

INTRODUCTION

Women's Emergency Committee Activities During Recall Election

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation of public schools violated the United States Constitution. Like other southern cities, Little Rock was mandated to integrate its schools. Its first experiment with integration came in the fall of 1957 when the whites-only Central High School admitted nine African American students, the "Little Rock Nine." The move met with resistance by racist white citizens, through the Capital Citizens Council, and the state's governor, Orval Faubus. The turbulence culminated in federal intervention when President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched the 101st Airborne Division to ensure that the African American students were allowed in the school. The year ended with Ernest Green becoming the first black student to graduate from Central High.

Despite this success for pro-integration forces, white segregationists remained committed to their fight. During the summer of 1958 Governor Faubus called a special session of the Arkansas General Assembly. Its exclusively white members voted overwhelmingly to close Little Rock's public schools so that white children could attend segregated private schools; the vacant school facilities were to be rented to private groups. This maneuver prompted the seventy-six-year-old elderly white lady, Adolphine Fletcher Terry, to organize the Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools (WEC).

Terry was a descendant of a wealthy and powerful Little Rock family, the wife of former Congressman David D. Terry, and the sister of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet John Gould Fletcher. She had demonstrated her sensitivity to racial justice through her membership in the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). On September 12, 1958, she hosted a meeting to discuss the current crisis with two women—Vivion Brewer, also a wealthy woman who was married to the nephew of United States Senator Joseph T. Robinson; and Velma Powell, secretary of the interracial Arkansas Council on Human Relations and the wife of J.O. Powell, one of Central High School's vice principals. At this meeting they decided to form an organization modeled on the ASWPL with the purpose of reopening Little Rock's public schools. On September 16, fifty-eight white women met at Terry's house to organize the WEC. Though Terry was acquainted with Daisy Bates, a black woman who as president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had advised the "Little Rock Nine," she feared that the participation of blacks in the WEC would hurt the organization's ability to recruit membership among white women. Therefore, the WEC's membership remained exclusively white, though it worked in cooperation with African American activists. The WEC chose a position which sidestepped the issue of integration; they wanted Little Rock's schools reopened, but did not demand they be integrated.

Less than two weeks later, the WEC was handed its first major defeat. On September 27, 1958, Little Rock citizens overwhelmingly voted to keep the schools closed rather than to "fully integrate" the city's schools. In early 1959, with the schools closed, the focus of the fight became the Little Rock School Board, whose six members remained deadlocked with three segregationists and three moderates who favored opening the schools with limited integration. In the state House of Representatives in March, 1959, Representative Tom Tyler of Pulaski County

proposed a bill that would allow Governor Faubus to appoint three more members to the city's school board. These members would be segregationists, who would break the deadlock. However, the WEC influenced senators to table the measure.

The dispute reached a crisis point on May 5, 1959, when the moderates walked out of a school board meeting. Taking advantage of their opponents' absence, the segregationists on the board declared they had a quorum, and proceeded to fire forty-four school employees--thirty-nine whites and five blacks—which included thirty-four teachers, seven school principals, and three other employees. The move outraged the members of the WEC as well as other citizens of Little Rock. A group of white men formed the organization STOP (Stop This Outrageous Purge), and, with the assistance of WEC members, petitioned for an election to recall the segregationist school board members. In response, segregationists formed CROSS (Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools), calling for the removal of the moderate school board members. The recall election was held on May 25, with 25,000 citizens of Little Rock—both white and black--voting. The moderates prevailed by a narrow margin; all three remained on the school board. However, all three segregationists were voted off the school board.

The WEC won their fight to reopen Little Rock's schools. In August 1959, the city's public schools opened with black students attending two formerly whites-only high schools—Central High, with two black students, and Hall High School, with three black students. Although Governor Faubus and others would continue to support segregation, integrated schools had finally become a permanent feature of the Little Rock public school system.

LESSON

Excerpts from the

Women's Emergency Committee Activities During Recall Election

Author: Not Known

(From the Sara Alderman Murphy Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas)

On September 16, 1958, the Women's Emergency Committee under the able direction of Mrs. Joe R. Brewer was organized. At first, membership grew slowly—for since the dark date of September, 1957 no ORGANIZED group had spoken out to save the public school system of Little Rock.

