

CLINTON, TENNESSEE: SEPTEMBER 1956

The Ordeal of Bobby Cain

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Clinton, Tennessee

THERE is an ironic inevitability in the location of Clinton High School. It sits smack at the foot of Foley Hill, Clinton's Negro community. You can't come off the hill to go downtown—to go anywhere—without passing the school.

Most of Clinton's Negro children have been passing it every day of their lives—and then, if they were of high-school age, have traveled 17 more miles to go to *their* school, a Negro school in Knoxville.

Until last August. Up on Foley Hill on the night of Sunday, August 26th, at 434 Jarnigan Street, a sixteen-year-old boy named Bobby Cain lay sleepless, frightened by the knowledge that the next morning he would have to enter that school at the foot of the hill. He did not want to go down that hill in the morning. Overnight, Clinton High had changed, in Bobby's eyes, from an accustomed landmark to the focus of an agonizing personal dilemma.

He either had to go to Clinton High, down that hill, just two tenths of a mile, or never go to school again.

For, by a quirk of history, the federal court ruling that made it possible for Bobby to go to Clinton High made it impossible for him to go back to Austin High in Knoxville. Anderson County would now no longer pay Bobby's tuition at Austin nor the cost of transporting him to Knoxville.

And it had become plain to Bobby, that Sunday for the first time, that to go to Clinton High might be an act of physical courage. All day long the sensitive intelligence network of mothers and sisters who worked as domestics "downtown" had been bringing home news of trouble. A white man had turned up down there, was calling on people, showing them pictures of a Negro man kissing a white girl. He was stirring people up.

Bobby had never wanted to go to Clinton if there "was going to be a disturbance about it." In the world within a world of Foley Hill, Bobby was known as quiet, serious and "a good boy." Now he was worried by the talk. At 7:00 P.M. he switched on the TV set in the living room of the small concrete-block Cain home to hear the news. The news was that a stranger named John Kasper had come to Clinton to fight integration at Clinton High School, and he threatened to have a protest picket line in front of the school the next morning.

Bobby did not want to go through a picket line. But he did not say so then. Instead, he dressed to go to the Sunday-evening service at Mount Sinai Church with his mother. He is meticulously clean and keeps a looking-glass shine on his shoes. His mother, Mrs. Robert Cain, a stocky, heavy-set woman, had to hurry him. "Bobby, you come on!" he heard her call from the porch.

He went, for it is part of the favorable repute in which Bobby is held that he is a dutiful son.

The service turned out to be a prayer for peace, come morning. "Help us to love our enemies," said the Reverend O. W. Willis, "and send our children down the hill with peace in their hearts." Bobby stood outside, talking with other youngsters, two of whom had already failed to enroll because they were going to "wait and see what happened."

On the way home, along the narrow, curbless dim-lighted lanes of Foley Hill, Bobby finally spoke to Mrs. Cain. "Mama," he said, "I want to get an education, but I don't want to go down there in the morning."

"You can't pay any attention to what they say to you," she said in a characteristic tone of hers, half harsh, half tender.

"I know there are people who hate me," said Bobby.

"Then you've got to take it," she answered.

"I'd rather go back to Austin High," said Bobby.

"No, no," she said, her voice rising. "From now on, you're going down the hill to school. Nobody can afford to send you back to Austin." Mrs. Cain is a household servant, and Mr. Cain is an odd-jobs carpenter.

There was no use. When Bobby got home, he went to his room, undressed, and got down on his knees and prayed. He asked "the Lord to watch over me during the day."

He had decided to go to Clinton High. But it was a decision that kept him awake that Sunday night.

He was scared.

It is useless to ask a man who has somehow gone beyond what he thought was his limit of courage to tell you where he found his unexpected resource. He very seldom knows. This was exactly Bobby Cain's plight the day I first talked with him, on September 14th, the Friday afternoon that marked the end of his third week in Clinton High.

During those weeks, this quiet adolescent who wanted to avoid any "disturbance" had been the victim of some of the most angry racial vituperation in recent American history. Afraid though he was to go to school because there might be a picket line, he had continued to go after the school was besieged by an uncontrolled mob.

But he had trouble explaining why. It was still too soon, for one thing. As we talked, drops of sweat gathered on his forehead and began to run down his cheek. He pressed his palms together nervously. He reminded me of the men I had interviewed when I served as a Marine combat correspondent in World War II. It is impossible for men who have really "had it" to talk about their experience until their memories have had an interval in which to reject the intolerable.

When I asked him, for example, what names he had been called when he ran the gantlet of segregationists who crowded around the sidewalks of Clinton High, he looked away, and answered in a voice so low I could barely hear him.

"Coon . . ." he said, his voice trailing off. He insisted he could not remember any others.

And Bobby, like most true combat veterans, knew very little about the shape of the larger events of which he was a part. He remembered that the first day of school had been relatively uneventful (of the more than 800 enrolled students only about 25 had failed to report) and that there wasn't much trouble the second morning, only a few pickets. But by the time school was out, there was a large crowd around the building, muttering ugly things to him as he came out. He did not know that that same day a hearing had been held on charges made earlier against Kasper, the outsider who was

leading the opposition to integration, and that Kasper had been freed in the morning, and had announced thereupon that he was not leaving town until the Negroes had withdrawn from school, or until the whole school board resigned. Bobby knew there was to be a meeting "downtown" that night.

When he got home, he sat down in the living room, and "just kind of trembled for a little while." Later, he tried to do homework, but the atmosphere was not exactly serene. That night Foley Hill began to stir in fear. It was a small community, about 200 Negroes in a town of 4,000, with nothing in its history to prepare it for racial violence.

