



Mansfield High

Before the desegregation of Little Rock High School became the turning point in the desegregation of public schools in America, a similar battle was fought in Texas. Mansfield, a small town southeast of Fort Worth, had 1,450 residents in the 1950s, about 350 of them African American. Like most southern communities, Mansfield's restaurants, churches, schools, and social functions were segregated. And, as in many southern communities, African Americans realized that the path to full citizenship and equality lead through quality schools.

The struggle for integration in Mansfield is chronicled in Robyn Duff Ladino's *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High*. In an effort spawned by the Bethlehem Baptist Church and organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), black residents began to look for ways to get the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring segregated schools unconstitutional applied in Mansfield. Black parents were not interested in seeing their children receive the kind of second-rate education that would virtually assure a life as a second-class citizen.

While some advocates of continuing segregation asked that the state be able to set its own timeline for ending segregation, many hardliners saw the separation of the races as a traditional value that should not be tinkered with. Governor Shivers demonstrated the uncompromising view of many segregationists when he proclaimed, "We are going to keep the system that we know is best. No law, no court, can wreck what God has made."ⁱ

As was often the case in Texas, opposition to desegregation was passionate and carried implied or explicit threats to students crossing the separation between the races. Some people advocated a gradual implementation of desegregation. While Mansfield High was technically open to black students, they knew attending put their lives at risk. Large crowds gathered in front of the school when it opened for registration in the fall of 1956. For several days, an effigy of a black figure hung from the flag pole in front of Mansfield High School instead of the American flag, and black students who were thinking about enrolling likely understood that the local law enforcement officers who would not remove the black figure would



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also not protect black students attempting to enroll at the campus beneath it. State and local officials refused to ensure the safety of black students, and those students decided that making the long bus ride into schools in Fort Worth was safer than risking their lives at Mansfield High School.

i. Robyn Duff Ladino, *Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 38.