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## The Gary School Crisis of the 1950s: A Personal Memoir

*Elizabeth Balanoff\**

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Professor Ronald D. Cohen's recent article on integration of the Gary school system, 1945 to 1960,<sup>1</sup> interested me both for what it said and what it did not say. I am sure it is a valid presentation of the facts available in the written records, and I agree with much that he wrote. Yet in some respects my memories of that period in Gary are very different.

In 1955 my family of six moved from Chicago to Gary in search of cheap housing near my husband's work place. We found it on the fringe of the Froebel School area, and as a Froebel School PTA member I became deeply involved in efforts to deal with the problems of that school. The major problems we faced were overcrowding, underfunding, and longtime general neglect on the part of the school administration. It was quite apparent to us, and openly discussed at the time, that our problems were compounded by the school board's determination to maintain as much segregation as possible by building no new schools in border areas, only deep in the middle of black or white neighborhoods. The central district, once shared by black and immigrant steelworkers, had grown increasingly black as Gary's population grew, and blacks faced invisible but insurmountable boundaries, trapping them in that small land area. While no new high schools were built after 1945, many elementary schools were built. One way of relieving the pressure at our K through 12 school would have been to build a new elementary school in the Froebel area. It is here that the school administration showed near total resistance to locating a new school

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, "The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945-1960," *Indiana Magazine of History*, LXXXII (June, 1986), 161-84.

in a border area. A major part of the total school problem was the strenuous campaign supported by the Chamber of Commerce to keep local taxes as low as possible, which meant constant reductions in funds proposed for schools. These cuts were felt in a very discriminatory fashion in poorer neighborhoods, including the blue-collar "integrated" Froebel area.

Now, as a professional historian with a special interest in oral history, I can better sympathize with people I interview who reluctantly agree to talk about their memories of historic events only if I promise to let them tell the *whole* story, "the way it really happened," as they recall it.

What "really happened" in the late 1950s in Gary was a grass-roots parents' protest throughout the black area, led by local parent-teacher associations, over school crowding and the school board's failure to exert sufficient initiative in resolving the problem. A significant part of that struggle was a vigorous campaign by the Froebel PTA to force the school administration to build the first school in years in a border area, Norton Park, which was the boundary between a primarily black neighborhood and a mainly white area.

When I joined the Froebel PTA, my neighbor, Irene Wilczynski, was president of it. All the executive board members were white. Only when her term expired, did I learn that this school, which had been touted as *the* glowing example of integration in Gary for years, had had two PTAs, one black, one white, until after the school strike of 1945. At that point they had merged into one PTA with an alternating leadership, a black executive board one year and a white one the next. When Irene's term expired, some of the black parents approached her, saying they felt one reason the school suffered so much neglect was because there was no continuity of leadership in the PTA. Even though it was their turn to lead the PTA, they asked Irene to remain on the executive board and asked the PTA to end the alternating white-black leadership. This was agreed to, and Irene remained on the board as vice-president. Richard Davis, a black parent of many Froebel children, was elected president; Bernice Terry, also black, was elected recording secretary; and I was elected corresponding secretary. Two other board members were Mrs. Wade and Mrs. River Dee Trimble, both black. The years that followed constituted the true beginning of my higher education.

Froebel School became so crowded that the first four grades were put on half-day shifts. Portables, World War II quonset huts, were added to our campus. Rental property was used, and in spite of this some children housed in Froebel's main building had their desks in one of the larger halls. Class sizes were large. I recall that my second grader was in a class with forty-five students, and the same teacher who taught all their subjects in the morning had another group of similar size in the afternoon. In some of the white

middle-class areas rental property was being used to maintain full-day classes with much lower class sizes, in one case as low as twenty students per class. None of the Froebel children were allowed to take their books home because the books, too, were used by two sets of children.

Our first efforts to change this situation began with a visit to Superintendent Alden Blankenship to complain about conditions. On our first visit he was friendly but insisted that the neighborhood was so congested no immediate improvements could be made. He suggested that when neighborhood redevelopment began there would be land available for a new school in the area. Fortunately we checked with the redevelopment commission to get an estimate of the length of our wait, and they told us there were no prospects of such redevelopment in our area in the foreseeable future.

In the meantime, through contacts with other PTA parents at the city PTA meetings, we learned that this congestion prevailed throughout the black area. Roosevelt PTA leaders told us they, too, had been told no relief was possible but had gone to the city engineer's office and asked him to find a possible school site. He found one; they went back to the school board and, with pressure, were able to get a new school built in their area. We decided to try the same tactic, but since our area was more congested, the only possible site the city engineer could find was Norton Park, which at that time was on the extreme north edge of the black community.

