

One town even uses Newton school as model

Mississippi integration at work

Curtis Wilkie is a native Mississippian who covered school desegregation cases for the Clarksdale (Miss.) Press Register for seven years before going to Washington this year on a Congressional Fellowship. He has written for The Nation and The New Republic.

By Curtis Wilkie

Pass Christian is a quaint fishing community which was nearly wiped out when Hurricane Camille struck the Mississippi Gulf Coast last August.

Little remains of the luxurious Summer homes and the rows of massive, moss-draped oaks which once lined its shoreline drive. Slowly, it is being rebuilt.

Three hundred miles north, pick-up trucks line the sloping main street of New Albany. It is planting time for the small farmers who yearly battle the poor soil of the Mississippi hills for a living. This is Faulkner country — in fact, the birthplace of novelist William Faulkner.

Pass Christian: predominantly Catholic, a retreat from nearly cosmopolitan New Orleans.

New Albany: fundamentalist Protestant, a provincial county seat.

Other than their size (approximately 7500) these two Mississippi towns have little in common. But they have been linked as "communities that have recognized the problem of school segregation and have determined to eliminate it on their own."

A U.S. Commission on Civil Rights statement on the Nixon Administration's desegregation stance reported:

"... Pass Christian and New Albany, Miss., both have accomplished full desegregation and have taken steps to assure that the desegregated schools are not white schools or black schools, but schools that all children can feel a part of. As measured by white and black student participation in school activities, daily attendance rates, and achievement scores, their efforts have been successful."

The peaceful transitions from dual to unitary school systems at Pass Christian and New Albany did not come easily in a state where integration was resisted in a bloody riot at the University of Mississippi in 1962, and where, even now, thousands of white students and teachers are deserting the public schools rather than integrate.

Frank B. Drummonds has been superintendent of the Pass Christian schools for 2 years, but he says "it seems like 10 years." He credits "advance preparation" for the success in his district.

Recalcitrant school districts were being drawn into desegregation suits throughout the South by the time the Pass Christian school board adopted a viable desegregation plan in October, 1968, to avoid litigation. The school administration had 11 months to sell it to the community before it was to be implemented in the Fall of 1969.

Desegregation before that time was minimal. Through the "freedom of choice" plan, a few Negroes attended the three formerly all-white schools, but the two Negro schools in town had remained all-black. Under the new plan, the town has 2 elementary schools (grades 1-6) and only 1 high school. The racial ratio runs nearly 50-50 in the lower grades and 40 percent black in the high school, according to Drummonds.

These ratios are higher than the threshold cited by Southerners who maintain that if schools become more than 30 percent black, then whites will leave.

But virtually no whites have left the Pass Christian schools for racial reasons, Drummonds said.

"We went to work to inform the community," he said of the 11-month campaign to ready Pass Christian for integration. They held public meetings and coordinated efforts with Parent-Teacher Assns. and student organizations. Aspirants for the 1969 football team from the white and black high schools practiced together in Spring training.

Despite all the planning, Pass Christian opened its 1969-70 school year under the most adverse conditions imaginable. The killer hurricane swept through two weeks before the start of the term. Two campuses lay in shambles and damage to educational facilities was estimated at \$3 million. Four hundred of the district's 2000 school children never returned. Some died in the storm; many more were homeless and were forced to move.

School opened a month late and 60 percent of the enrollment had to attend classes in temporary quarters or in portable facilities.

It has been suggested that Pass Christian's school success is attributable to the camaraderie developed as blacks and whites worked together to build from the ruins. Drummonds discounts this. "We have faith in the fact that storm or no storm, our plan would have worked."

That it succeeded, he feels, is a testament to the unique character of Pass Christian. Parochial schools take some of the load from public schools, but there has been no movement to found a "segregation academy." Although it has the aura of a wealthy resort because of the New Orleanians who summer there and the elderly couples who have retired to settle on the Coast, this is misleading.

