That fearsome day when 9 black kids made history

By Henry Weinsteiri

"At first it was an adventure. I didn't have any thoughts. I wondered what was inside this huge castle. Why didn't they want me to go in there?"

Sitting in her comfortable Glen Park home, Melba Beals recalled how she became part of history 30 years ago this month. She was one of nine black students who integrated Little Rock Central High School—secreted into the school by bayonet-bearing Army troops sent by President Dwight Eisenhower.

Now, as a reporter for TV station KRON here and says her eight compatrises are also doing well. But she is disturbed that the situation inside public schools in this area seems so bad that she decided to send her 14-year-old daughter Kelcie to a private school. something that matriarch segregations in the South did in the past so that their children wouldn't come into contact with black kids.

"I don't want her to get involved in what I went through," said Beals. It's possible that no other set of students will ever go through what the Little Rock 9 endured.

"Nigger go home," a mob of a thousand yelled at the six girls and three boys and their parents when they first arrived at Central High on Sept. 3, 1957. Gov. Orval Faubus used National Guardsmen to keep the nine out of the school, after a federal court ordered them admitted.

This was three years after the U.S. Supreme Court in its historic Brown vs. Board of Education decision ruled that segregated schools were "inherently unequal" and as such a denial of the Constitution's guarantee of equal protection under the law.

"We got out of there in a car," said Beals, then 15, whose mother Leola Pettit, a schoolteacher, was at first hesitant about her daughter leaving Horace Mann, the all-black high school she had previously attended but eventually gave her approval.

For the next 19 days the nine children became a more cohesive unit. Meetings were held with NAACP officials, hundreds of reporters came to town, there were rumblings of the Klan menacing for attack, and Faubus is saying there'll be violence and bloodshed.

Nobody really realized what would happen. We were more afraid than we'd ever been in our lives," said Beals, who said she was aware that a number of blacks in Little Rock had been lynched and thrown into the Arkansas River. "It was a misadventure then to Lynch a black in Arkansas."

When the nine arrived at Central High the morning of Sept. 23 for their second attempt to enter the school, they saw a reporter and photographer from Life magazine and a journalist from a black newspaper in Memphis being beaten.

The nine were placed in separate classrooms and "on my way up to my homeroom on the third floor I was spit on and kicked."

"Then, a mother of one of the white kids slapped me," Beals said. The anger of the crowd outside the school grew and by mid-day the students had to be taken home in unmarked police cars led by assistant chief Gene Smith, who later committed suicide. Later that day, whites and blacks fought on the streets of Little Rock.

That evening, President Eisenhower ordered in federal troops to implement the court-ordered desegregation. "Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decision of the majority," he said, in a lengthy message broadcast nationwide on the radio.

A lot of people think of the as the president who played golf, but I will always remember him for what he said about my hole," Beals said.

"For some time we had our personal bodyguard. Mine was Johnny Black of the little Aurora Screaming Eagles. He walked with me in the hall and stayed outside the classroom, looking through the glass.

But having an escort didn't solve the problem. They shot at us in our gymnasium, poured water on us, poured eggs on our heads, and did other things I wouldn't have dreamed of."

The federal troops stayed until Christmas and then were replaced by the Arkansas National Guard, who Beals said "were a real pain in terms of protection."

In the meantime, most of her white classmates and white teachers were hostile, "except for my shorthand teacher, Miss Pickett. She didn't cater to me, and she wouldn't put up with anything from those kids. She treated me fairly."

Also providing assistance was one white 12th grader who was on the football team and used to call Beals at night and warn her of upcoming dangers.

By the end of the school year, Beals had lost a lot of sleep and gone through considerable psychological torment. One of the nine had been kicked out of school for allegedly dumping a bowl of chili on a white student in retaliation for an attack.

"Religion helped me a lot. I attended the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in those days. And to keep my mind off the harassment at school, I'd see how many times I could say The Lord's Prayer, walking from the first floor to the third floor at school. I got up to 20," she said.

Beals said that some of her classmates were better than at the "all-black" school she had previously attended, but that "race was constantly an issue."

During the year, her mother lost her teaching job in North Little Rock, as did a number of other black adults who were associated with the nine. The students were buoyed by visits from Martin Luther King Jr., who had recently emerged as an activist minister during the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, and by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall. "Being from the North, he was not afraid," said Beals. "I thought he was invincible in those days."

She met hundreds of reporters, including the late Walter Lippmann, received letters of support from U.N. leader Dag Hammarskjold and poems from Robert Frost.

But by the last day of the school year, the situation was no better. "I went on tour and never looked back," said Beals. Soon after, the nine went on tour and instead of being beaten to death by mobs like the New York Hilton and driven around in trucks driven by chauffeurs of northern liberals, some of whom would later refuse to sit in much more subtle ways that Beals had encountered.

She made speeches all over the country, was given a sash at a banquet," Beals said.

"I was the keynote speaker. He is now an undersheriff of the Carter administration. Several of the others are teachers and one is a leader at the church."

Beals, who has been back to Little Rock just twice since she left in 1959, said that this is the first year she's been able to "sit down and talk about all that. I sacrificed a whole intervening part of my life," she said.