This was followed by more visits—to the school superintendent, the mayor, the school board, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Midtown Businessmen's Association, the Gary Urban League. The mayor advised us to persist in pressuring the school board. They were the ones who should solve this problem, and as he said, much to his later regret, "It's the squeaky wheel that gets the oil." The NAACP and Midtown Businessmen's Association offered us moral support. From one of the men at the Urban League we received some practical advice on strategy. We were contemplating a petition campaign. He urged us to first persuade numerous local organizations to pass resolutions of support, to send letters to the newspapers, and then to make the petition campaign our grand finale.

Our relations with the school board and Superintendent Blankenship quickly became less cordial. Chris Retson, president of the school board, frequently told us he could see no solution for our problem except a pied piper to lure away our numerous children. While he obviously considered this a form of friendly banter, it was ill-received by Froebel parents who felt our children were, in fact, not valued by the city leaders. My husband suggested we might receive a more respectful hearing if we took a few precinct committeemen along on our next visit. A friend of his, a leader of Local 1010 of the Steelworkers Union, Bill Young, was married to a

woman who was extremely active in local politics, and Mrs. Grace Young agreed to accompany us on our next trip to the school board. Mrs. Carrie Irving, another black precinct committeewoman, also joined us. They were older women with no small children in school, but both were very motherly, concerned women. When they appeared with us at our next meeting, Mr. Retson got up, offered one of them his chair, and the foolish banter ceased.

When we suggested Norton Park as a possible school site, Dr. Blankenship informed us it would be unthinkable to take park space but said they had discovered another possible site, some property owned by the railroad south of 15th Street (right in the middle of the black area). The price had originally been a quarter of a million dollars, but since the school had expressed an interest in it, the price had unfortunately doubled. Also the railroad refused to build a bridge over some tracks, which would be necessary. However, he added, the city could condemn the property. There were many problems, nothing could be done quickly, but as long as any other possibility existed, we must forget about park property. Certainly Dr. Cohen was correct in his article in pointing out that a program of integration based on a neighborhood school policy, combined with residential segregation, permits a community to espouse the principle of integration while avoiding its substance. The establishment of a school in Norton Park was a real threat to this arrangement. The vigor with which it was opposed suggests that most community leaders had never committed themselves to anything more than this comfortable fiction.

In the face of our persistence, Dr. Blankenship became increasingly testy, suggesting that our children were really getting the basics, just missing the frills, and that if we insisted on having them in school and out of our homes for the full normal school day he might oblige us by running two complete shifts at Froebel, one starting at six in the morning and the second one ending at six in the evening. Our committee had agreed in advance never to make commitments of any kind without a full discussion with our whole PTA. He appeared quite startled when we said we would have to discuss that proposal before we could agree or turn it down.

If he was startled, Froebel teachers were dismayed that we might even consider such a proposal. Some of the best, most dedicated teachers I have ever known taught in that school, both black and white, and many of them had given the PTA encouragement and needed information. We never expected them to teach such a schedule, but we dared not tell them so at the time. The white parents in our PTA were well aware, from discussions with friends outside the area, that the white community in general did not really believe conditions at Froebel were that bad. Black parents were convinced they knew and did not care. We all agreed that more publicity could only help our cause. We informed our principal, the

school board, and all our friends in the citywide PTA that this suggestion had been made to us and that we would seriously consider it. We pointed out, however, that the children from one section of our school area would have to walk through the worst vice area of the city before or after dark and as responsible parents we would feel obliged either to organize parent patrols to accompany them or ask for special police patrols in the area. Therefore we could not accept or reject this proposal until we had time to investigate the possibilities. In the process of "investigating the possibilities" we managed to let many more people know how serious the situation at Froebel School really was. I doubt if this proposal ever appeared in any official records. It was probably never intended by Dr. Blankenship as a serious one, but we knew, from past experience, that had we rejected it we would be accused of caring only about getting our children out from under foot and not about education since hints of that nature were frequently made during our discussions.

We decided to approach the park board directly to discuss the possible use of Norton Park. The head of the park board, Griffith Rees, informed us that he had no use for the school board. The park board had, at one time, requested the use of some land the school city owned for a soccer field. They had been refused, and there had been no cooperation between the two boards since then. We explained to him that we, too, had little use for the school board but were unwilling to let our children pay the price for their poor relations. Why not, instead, let us build a school in the park and insist on a quid pro quo in the nature of a soccer field on some other piece of school property? In fact, why not let us use only one end of the park and insist that the school city allow the park board to use the school recreational facilities in return? Rees found the suggestions appealing and promised to take them up with his board.