Actually, many of the public school patrons are poor. Fishing provided the major livelihood a generation ago and is still important to the economy, although car pools carry commuters to factory jobs farther down the Coast. "Blacks and whites have lived together side by side for years and there is sort of a working relationship between them," Drummonds said.

The superintendent acknowledged that there had been trouble among the students during the year, but he added, "Anywhere you have kids, you have problems. No where have we directly associated the problems to race."

Will the schools continue to function well? "This has not been a normal year and it is impossible to gauge. Whether or not the kids will continue to put up with each other remains to be seen," Drummonds concluded.

One person who has an optimistic outlook for the Pass Christian schools is C. J. Duckworth, director of the all-black Mississippi Teachers Assn. "That is a good system," he commented. "The blacks are reasonably happy, and it is my understanding that the black kids had a part in all activities, sports and even the homecoming court."



RECESS IN GRENADA — Integrated elementary school in another Mississippi town finds black and

white pupils sharing swing set during free period. (Photo by UPI)

New Albany is a more typical Mississippi town, however, and as a result its integration problems have been greater.

The school board, composed of five whites just as in Pass Christian, made the decision to meld white and black schools in January, 1968. "It would be untrue to say they decided to do it without pressure," concedes New Albany Superintendent J. Bryant Smith.

The pressure came first from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, which threatened to rule the district out of compliance if it did not integrate. After the schools took steps to satisfy HEW, the pressure intensified from local whites, opposing any integration.

"We had to convince the people that we would have a better program despite integration," Smith said, and the New Albany schools instituted an innovative educational process based on team teaching, individualized instruction and ungraded classrooms.

Working with grants from the U.S. Office of Education, the district brought in special consultants and sent their own personnel to observe activities at experimental schools.

Smith said the system followed closely the pattern of a school in Newton, Mass. which his board members visited.

Undercut by Nixon

It was begun in the lower five grades in the Fall of 1968 and was scheduled to be carried out in the middle and upper grades beginning in September, 1969. Black enrollment — 29 percent, the same proportion as the town was to be consistent throughout the system's four schools.

Pass Christian had its Camille last Summer in the same month, the New Albany school district had its Justice Department retreat on integration.

Believing that integration was inexorable, the district had finalized plans to complete the process at the beginning of the coming school year.

"This really undercut us," Smith said. "All the publicity was that Nixon was slowing up on integration, and here we were going into the final stage. September was the toughest month of my life."

An angry group of whites rallied forces to block the school board's plans. "There was a lot of clamor and a lot of problems. People gave the board hell," Smith said. "They got up a petition to fire me and asked that the school board resign, but we went ahead." The petitioners could muster only 750 signatures, however, and their momentum was sapped a few weeks later when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the slow-down.

"Since January, we've had a beautiful school year," Smith said, despite scattered "human relations problems with the kids" and criticism from civil rights groups.

Team teaching

"The situation is good by Mississippi standards," says John Maxey of Jackson, a former New Albany resident and Legal Services attorney. But he makes a demurrer. There are complaints that a building which once served as a black school is now vacant and that black teachers have been relegated to lower positions.

Smith said that many whites would have balked at attending a school which was once all black and that it is simply "practical" not to use it now.

Along the same line, team teaching is employed to allay fears of white parents that their child might be "trapped" with a Negro teacher all day. He says that the black faculty, as well as some whites, lacked a proper educational background. "We didn't push a single teacher out. It was made clear to many that they had to go back to school, and we even offered to pay the tuition. A few of the older teachers just dropped out." There are only three black teachers on a faculty of 24 in the high school, but the ratio is one black instructor in every five-member teaching team in the lower grades.

This has been Smith's year on a tightrope, and he feels the worst is over.

"I used to always speak to our civic clubs at the first of each school year," he recalls. "Last September, when things were going bad, I didn't get a single invitation. But after things calmed down in January, I got the invitations and started making the rounds. I got a standing ovation at every place. I tell you, I'm proud of what we've done here."