Before long, we learned that other women in Little Rock were eager, yes anxious—to identify themselves with the Women's Emergency Committee and to WORK to save our public schools.

With definite purpose an organization of women was developed—women well-trained in various fields covering a broad scope. These women were “mustered” in various committees and were alerted for action in any emergency that might develop where a voice should be heard in the jungle of doubt, suspicion, and fear which had plagued the citizens of Little Rock from the time Gov. Faubus called out the National Guard to keep Negro children from attending Central High School.

The first objective was the so-called “rigged” election. We lost this about 3 to 1 but we were not discouraged since we felt somewhat [pleased] that over 7500 people in Little Rock voted “for integration of all schools.” [Two,] we were stimulated by having made [at] least a start and we were determined to undertake the tremendous job of educating the citizens of Little Rock to realize the need for preserving our free public schools.

Through the cold, bitter winter the WEC was ever vigilant and became a strong working group composed of women who could be depended upon to say “Yes, I'll be glad to do it,” when called upon for action! It must be remembered that these women subjected themselves to ugly and insulting telephone calls, receiving unpleasant and obscene mail, and any other intimidating device that extremists could use.

During the winter we worked hard to secure members. Although no candidate wished to be identified with the WEC, we were responsible for the election of three “moderate” members of the School Board.

We worked very hard to get civic leaders, ministers, business and professional people to go on record supporting public schools. The President of the Chamber of Commerce has stated his Board was able to make a statement supporting public education largely as a result of the women's work.

The WEC was responsible for defeating the Tyler Bill in the State Legislature—a bill which would have enabled the Governor to pack the School Board against public education.

On Tuesday, May 5, the WEC was having its regular monthly meeting with a program regarding the long and arduous efforts of many of our early settlers in establishing a free public education for all the children of Arkansas.

A few of our members were not at this meeting, for it had been determined that the most important place for them on this particular date was at the never-to-be-forgotten School Board meeting. They called in their reports of action being taken by the Board each hour.

At the close of our program, our Chairman, Mrs. Joe R. Brewer ... stood and with a tremulous voice and anxious heart told us that the “School Board is firing our teachers right and left.” Immediately a vote of confidence was given [to] Mrs. Brewer and the Executive Committee to ACT [,] to do whatever possible to save our fine staff of teachers.... The Executive Committee adjourned with a renewed determination to preserve our schools and our staffs of teachers.

Thankfully we learned that other citizens—MEN of Little Rock were irate over this purging of 44 teachers by the remaining school board members and were eager to be vocal in their outrage... .

PTA meetings were called protesting the firing of our teachers. The meetings confirmed our knowledge of the extremist areas, where we would have to do our hardest work. The WEC telephone chain worked to insure good attendance at these PTA meetings.

On Friday, May 8, the sky was illumined and our hearts soared for we were told that a MEN’S group was meeting in an all out effort to win this recall election....At this meeting Stop This Outrageous Purge [STOP] was organized with a statement of principles set out. Dr. Drew Agar was elected chairman. Approximately one hundred sixty-three men signed the statement....

On [May 9,] we were told that there had been a threat against the life of one of the School Board members who was against the purge—the threat to be carried out at a PTA meeting that night. We were asked to have a number of our people at this meeting. Many cancelled engagements at the last minute in order to attend and those people surrounding the School Board member that night were WEC members and their husbands....

The WEC Messenger Committee was enlarged with duty hours from 8:00 a.m. through 6:00 p.m., until after the election date. This proved invaluable in securing necessary supplies and equipment and delivering needed materials to other areas. We were told of a suggested plan for action through the wards and precincts.... A school district map drawn off by wards and precincts was furnished to STOP by WEC.... All Precinct Secretaries were members of the WEC. One person was appointed STOP liaison for each WARD from the WEC—her duties to coordinate all messages, suggestions and activities between her ward and STOP—and continue after the election any duties that may be involved....

We were told that there would be a rally ... honoring the purged teachers and we MUST have a crowd.... Immediately we set to work to ... get a tremendous crowd at the auditorium through the phone chain.... We were asked to get someone from the PTA to line up appointments for “This Teacher was Purged” ads.... Outstanding men and women who had graduated from Central; ministers of certain denominations; doctors and other business men who had not already been “labeled” were needed. By having a great amount of information on people in Little Rock, these appointments were lined up.... Volunteers flooded our office all day for various assignments.... A large and enthusiastic crowd attended the Rally which was most rewarding.