A new reason why we should not have the park was soon discovered by the school administration. A small wooden building in one end of the park was used as a school for the physically handicapped children. Suddenly we were portrayed as greedy parents who would help ourselves at their expense. Our PTA made suggestions about busing some of our children to less crowded schools or changing school boundaries. Again the same response. We would make those schools overcrowded, too. Some of the nearby white schools were already renting extra property to keep their class sizes within reason. We were told any changes would damage other schools or other people, and we must be patient until either redevelopment or the railroad property brought us some relief.

The parents of the handicapped children were easy to deal with. We called them and told them we needed the park but we did not want to leave them without a school. Would they consider becoming part of our school if we could get one built in the park? They, too, were an "integrated" group and rejoiced at the prospect of any

support from anyone. They had their own horror stories about the difficulty they had had in finding even the ramshackle park building and getting any kind of schooling for their children. Attending school with non-handicapped children would benefit their children. What they really needed was a new building with ramps and therapeutic pools. Shortly after we made allies of those parents, the small wooden building in the park burned down. It was suggested an irate Froebel parent might have started the fire. Froebel parents either replied that tramps were known to hang out in that area or that God, in the interests of justice, had struck it by lightning. At any rate the handicapped children had to be housed somewhere, and we promptly demanded they share a new building with us in the park. Ramps and therapeutic pools, as well as cooperation with a park recreation program, were added to our demands.

One of the park board members lived just a block north of Norton Park, as did Irene Wilczynski and I, and we soon heard this man was blocking the proposal at the park board by promising the entire neighborhood would rise up in protest, possibly even precipitate another race riot similar to the one at Froebel in 1945. It was time for a new step in our PTA drive for support.

Throughout this period various community groups had sent resolutions to the school board urging them to let us use the park for a school unless they found another real solution. Our letters regularly appeared in the letter column of the *Gary Post-Tribune*.<sup>2</sup> A petition campaign in the black area was producing large numbers of signatures. Now Irene and I were told we must canvass our white neighbors on the edge of the park and get as many signatures from them as possible. We felt defeated before we started. Most of our neighbors were Catholics who sent their children to parochial schools, and we were sure they would be against us. In this case we were the ones who were guilty of prejudging people wrongly. There was racial bias aplenty, but there was also a sense of fair play that we had not counted on. That ambivalence in white blue-collar workers, which Robert Coles has so well documented in his study of Boston,<sup>3</sup> existed in Gary, and through sheer blind luck, with little confidence or understanding, we managed to appeal to the better side of most of our neighbors. We were pleasantly surprised at the amount of support we received. Even the few refusals were polite.

There was one exception. Three-quarters through my block I knocked on one door to be greeted with a hostile harangue. It soon

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<sup>2</sup> Letters appeared frequently in the *Gary Post-Tribune* from September, 1957, through the fall of 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Coles, *The South Goes North* (Boston, 1967). A later book which shows widespread ambivalence in American society over a wide time span where race relations are concerned is J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground* (New York, 1985).

became clear that the angry man I faced felt abandoned by his son who had just moved out of the area. Flushed with success by that time, I told him all the young parents would be forced to move unless we got a school soon, adding that people who were so hostile to blacks they would deny their own grandchildren a decent education had no cause for complaint. At that point he grabbed my petition, scrawled his name on it, and slammed the door in my face. Only when Irene and I compared notes, did I learn he was the father of one of the leaders of the racial strike at Froebel in 1945. Had I known who he was, I would have passed his door without knocking. With his signature along with all the others on our petition, our neighborhood park board member was left with little support for his opposition. He became ill and did not attend any park board meetings until after the park became securely ours.

With park board leaders growing more and more receptive to our demand for a new elementary school in Norton Park, it became increasingly difficult for the school administration to continue their refusal. We were still in the position of making all the proposals to both park board and school board while they continued to decline to talk to each other. In desperation we finally attended a city council meeting en masse to insist that the mayor call the two groups to a joint conference to discuss our proposal. The entire council chambers were filled with Froebel parents and parents from one of the black schools, who were also there in large numbers protesting conditions in their school. Mayor George Chacharis was irate! The parents were adamant, speaking out of order when he declined to call on them, and the local newspaper carried the story on the front page.<sup>4</sup> By this time the whole city had heard that unless some relief was immediately forthcoming our entire school would be put on half shift through the eighth grade and there would be little peace in Gary if that happened. The following day Superintendent Blankenship formally requested the park for a school.<sup>5</sup> Within a week the park board and school board came to an agreement to build the Norton Park School,<sup>6</sup> complete with ramps and therapeutic pools for the handicapped children and with special provision for park programs to be carried out there as well. We were told by a local, forever to be unnamed, political leader that Congressman Ray J. Madden had flown in from Washington to tell the local Democratic leadership to give us the park school before we wrecked their next election.