East Tennessee was not Mississippi; indeed, America's first abolitionist newspaper was published in the area, and the region had voted against joining the Confederacy. But if the Negroes could, as one of them said, "go almost anywhere in East Tennessee," it was still a region with another pertinent tradition. Clinton was within an area where it was part of the code to settle disputes without help from the law. The danger, as some of the adults on Foley Hill saw it, was not so much from racial hatred, as that any open argument might be settled with gunfire.

It is hard to say exactly what happened on Foley Hill that night, and on the successive nights until the National Guard arrived in Clinton. A leading Negro newspaper has said that Foley Hill became an arsenal. A rumor was circulated that the men of Foley Hill at one time took up tactical positions, covering the roads that led up to it.

Bobby stayed around the house. Mrs. Cain says that he began to "act different and strange with his brothers and sisters. They got on his nerves, and he asked me to keep them quiet."

When bedtime came, Bobby took two aspirins, prayed, and again lay sleepless for hours.

Things had got so bad at Clinton High by Wednesday morning that "they took us in the side door," Bobby said. A newspaper account says that "a milling mob of approximately 1,000 gathered at the school." An elderly Negro woman was tripped and struck in the face by a white man.

By then, Bobby had begun to think of "inside the school"

as his sanctuary. The white students were not unfriendly. "They didn't make any cracks, and one teacher came up to me in the hall that day and apologized," Bobby recalls.

"We're sorry you have to go through this," she said to Bobby.

But outside the school, the mutterings were turning into an ugly and menacing rumble. The mob would not leave the school. Some of the angriest were a handful of students; "the same group who were troublemakers inside the school were the troublemakers outside," a teacher observed.

The sheriff of Anderson County arrived at school and "temporarily withdrew" the 12 Negro students, Bobby among them. When he got home this time, on Wednesday, Bobby "sat and trembled for a long time." He was preparing himself for another talk with his mother, a serious one.

"I had decided I wasn't going back," he said.

After supper, there was another of those improvised Foley Hill councils of war, and Bobby attended with his mother. The sheriff turned up. "He told us if we'd only send our children back to Austin High," Mrs. Cain recalls, "he'd drive them down himself every day." His offer was refused.

While this handful of parents and children were meeting, Kasper was speaking at the courthouse to "a crowd estimated at from 1,000 to 3,000 cheering and howling persons," according to a report. Photographers and reporters were pushed around. Kasper was delivering an "ultimatum" to officials to "get those Negroes out of Clinton High."

When Bobby and his mother got home, he put it to her, as strongly as a boy like him might dare.

"I can't go back down there," he told her.

Mrs. Cain "just sat Bobby down in a chair," she recalls. Then she told him: "I had to scuffle to get what little education I got. I'm as worried about that mob as you are. But what about the others in there asleep? Where are your brothers and sisters going to school if you don't stick?"

Mr. Cain was there. "I wouldn't be so worried," he told his wife, "if Bobby was a girl. I don't think they'd hurt a girl."

But Mrs. Cain ignored him. "Bobby," she said, "you'll never feel right with yourself if you don't go back."

Bobby took his aspirin, went off to bed, got down on his knees, and “prayed to the Lord to help me get through that line in the morning.”

When Bobby Cain went to school on Thursday morning he had with him a little pocketknife of the kind boys often carry. “I wasn’t mad,” he says. “I could take the names they called me. But I was gonna protect myself.”

As Bobby went into school, a woman stepped out of the crowd and whacked him on the shoulder with a stick. “You nigger!” she yelled. Bobby kept walking, head down. “I didn’t want to see her face,” he says.

The Negro students had not been using the school cafeteria—they were not sure they were supposed to—and as they walked at lunchtime to a drive-in custard spot three blocks away to eat, a crowd followed. Bobby and another boy were pushed off the sidewalk, into the street.

“There were just these two little colored boys against 200 white men,” an eyewitness told a reporter from a Knoxville paper.

A heckler stepped forward and grabbed at Bobby. Bobby drew his little pocketknife, just as the police arrived. The official police account says that Bobby “tried to defend himself with a knife.” He was taken into protective custody, and held at the jail until an older brother could come for him.

That was a turning point. Bobby can talk about what happened on Thursday reflectively, as he cannot talk about the earlier events.

“After that day,” he says, “I found a little courage of my own. I won’t say I wasn’t afraid after that. But it came to me for the first time that I had a right to go to school. I realized that it was those other people who were breaking the law, not me. That night I determined to stick it out for Bobby Cain, and not for anybody else.”

After that day, he never again had so much trouble getting to sleep, although Foley Hill was still as tense as ever. At last, on Saturday night, 100 state troopers dramatically arrived in Clinton and restored order. They were followed the next day, Sunday, by the National Guard. Kasper was convicted of contempt and sentenced to a year in jail. He is now out on bond.

Bobby did not stop trembling at home until well into the second week, long after the National Guard had taken over. What helped him most was the attitude of the white student body at Clinton High.

They grew more and more friendly. "They'd ask me about my homework, did I have it done, things like that," Bobby recalls with obvious pleasure. One of his teachers observed that the members of Clinton High's football team ("they're the elite at this time of the school year," she said) went out of their way to talk with Bobby.

Although he had been an above-average student at Austin High, he did not settle down to his homework until the third week of school, at the same time that it became possible for him to make the two-tenths-mile trip to Clinton High unescorted.

He scored his first scholastic triumph the day I interviewed him, on Friday, September 14th. The day before, his history teacher, Mrs. Don Byerly, had asked his class to memorize the Declaration of Independence as the next day's assignment. When it came time to recite, Mrs. Byerly asked Bobby to come to the front of the room.

"I knew it," Bobby said. "When I finished, she said to me, 'That's very good, Bobby, very good.'"

Collier's, November 23, 1956