

The Clinton 12: A Story of Courage, Determination, Reconciliation and Resolve

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | August 21, 2006

On August 24 through August 27, 2006 a momentous series of events will take place in our neighboring city of Clinton. The story being told through the creation of a cultural center and museum, a documentary and a lasting memorial to the Clinton 12, is a story that was addressed only when the events occurred and the story was fresh in our nation's mind. Years have gone by with little being done to remember the historic events of August 1956 and October 1958. But there are lessons to learn still and feelings to understand that are immensely important to the history of our area of East Tennessee and the nation. This article will give you a preview of what is coming into being on Thursday, August 24 through Sunday, August 27, 2006. From that weekend forward, a piece of our history will live again in unique fashion for our learning and appreciation. It will be a momentous occasion.

The documentary film, *The Clinton 12* has been created by Keith McDaniel. The film has a powerful message from true life experiences emotionally told through the powerful narration of James Earl Jones. The documentary also contains exceptional original film footage from the events as they actually unfolded in 1956 and 1958, some 50 years ago.

"At 4:22 AM on the morning of October 5th, 1958, the residents of Clinton, Tennessee were awakened by the sound of three strong blasts"...begins the narration of the documentary film. Can't you just hear James Earl Jones' deep resonating voice! Right away you know to hold on to your seats because you are about to experience an unusual visual display of a series of events that are true happenings but are truly the stuff movies are made of. Edward R. Murrow, a legendary news reporter, was here in Clinton 50 years ago and produced a full hour show featuring the story of the integration of Clinton High School. It was broadcast on national television across the nation.

"This is a story of courage and determination – of reconciliation and resolve – the story of a community who stood shoulder-to-shoulder to uphold the law. This is the story of 12 black teenagers who faced the best and worst in all of us. This is the story of the Clinton 12." The narration continues as images flash on the screen of a small town in the 1950's shook to its very foundations by events that quickly grew well beyond its abilities to control.

The Clinton home guard, 40 citizens who held off an angry mob of nearly 2,000 highly agitated individuals screaming insults and pushing the limits of the citizens who volunteered to serve as "home guards," were exceptional in their valor and courage in the midst of the unimaginable horror of potential mob violence. They held out until the Tennessee Highway Patrol arrived.

There was also a home guard in the Black community that protected their families at the same time. This aspect of the historic events of 1956 in Clinton has not been well known. This heroic story is best told by Alan Jones' account he e-mailed to me. Read it carefully and know that it represents the best of us doing what is necessary to protect our own!

African American "Homeguard"

"In the earliest days of public school desegregation when unrest and chaos erupted in the streets of Clinton, Tennessee, citizens of the white communities of Clinton and Oak Ridge came together to form a 'Homeguard' to provide much needed security to protect the civil interests of the Clinton community. Led by veteran Leo Grant the few brave citizens confronted a mob in front of the Courthouse until the Highway Patrol saved the day. Despite their heroic efforts, unrest continued and threatened to spill over into the African American community on what the press erroneously referred to as 'Foley Hill.'

"Frederick John Kasper, Asa Carter and others continued to fan the flames of racial hatred which resulted in violent acts, racial slurs, and intimidation toward African American families and especially the Clinton 12 who integrated Clinton High School. The story of the bravery of the African American community has not been fully disclosed. Oral historical accounts reveal that during those turbulent days while the black women and children took refuge in Mount Sinai Baptist Church and at their homes, the African American men: fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, and friends guarded their community with loaded guns. From the vantage point of the hill had someone had the audacity to attack them, they would have met a prepared,

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organized and determined resistance from what has been recently called the 'African American Homeguard'.

"The late Robert L. Cain, Sr. (Father of Bobby Cain - the first black graduate of an integrated state supported high school in Tennessee and in the south) was one of those who patrolled his community to protect 'Foley Hill.' Because of their courage, faith, and endurance the African American Homeguard successfully weathered the storm of racial unrest and assisted in bringing down the proverbial Jericho walls of segregation. It was truly miraculous that not one person died a violent death in that community.

