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| the Little Rock NineSeptember 23, 1957 was no ordinary school day for Elizabeth Eckford and eight other African American teenagers in Little Rock, Arkansas. Little Rock Central High School, like many schools across the country, was segregated. Only white students were allowed to attend. But the Supreme Court had ruled that segregation, or the legal separation of blacks and whites in public facilities, was illegal. And these nine students, who would be known as The Little Rock Nine, would be the first African Americans to attend Little Rock's Central High. As they drove toward the school that morning, the students knew what awaited them--an angry group of white protesters. Just a few weeks before, the nine had walked past just such a crowd to the high school's entrance. That morning, Arkansas National Guardsmen had turned the nine away, and, along with police, stood by while the mob pelted the black students cars with stones, assaulted them, and threatened their lives. But even though they were scared, the nine hadn't given up. Like many of the figures in what came to be known as the Civil Rights movement, they would keep trying. The right to an equal education had been granted to African American students in 1954 by the United States Supreme Court, when it ruled that segregation was illegal. Unfortunately, three years later, many African Americans were still being forced to go to separate and inferior schools. African Americans also still suffered under "Jim Crow" laws that forced them to use separate public facilities from whites. Especially in the South, city buses, restaurants, hotels, public bathrooms and even public water fountains were segregated. In spite of the repression, courageous African Americans, as well as some equally gallant whites, challenged segregation. These freedom fighters met resistance from segregationists at every turn. The segregationists fought back not only in the court room, but on the streets, hurting and even killing African Americans and other supporters who spoke up for equality. Progress was slow and accompanied by danger, but African Americans continued to fight for their rights. Working together under the guidance of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Ralph Abernathy, they challenged the laws that discriminated against them as well as the attitudes of many Americans. One by one segregation laws were overturned and slowly many white Americans began to change how they felt about African Americans. Other groups, notably Latinos and Native Americans also became increasingly active in their drive for full participation in American society. In 1962, Cesar Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Union, which campaigned nonviolently for better working condition for Hispanic, Filipino, and other farm laborers. Native American leaders such as Dennis Banks and Clyde Bellecourt, formed the American Indian Movement in 1968 to address police brutality, slum housing, unemployment, racism, and other issues. These movements found broad support inside their communities as well as among the larger society. Much of the focus of the Civil Right Movement was on education. Education, many believed, would help African Americans to get better jobs and to gain influence in American society. But overcoming school segregation, especially in the South, meant facing extreme opposition and risking extreme violence. Little Rock's Central High became an important test. When the Little Rock Nine arrived at school that September morning, they entered the building through a side door. A white student led them to the principal's office, where they were to register for classes. But when the protesters outside realized the students had entered the school, they exploded into violence. Once again, the Little Rock Nine were forced to leave the school. But again, they would not give up. The next day, the Little Rock Nine returned to Central High, this time protected by United States Army troops sent by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. For the Little Rock Nine, the battle was only beginning. Throughout the school year, they faced physical and verbal assaults from white students, as well as death threats against themselves, their families, and other members of the black community. And one of the nine, Minnijean Brown, was expelled from Central after fighting back against white students who abused her. But the following May, Ernest Green became the first African American student ever to graduate from Central High. The courageous actions of the Little Rock Nine had helped open the door of education for African Americans all across the nation. |