A WEC member outlined in detail how the cards would be used [in the election] and helped each Ward in the organization. Specifically, a card was made on every person holding a poll tax receipt—approximately 30,000.... All the STOP petition signers...would be separated out and marked “saints.” The CROSS [The Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools] and other known agitators and extremists were marked “sinners.” All those cards on which there was no information were marked “savables.” The goal was to make personal contact with all “savables” to determine how they felt and to urge them to vote for STOP and to contact all STOP “saints” to tell them the importance of their voting. This entailed approximately 23,000 calls—most from door to door, since each precinct was broken into blocks.... Many WEC women from the fifth ward were sent to weak spots in other wards. This was necessary to accomplish our goal of the house-to-house canvass. These women were subjected to many uncouth and obscene insults. One woman says she was “literally swept from the porch with a broom....”

[On Friday, May 22] after Governor Faubus talked at 9:30 p.m. on TV supporting the extremists [,] in which talk he attacked personally a prominent member of STOP and the Chairman of the WEC, another flyer was prepared and mailed to all STOP people. Midnight!....

[The day before the election, the WEC] continued funneling information and supplies to Wards and Precincts. Had Motor Pools set up in each ward. Supplied list of numbers to be used in the paper. Set up people to be on “stand-by” at each precinct by 7:30 a.m. election day in case judges or clerks did not show. Secured additional Judges and Clerks—poll watchers and Count Reporters for each polling place....

Monday—May 25, [was] ELECTION DAY. Trouble-shooting began at 8:05 a.m.... Many Negroes who work in Ward V were taken to the polls by WEC members. Someone went to the Ada Thompson Home ... [a nursing home for women] to help those who were able to vote. Relatives were located for people who were ill so that they could secure absentee ballots....

About 11:30 p.m. we anxiously went to the “Victory Party”.... victory was ours—but we did not know this until after 4:00 a.m. We had WON!.... After the election, the men of STOP said they could never have gotten off the ground had it not been for the efficient organization of the WEC. They simply could not have functioned, for they had no means of securing the necessary information and volunteers on such short notice. It should be pointed out here that the men of STOP furnished the money for the campaign—without which the WEC could not have functioned!

Number of WEC members (or husbands) participating in KEY JOBS during campaign:

Ward Liaisons-5 out of 5
Ward Chairmen-4 out of 5
Precinct Chairmen, Co-Chairmen, 43 out of 51
Precinct Secretaries-31 out of 31
Advisory Committee-25 out of 35
Count Reporters-27 out of 41
Poll Watchers-70 out of 78
Motor Pools-4 out of 5
TV Spots-31 out of 38
TV Program, Sunday night-5 out of 7
Card breakdowns-36 women to a shift...
Mailing Shifts-7 each night...

Victory was ours! Immediately after [the] election STOP went out of existence. Therefore, it was even more important to hold our organization together to GET THE SCHOOLS OPEN. For our chief aim—"To open our four public high schools" was still ahead!

Please note:

The lesson plan is suggestive of a beginning point for teachers. Teachers are advised to modify to meet their specific classroom needs.

LESSON PLAN

Lesson: Women's Emergency Committee Activities during Recall Election

Recommended grade levels: 7-8 grades

Time required: 2-3 class periods of 50 minutes duration

Curriculum fit: Arkansas History

Arkansas History Curriculum Frameworks: WWP.9.AH.9-12.4

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- demonstrate comprehension, in the form of a writing activity, of racial attitudes that prevailed during the mid-twentieth century in Arkansas and the role that the Women's Emergency Committee (WEC) played with Stop This Outrageous Purge (STOP) during the recall election.

Procedure:

- 1) Divide the class into 4-5 groups.
- 2) Instruct (and assist) students to read the lesson, *Women's Emergency Committee Activities during Recall Election*.
- 3) Ask students to identify and write down three tasks that the WEC accomplished which they consider important.
- 4) Instruct groups to imagine that they are WEC members. Ask students to brainstorm ideas and write down:
 - a) what additional things they would have done for each of the three tasks they identified in Step 3; or
 - b) how differently they would do each of the three tasks they identified in Step 3 than the actual WEC members did.
- 5) Call upon groups to present their ideas to the class.
- 6) Facilitate discussion and provide feedback.