"Based upon an account from a World War II veteran, Robert Minter, Sr. he and a group of veterans had followed with keen interest the events of racial unrest in Clinton, TN. They made contact with the African American men of the Clinton community. They were prepared at a moments notice to go to the aid of their Clinton brothers should violence erupt on 'the hill.' As veterans they were prepared to help take back the black community should the authorities neglect its protection.

At Alan's suggestion, I called O. W. Willis, Jr. who was 12 years old at the time of the "Homeguards." He suggested I call his older brother, Robert, which I did. Robert was 17 years old at the time and remembers more about the events. Robert recounted to me his memory of how the older men knew they had to protect their families and how they gathered outside their homes at night and would take turns sitting up all night. He recalled a gathering place known as "The Shack" where the men would congregate. He could well remember the families gathering in the Mount Sinai Baptist Church or in their homes. The men would walk down to the railroad tracks and hide in the weeds with their weapons watching to see if anyone would attempt to come up the hill across the tracks. He said there were several bombs set off and that some of them exploded near their house and that of Jack Weaver. He recalled that the Ku Klux Klan said they were "going to come up there" and how the very mention of that threat caused great fear and yet tremendous resolve in the whole black community.

Also, at Alan's suggestion, I called Robert Minter, Sr. to seek his recollections of the feelings of the World War II veterans in Knoxville regarding the situation at Clinton. Although he is now 93 years old, he did recall that he and his friends who lived near the Farragut Hotel were indeed ready to come to Clinton at a moments notice to protect the black community there or to "take back the hill" if necessary. He wanted me to understand that there was not a "group" as such that was formed for this eventuality, just several individuals who agreed that if needed, they were ready to lend a hand to their neighbors in Clinton. He is thankful that such drastic action was not required.

Governor Clement's decision to send in the National Guard was timely and needed. Only with that kind of force could order be maintained in Clinton. As Alan Jones said, violence leading to death was narrowly avoided.

The Highway Patrol first and then the National Guard, 600 strong, was required to keep the town from being overrun by wild and raucous mobs. It did not start out that way. The local officials did not see it coming. Only when the news media picked up the story and the outside agitators began arriving did it dawn on the town officials that things were in danger of quickly getting out of hand and going well beyond anything the town had previously experienced.

Governor Frank Clement quickly responded to the situation choosing to support the town fully in their efforts to maintain control of the primarily out of town influence that was quickly gaining momentum and even some local support. His intent was to enforce the law and to maintain order regardless. He speedily applied all available resources to that end.


On Friday, August 31, 1956, Gene Caldwell was a young man in Nashville attending a Junior Chamber of Commerce Lunch Meeting where the speaker was Governor Frank Clement. When it came time for the governor's key note address, he told the young audience that he had a speech prepared but was not going to use it. There was something much more important that he wanted to tell them. He said, "In the morning, I'm going to send the National Guard to Clinton, TN, because it's the first school to integrate and there's a lot of people coming from out of state and out of town to cause trouble. This will be an unpopular decision and I need your

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support.” After Governor Clement completed his speech, Gene Caldwell said, “the group would have taken up their knife and fork and marched to Clinton with him if he’d wanted us to.”

**On August 20, 1956, twelve black teenagers entered
Clinton High School for the first time.
What followed shocked the world...and changed a nation.**



The Clinton 12
A DOCUMENTARY FILM

NARRATED BY **JAMES EARL JONES**
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY **KEITH MCDANIEL**
PRODUCED BY **GREEN MCADOO CULTURAL ORGANIZATION**
ORIGINAL SCORE BY **JON CLARK & JOSH MOLEN**

WORLD PREMIERE
August 24, 2006 • 7pm • Ritz Theatre

The *Clinton 12* documentary film narrated by James Earl Jones, written and directed by Keith McDaniel and produced by the Green McAdoo Cultural Organization