

Book Review

A New Day in the Delta: Inventing School Desegregation as You Go.
Beckwith, David W.

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296 pages.

Reviewed by
Thomas Aiello

Valdosta State University

Though *Brown v. Board of Education* happened in 1954, through various maneuvers and a reliance on local option politics, many Mississippi school districts had yet to integrate by 1969. In the Delta community of Leland, Mississippi, the school superintendent sought to cushion the blow of desegregated schools by integrating the teaching staff first. To that end, he hired a recently graduated white business major from Ole Miss to teach history to students at the district's black school. David W. Beckwith was massively unqualified for the job. It was, the account claims, his willingness to take the job that was his principal qualification, though the author provides no evidence that the district made any concerted effort to find actually qualified teachers for the position.

So begins Beckwith's memoir, *A New Day in the Delta: Inventing School Desegregation as You Go*. He goes on to explain that Leland was under a federal court order to desegregate, and that the hiring of white teachers for the district's black school was a strategy to delay integration while still qualifying for federal funding. Still, it got him a job, and Beckwith's first days with the faculty produced the telling series of revelations expected of an educated white southerner meeting educated black southerners for the first time. The problem with Beckwith's account is that the revelations obviously only went so far. Beckwith adds dialog to his memoir for dramatic effect, which is problematic because of the narrative's absolute reliance on it and its caricatured depiction of black student speech. Though it is hard for a reader to believe that any resident of Leland, Mississippi was without a relatively significant accent, only the black students are depicted as speaking in dialect.

This kind of presentation ultimately causes broader problems with the manuscript. Beckwith begins the school year with the unsurprising prob-

lems of poor discipline and academic performance, but he begins to make an impact on the students and create a positive rapport. His manuscript is self-serving, as are all memoirs, but when combined with the dialect problems, *A New Day in the Delta* becomes uncomfortably paternalistic. In an effort to broaden the students' horizons, for example, Beckwith decides to require the parents of each of his students to provide seventy-five cents for a subscription to *Junior Scholastic Magazine* because he had found it rewarding when he was a student. Some of the parents did not provide the money, either because they expected schoolbooks to be provided by the state or because they couldn't afford the excess whims of their children's teacher. Beckwith explains that he paid for the subscriptions himself, and after wrestling with whether or not to provide them to students who never provided seventy-five cents, he decides to give magazines to all of his students. It was a nice gesture from Beckwith, but at the same time, the notion of a white man deciding what's best for black students based solely on memories of his own childhood, then forcing their impoverished parents to pay for his notions or to accept charity in its stead is nothing if not a display of Old South paternalism.

Of course, that display can also be incredibly helpful for those attempting to understand the racial negotiations that took place between white and black during the integrationist period, the legacy of those negotiations, and the makeup of the white mind in their wake. Ultimately, Beckwith's would not remain the only white mind in his school. Leland's delaying tactics were unsuccessful, and the integration of students began in Beckwith's second semester. The number of violent confrontations increased. The racism of the white students and teachers was evident. The viability of the Leland schools and of Beckwith's classroom, however, was maintained largely by the sense of inevitability felt by everyone involved.

During the students' integration, Beckwith noticed that the abject poverty of many of the white students matched that of his black charges. At the same time, as locals outside of the school began railing against the integration, the Leland Chapter of the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race blamed "limousine liberals," who made their fortunes on the backs of white workers and sent their children to private schools, for the new heresy. Beckwith makes clear that poverty played a substantial role in all aspects of both racial tensions and education in Mississippi, driving both the poor performance of students and the poor reactions of adults.

The racism of those adults was paramount, as Beckwith found himself threatened both by white supremacist groups and parents of disgruntled and underperforming white students because his previous semester as a white

teacher of solely black classrooms gave them reason to doubt his authenticity and racial loyalty. Racial loyalty dominated within the teaching fraternity, as well. Beckwith and his two white colleagues who began the school year at the black school had joined the black teacher's union, for example. After the integration, their colleagues unsuccessfully tried to pressure them into switching to the white union, and tensions remained even between white members of the faculty because of the suspicion of divided loyalties. As Beckwith frankly admits, "The racial divide had begun to dominate every facet of school life" (228).

That it did. The problems don't abate as *A New Day in the Delta* comes to its conclusion. The students and teachers both complete a difficult and traumatic school year, but there are obviously more problems to come. Beckwith would not be in the system to experience them, as his time in the Leland schools helped him decide to attend graduate school. He did, however, return more than thirty years later to relive his year in the system. Beckwith's epilogue, written after his return, emphasizes the fates of those who had played prominent roles in his brief teaching life. But perhaps more significantly, the school system is still there. Its first difficult integrated year was followed by more difficult years, its problems only exacerbated by the same poverty and closed-society thinking that hurt them in the 1960s, but as of 2003 the system was, if not thriving, at least unflaggingly stable. Overt racism and more subtle paternalism have given way to a general acceptance that allows all of Leland's students and teachers to benefit from the difficult work of Beckwith and his colleagues, achieving the goal of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

A New Day in the Delta is an interesting and remarkably revealing account of one Mississippi community's late school desegregation, but it doesn't do the work of unpacking its content for the reader. It is less an analysis of desegregation, and more a remembered tale of a long-ago participation—a primary source that stops at the water's edge of objective analysis. That being the case, the narrative explains just as much about the mind of Beckwith and similar reluctant white southerners swept up in a process that they had lost the ability to control. And in that effort, the memoir is entirely successful.