

## **Brown vs. the Board of Education**

During the 1950's, blacks slowly prospered along side whites, but they were still being denied opportunities simply on the basis of race. The fortunes of minorities would soon change again; or so it would seem. The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, placed a damaging blow to the hearts of many white segregationists.

A black family challenged the segregation policies of the Topeka school district. While living just two blocks from a local area school, Linda Brown had to travel twenty-one blocks to attend an all-black school. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) saw this as excellent opportunity to challenge the "Separate but Equal" segregationist policies and filed the brief on behalf of the Brown family. They would argue that the Fourteenth Amendment indicated that the policy established by the 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson ("separate but equal") ruling was unconstitutional. Earlier battles had been won, but this was the case that would test the constitutionality of segregation. Thurgood Marshall presented the brief before the Court. When the decision came in, all nine justices voted that the policy of "separate but equal" was unconstitutional. The courts ordered immediate desegregation of public schools. blacks, for the first time in the nation's history, would be admitted to southern white schools—at least in theory.

The ruling shocked Americans and white parents were spurred into action as white citizens councils were formed throughout the South. In 1957, members of these groups came from all over the South to stop the admittance of nine black students to a local Little Rock high school. Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus order the National Guard to bar admittance of the black students. The events that followed

were broadcast on national television and America's Southern hospitality, racism, was revealed to the world. The television cameras were rolling as white mobs threatened the black students with physical harm as they unsuccessfully attempted to enter the doors of the school. Black civil rights leaders pressured President Eisenhower to send federal troops to protect the rights of the students. As several presidents before him, he told the leaders that progress on the matter must come slowly. After conferring with governor Faubus, President Eisenhower had no choice but to act. Eisenhower urged Faubus to allow the students to enter the school. When thousands gathered to prevent the students from entering the school, Eisenhower again attempted to speak with the governor. Rather than relenting, the governor left the state on a "business trip". Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and sent in one thousand paratroopers from the 101st airborne platoon to protect the nine black students. For the first time since Reconstruction, U.S. military forces were sent to a state to assist blacks and restore order.

Many school districts throughout the South simply closed their doors rather integrate. The results of the Supreme Court ruling were not enacted until fourteen years later. Several state legislatures did everything they could to prevent desegregation of their schools. One tactic used by legislatures was to pass numerous laws to side step the court's decision. Each of their laws would then have to be challenged in court. Another tactic used was the passage of laws requiring disclosure of NAACP membership. Once obtained, pressure was applied to employers to fire NAACP members.