These are my recollections of the school situation in Gary in the late 1950s, aided by a few newspaper clippings and numerous

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<sup>4</sup> *Gary Post-Tribune*, October 8, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, October 9, 1958.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, October 13, 1958.

notes taken at the time. I well recall that PTAs in many of the black schools were as actively protesting overcrowded conditions as we were. We frequently met at the same civic meetings and always the issue of discrimination in the distribution of school resources was a shared complaint. Frequently changes in school boundaries were suggested to distribute the misery more evenly. Because of the neglected condition of Froebel School, which was Gary's showcase "integrated" school, however, Gary parents never enjoyed the illusion that integration alone would achieve parity. It was clearly understood in Gary, as it was not in many other communities, that both class and race were bases for discrimination.

In the 1960s there were continued demands for both equal and integrated education. One took the form of the law suit discussed in Cohen's article. Another was a "Freedom School" conducted primarily by the Gary NAACP under the leadership of Jeanette Strong. The Gary NAACP was revived when Mrs. Strong, whose husband was a leader in the steelworkers' union, became NAACP president. At that point not only the school system but also local hospitals and businesses were vigorously challenged on issues of discrimination.

The Freedom School, a one-day school boycott, I remember especially for two reasons: Dick Gregory and the Tolleston High School track team. The school administration scheduled a city track meet for the same day as the school boycott, and the boycott organizers feared many of the high school students might choose to attend the track meet. Bernice Terry assured everyone that she had personally talked to the Tolleston track team, the one expected to win most of the honors at the track meet, and they had promised to attend the Freedom School. They did, walking in as a group exactly at the minute the school was scheduled to start, wearing their letters and a look of pride and dignity that made them seem much older than they were.

Parents assisting at the school were apprehensive about the lunch hour. Although there was food and drink for all, it involved some long lines, and many of us had experienced a good deal of unruliness in our schools between classes. Dick Gregory spoke to the students just before lunch. He was still regarded primarily as a comedian with a strong social conscience. His full potential as a social reformer had not yet been realized, but it was apparent that day. Gregory simply transformed those youngsters. He talked to them about responsibility and maturity. He praised them for having achieved more of both than many adults ever do by making a choice to attend the school, and he spoke of the importance of persistence, the importance of small choices made all day, everyday. The lunch lines were totally quiet, totally peaceful, and the cleanup committee had nothing to clean up when lunch was over. It was a rare moment in a parent's life!

I remember the court case and the efforts of the NAACP attorneys to prove, what to me is still an obvious truth, that the school city had continuously and systematically built schools in such a way as to create a segregated system. I was not too surprised at the outcome of the trial because the kind of evidence required to prove such a case in court is not the kind that people in the 1950s left lying around in the records.

Mrs. Terry was the only member of the Froebel PTA to testify at the trial, and she was put on the stand only on the spur of the moment to fill in a bit of time needed by the NAACP lawyers. One of the bright moments of the trial for the NAACP side occurred during her testimony. The school board's attorney was trying to make the point, which Cohen referred to in his article, that they could not change the school boundaries in the manner suggested by the NAACP because it would endanger children by forcing them to cross railroad tracks. He asked Mrs. Terry if one of her children would not be forced to cross a track and if she did not fear for the child's safety. She pondered the question a moment and replied that she did fear that track crossing, but then she added, if half the children in another (overcrowded) school had to cross the same track a few blocks further away as they had done for years, her child might as well risk his life for a chance to go to a better school. This small mother of seven children appeared so innocent in her remarks that the lawyer walked into two more traps before he finally realized he was talking to a woman who knew much more about Gary school boundaries than he did.

It was the breaking of residential barriers that finally led to real change. Blacks, who by the 1960s were well over half the population of Gary, had been bottled up in about one-sixth of its territory so long that the boundaries simply would not hold. They began to move into new neighborhoods and new schools. But these changes came about after a revitalized local NAACP chapter finally gave a united focus to black discontent and after several years of vigorous school protests at the grassroots level of the community.

A continuing problem, one of whose major symptoms is this endless competition among neglected groups for better opportunities for their children, still remains to be addressed by the nation as a whole. That is the failure of leadership at *all* levels, local, state, and federal, to place the needs of children in general high on their list of priorities—their needs for education, support, and protection. Facing up to this one, if we do it, will undoubtedly change our society even more than the 1960s.