboring Clay, DeKalb, Jackson, Overton and White counties. This meant that if Putnam County schools were desegregated, the adjoining counties that had sent their black students to Darwin School would be forced to address a delicate subject. They could arrange to send ninth through 12th graders to other black high schools in the region (perhaps Hartsville, Lebanon, McMinnville or Rockwood), or they too could integrate African American students into the local all-white schools.

(Photo: This photo appeared in the Jan. 8, 1963, issue of the Cookeville Citizen, shows firefighters watching as Darwin School fell to the flames that destroyed the school).

School desegregation in Cookeville was deliberate. When the Brown Decision was rendered in 1954, there was no effort made to comply with the federal law and desegregate. Likewise, there was no commitment

by the federal government to enforce the court decree. In 1963, the timing could not have been more perfect. Not only was the federal government committed to enforcement of the Brown Decision, in addition the indifference of some local officials and given away to a willingness to comply with the federal mandate.

Indifference to compliance with the law is oftentimes a greater obstacle than direct defiance of the law because, as a rule of thumb larger numbers tend to be indifferent, not caring, which allows a handful to act out their hatred and opposition. It is more likely that the “silent majority,” who choose not to get involved undermine efforts for progress. Whereas in 1954, Cookeville’s silent majority was not only intact but, perhaps, leaned towards opposition and defiance of desegregation. By 1963 this same component of society slowly swung behind, pushing Cookeville into a more progressive era. After all, many in the city had witnessed integrated baseball in the city Little League and Babe Ruth Leagues as early as 1959.

Compliance with the Brown Decision in Cookeville and Putnam County stimulated change in adjoining Upper Cumberland communities such as Sparta (White County), Livingston (Overton County), Free Hill and Celina (Clay County), and Gainesboro (Jackson County). These cities and counties sent African American students to Darwin School. With the burring of Darwin School these communities were forced to take action. Subsequently, their responses were to accommodate African American students locally within the formerly all-schools. In the area of public education, 1963 certainly was a year of decision for Cookeville and the Tennessee Upper Cumberland.

“Cumberland Tales” created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region’s history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tentech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu

*See Book Looks at History of Blacks in the Upper Cumberland, TN, History of Putnam County, TN and Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>