Women’s Emergency Committee Activities During Recall Election

ASSESSMENT

1. The Women’s Emergency Committee was organized under the able direction of _____.
A. Mrs. David D. Terry
B. Mrs. J. O. Powell
C. Mrs. L. C. Bates
D. Mrs. Joe R. Brewer
2. As used in the lesson, what is the meaning of the word “mustered”?
A. Break-up
B. Courage
C. Gather
D. Support
3. According to the lesson, which of the following describes the intent of the Tyler Bill?
A. The bill enabled the governor to pack the School Board against public education.
B. The bill enabled the governor to stop racial integration of public schools.
C. The bill enabled the governor to fire public school teachers.
D. The bill enabled the governor to close the public schools.
4. The Chairman of STOP in 1959 was:
A. Orval Faubus
B. David Terry
C. Joseph Robinson
D. Drew Agar
5. As used in the lesson, what is the meaning of the word “purge”?
A. Appoint
B. Criticize
C. Praise
D. Remove
6. According to the lesson, STOP stands for:
A. Stop, Think, Observe, and Plan
B. Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice
C. Stop This Outrageous Purge
D. Stop Taxing Our Patrons

7. According to the lesson, CROSS stands for:
A. Church Related Online Software Systems
B. Committee to Retain Our Segregated Schools
C. Core Router Operating System Support
D. Christians Reaching Out Spreading Spirituality
8. According to the lesson, WEC stands for:
A. Women’s Energy Committee
B. Women’s Emergency Committee
C. Women’s Entertainment Committee
D. Women’s Endurance Committee

READING OPEN-RESPONSE ITEM

Using details from the lesson, list three contributions of the Women’s Emergency Committee toward the reopening of Little Rock public schools in 1958-1959.

RUBRIC FOR READING OPEN-RESPONSE ITEM

SCORE	DESCRIPTION
4	The response clearly lists all three contributions.
3	The response clearly lists all three contributions, but a part of the list is unclear.
2	The response clearly describes two contributions.
1	The response clearly describes one contribution.
0	The response is incorrect or irrelevant.
B	Blank – No Response. A score of “B” will be reported as “NA” (No Attempt – Zero Score).

Women's Emergency Committee Activities During Recall Election

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brewer, Vivion L. *The Embattled Ladies of Little Rock: 1958-1963: The Struggle to Save Public Education at Central High*. Fort Bragg, CA: Lost Coast Press, 1999.

Elizabeth Jacoway Oral History Interviews, 1976. MC 481. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/findingaids/jacoway.asp>

Jacoway, Elizabeth. *Turn Away thy Son: Little Rock, the Crisis that Shocked the Nation*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

Miller, Laura A. *Fearless: Irene Gaston Samuel and the Life of a Southern Liberal*. Little Rock: Center for Arkansas Studies, 2002.

Murphy, Sara Alderman. *Breaking the Silence: Little Rock's Women's Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, 1958-1963*. Edited by Patrick C. Murphy II. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997.

Sara Alderman Murphy Papers. MC 1321. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. <http://libinfo.uark.edu/SpecialCollections/findingaids/saramurphyaid.html>

Velma and J. O. Powell Papers. MC 1367. Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. <http://libinfo.uark.edu/specialcollections/findingaids/velmajopowellaid.html>

Women's Emergency Committee Activities During Recall Election

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Arduous	difficult
Culminated	ended; came to a close
Denomination	grouping based on church beliefs
Illumined	Lit up
Invaluable	important; very useful
Liaison	link; connection
Lynching	killing
Mustered	gathered
Plagued	badly affected; caused problems
Precincts	boundaries
Purge	remove; do away with
Segregation	keeping one group of people apart from another and treating them differently, especially because of race or cultural differences
Subjected	turned in [themselves] to undergo unpleasant experiences
Turbulence	confusion
Uncouth	rude; impolite
Vigilant	careful; alert
Wards	marked areas of a city for the purpose of election