

# The Clinton 12 story of courage continues

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | August 22, 2006

*EDITOR'NOTE: This is the second part of a two-part account of the desegregation of Clinton High School in 1956 and 1958. The first part was published in Monday's edition. The story continues, below, with a discussion of John Kasper, one of the people who helped incite the riots that took place in Clinton.*

John Kasper was originally from New Jersey and at the time of his arrival in Clinton was running a bookstore in Washington D.C. He was 27 years old and possessed of a persuasive, charismatic personality. His appeal to the Clinton citizens who were already somewhat disturbed by the integration of the Clinton High School consisted of attempting to convince them that the common will of the local people was superior to the law of the courts.

Until John Kasper showed up in Clinton, the integration of the Clinton High School was proceeding orderly and with little fanfare. But his agitation and that of Asa (Ace) Carter, maybe even more an inciter to riot than Kasper, succeeded in changing Clinton peaceful integration into a huge mob riot and caused exceptional uproar where essentially none existed before their arrival.

Jerry Shattuck tells of his first-hand experience as the captain of the Clinton High School football team. David J. Brittain, who was the principal of the Clinton High School, asked Jerry, who in addition to being captain of the football team was also president of the student body, to help him by organizing the football team "to keep peace in the school." Jerry did that and did it well. He staged football team members at every corner of the hallways. They maintained the peace and protected the Clinton 12.

All of the 12 teenagers who make up the "Clinton 12" are worthy of praise for the pain and suffering they endured as Clinton High School was integrated. The story of four of the 12 will suffice to highlight the key elements of the emotional torture they endured.

First, Bobby Cain, a senior, who would be the **first African American graduate** of a white public high school in the South, found himself more concerned for his life than able to concentrate on the tremendous achievement of being the first Black to graduate from an integrated school.

After the ceremony, when it came time for the graduates to go into the basement to change out of their caps and gowns, Bobby had to go it alone. While he was in the basement, the lights went off and someone hit Bobby in the face. Bobby's mother, the late Beatrice Cain, was afraid someone had put dynamite in their car when she saw someone walking away from it. Even with all the turmoil, Bobby considered his graduation "a great honor - a great achievement."

Second, Regina Turner stayed at Clinton High School through her sophomore and junior years. "I refused to leave. People told us 'if you quit, that will end the ideas of desegregation. I got angry and I guess I'm stubborn.'" After two years, she did go to her mother's hometown of Tallahassee, Florida, to live with an aunt and to graduate from a still segregated Black high school. "In Clinton, it was just go to school and come home. We couldn't go to football or basketball games or any social event at school. I wanted more than that. Green McAdoo Elementary School was never even painted inside," she recalled. "I was too angry to be afraid. I hope I never get so angry again. I was angry enough to do something horrible and not care." Regina recalls her Clinton experience with disappointment at the lack of equality provided to Black students.

Third, Jo Ann Allen, wrote that she was "very afraid," yet she had ambivalent feelings about her family moving away from the trouble. However, she also recalled that in Clinton, her education was being compromised "because of too many days out of school because of the constant threats of violence or death. This bitter struggle was hindering my forward motion. And, although I didn't want to give up 'the fight', my family packed up and moved." She agreed with Regina Turner that Blacks were not treated fairly in Clinton. "There was a time in Clinton when I thought I was pretty smart, but I found myself working twice as hard when we moved to California. By classroom standards here, I was very behind. Jo Ann did, however, praise one teacher. "I am very grateful to an excellent first grade teacher named Theresa E. Blair, who gave most of us Clinton Black kids a wonderful start. Without her, things would have been worse, but she got us through even using those second-hand books."

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Fourth, Gail Ann Epps, for whom the most horrible feeling came in September 1956 when the National Guard arrived. It was a Sunday morning and she was in church. Even though they saw the National Guard as protectors, it was just like war. She vividly remembers what happened to James Chandler, a Clinton sailor she was dating. He was taken into protective custody after being harassed and threatened when he was visiting her. He was caught up by a mob shouting, "Let's beat this nigger," when he was on his way back to Knoxville, and the National Guard had to rescue him. She recalled his fear, both of the mob and of the rather rough guardsmen.

Get the idea? The Blacks were subjected to an experience that none of us who have never been through what they experienced can even fathom. You and I cannot even begin to imagine the fear and the unreal torture to the emotions and intellect that comes from such treatment that these 12 teenagers had to endure. Never in our wildest dreams do we have any baseline experience that allows us to comprehend the extent of this ordeal endured by 12 teenagers. Pray to God we never do. Yet, it actually happened. Right here in our community.

Let's help the community document this experience accurately so future generations can understand what happened without filter and without changing any of the emotional reality. The documentary film will help do that. The Green McAdoo Cultural Center will do that. Let the truth sink in. Know that our history includes this event and embrace it for future learning.

On May 17, 1957, exactly three years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision, Bobby Cain graduated from Clinton High School and became the first African American graduate of a state supported public integrated high school in the south. The following year, Gail Ann Epps became the first African American female to graduate from a public integrated high school in Tennessee.

Then on October 5, 1958, before dawn on Sunday morning, three loud explosive blasts were heard throughout Clinton. The High School had been dynamited and essentially destroyed. Neighboring Oak Ridge opened its doors to the Clinton High School students and let them use the Linden School building for two years while the school was rebuilt. The Clinton students were welcomed to Oak Ridge by the school band playing the Clinton High School anthem. This neighborly reaction is also a story worth remembering.

The Green McAdoo Cultural Organization Board members, Cleo Ellis, Dr. Joseph Weaver, James Cain and Marilyn Hayden along with committee members, Steve Jones, Rev. Alan Jones, Ernest Griffin, Jerry Shattuck, Sara Hayden, David Bolling Jr., Clay Wright, Matt Kirkpatrick, Mattie Gallaher and Eugene Gallaher have transformed the vision of a few into a multi-community shared vision. Not only have the Clinton city officials, city residents and surrounding communities taken interest in the project, state and national officials have taken note as well.

Senate Majority Leader, Bill Frist, and Senator, Lamar Alexander, made this project a top priority in 2005 by awarding the City of Clinton the largest Economic Development Initiative in the HUD bill for the historical rehabilitation for the old Green McAdoo school building. Congressman Zach Wamp has been relentless in his support. Governor Phil Bredesen made this project a top priority this year with a sizeable donation from the state of Tennessee.

Many corporations, individuals, families and others have helped bring this national recognition to the August 24 through August 27, 2006 event and made the Green McAdoo Cultural Center a reality for the entire area, not just Clinton.

Not only is this project yet another example of Heritage Tourism growing in our area, it is a fitting memorial to the historic courage of 12 young teenagers and a town that refused to be intimidated or caused to lose sight of the importance of upholding the law and doing the right thing regardless of the opposition. The entire area of Clinton and surrounding communities and cities can be proud of this significant accomplishment. Let's join Clinton in celebrating a job well done! To learn more, go to the Green McAdoo web site at: [www.greenmcadoo.org](http://www.greenmcadoo.org).

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Keith McDaniel and Gary Brooks film inside Hoskins' Drug Store in Clinton as they prepare for the Clinton 12 documentary film, which will premiere at 7 PM, Thursday, 8/24/06, at the Ritz Theater next door