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By Jane Gross With Ronald Smothers

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This two-stoplight town is America's latest civil rights crucible, a speck on the map between Atlanta and Birmingham that has been riven by racial tension in the six months since a white high school principal threatened to cancel the prom to prevent interracial dating and was accused of telling a mixed-race student that her birth had been a mistake.

The challenge of Hulond Humphries, the 55-year-old principal, to the inexorable tide of social integration here and his disputed exchange with the student, 17-year-old Revonda Bowen, have uncovered deep racial divisions long hidden in Wedowee, a rural hamlet known for the easy friendships among its 800 residents and for the huge bass in its local lake.

The big fish are still jumping in Lake Wedowee, but blacks and whites are looking at each other through narrowed eyes these days outside the county courthouse, the grocery and the flower shop on Main Street, and especially around the charred husk of the high school, which was set afire by arsonists.

"It seems like a different place now," said Ms. Bowen, who won a \$25,000 settlement from the school district after her confrontation with Mr. Humphries but has since seen some of her relationships come unraveled amid the tumult.

"Everything was quiet before. Now you can see everything, hear everything. Everything's out in the open." Sound and Fury

The racial tempest that began in February at Randolph County High School looks on the surface like a replay of anguished decades past. It has riled blacks, unsettled whites, turned school board meetings into racial shouting matches and led to bomb threats, school boycotts and sound and fury from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Ku Klux Klan.

The once-quiet four-block downtown is abustle with civil rights lawyers and curious journalists. The outsiders are welcomed by many of the blacks here, who are tired of having to hold their tongues when treated with condescension or contempt, but they are given a cold shoulder by most of the whites, who were well served by the status quo.

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On Aug. 7, in the dead of night, this incendiary situation exploded with the torching of the high school by an unidentified arsonist. Now Mr. Humphries, after months of support from the school board, has been reassigned to the central office and kept from the school grounds, under pressure from the United States Justice Department. And Federal marshals are parked under the pecan trees that shade the Bowens' modest home at the end of a dirt road, protecting the family from threats that their's will be the next place to burn.

But on deeper inspection, these stock characters and plot from a bygone era give way to the here-and-now, to the stirrings of the New South. Even in this east Alabama backwater, where people in power unapologetically patronize blacks and blacks learn early not to speak their mind, the two races govern together, go to the same school, live next door to each other and even date and marry with little public opprobrium.

Ms. Bowen's relationship with a white boy and the marriage of her white father and black mother are not extraordinary events in Wedowee, say many of the more than three dozen people interviewed here.

"Black and white kids ride to the Dairy Queen together, they go to ball games and most people don't think anything of it," said Mayor Terry Graham. "It's prevalent, it occurs, it happens. The red lights don't all quit working when an interracial couple drives through town. This is 1994. We're out in the country, but we get TV. We know what's accepted." THE CLASH A Taboo Subject Ignored No Longer

As with so many taboos in American society, interracial dating is tolerated best when it is not discussed. Mr. Humphries insisted upon talking about it, at a February assembly that he called after two violent incidents, a fight between black and white girls that seemed inspired by a cross-racial romance and the confiscation of a .38-caliber pistol, the first gun ever found at the 680-student school, from one of the boys involved in the original dispute.

Many details of that assembly are under dispute, but not Mr. Humphries's conviction that the prom ought to be canceled, for fear of violence, if any student planned to bring a date of another race, a decision that was reversed by the

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superintendent the next day. Ms. Bowen was one of several students who told Mr. Humphries she had such a date, and she asked the principal whom he suggested a girl with a white father and black mother choose as an escort.

By her account, the principal said her parents had made a "mistake" in having her. Mr. Humphries has denied the accusation but has declined further comment because of pending litigation against him and the school district by the Justice Department. The department's case, one of several Federal challenges to Wedowee's compliance with a 1970 desegregation plan, was filed after the Bowen incident and is scheduled for trial in October, if mediation fails. An Iron Hand

Mr. Humphries had ruled Randolph County High School with an iron hand from its integration 25 years ago to its destruction last week.

To whites, the ruddy-faced, white-haired principal seemed a bulwark against anarchy, a strong leader who used the paddles in his office to turn boys into men and to keep the violence common elsewhere out of their school. But most blacks considered him a vestige of the Old South, chosen so whites would not feel threatened by integration and reprimanded by the Federal Education Department in 1989 for reserving his harshest punishment for their children.

The black parents, in keeping with the old social code, usually swallowed their grievances, until the recent outburst by Mr. Humphries, who came of age in the almost entirely white Sand Mountain region of northeast Alabama. The area is also near the home of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teen-agers who were accused in 1931 of raping two white girls and of whom eight were sentenced to death, sentences that were overturned.

But the insult Mr. Humphries was accused of leveling at the mixed-race girl tapped a vein of anger among blacks, who account for about a third of the town's population and 38 percent of the school's.

That anger "was like a bomb that exploded," said Beverly Myers, the daughter of a leading minister here, and it quickly created a fledgling political movement. Now the blacks of Wedowee (pronounced wih-DOW-ee) are plotting strategy over eggs,

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grits and ham, crowding into school board meetings, organizing alternative schools in church basements and expressing their views to national civil rights organizations and the Federal authorities.

"There was a lot of hidden racism here before the incident," said the Rev. Henry Sterling, a black pastor who is a leader of the protests. "But you could pass through and not know the tension. There wasn't a problem as long as blacks stayed in their place. But now the blacks have risen up and it has drawn a line through the middle of the community."

That sudden militancy has bewildered whites, who mistook the polite smiles of their neighbors for contentment.

Take the Mayor, Mr. Graham, who is still something of an outsider in Wedowee 14 years after his arrival from Atlanta to marry a local girl and start a construction business. A voice of reason here in recent days and the man who rescued a black cameraman from an apparent attack, captured on videotape, by Mr. Humphries and several other white men the night of the fire, even Mayor Graham said he was totally taken aback by the level of black anger.

"There were more black people who felt their kids didn't get a fair shake than I was aware of," Mr. Graham said, noting that the two black members of the seven-member City Council never said a word about racial problems until after the Bowen incident and then were adamant that the principal should be fired.

"That lack of communication ----," he continued. "Whether people felt like they wouldn't be listened to or put it off due to a lackadaisical attitude, I don't know. But we need to make the necessary changes so all people feel they're part of the system." THE CONCERNS Bolder Blacks, Defensive Whites

The blacks here agree that their complaints about Mr. Humphries were mostly kept private, rarely known to the community and often not even discussed among themselves. But when he drew national attention, they felt emboldened.

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"All those parents from years and years back suddenly said, 'We got Humphries and we're going to jump on him with both feet,' " said Charlotte Clark-Frieson, the sole black member of the six-member Randolph County School Board and president of the county chapter of the N.A.A.C.P.

Fueling the black anger, Ms. Clark-Frieson said, was the way the board and the larger community closed ranks around the principal. After a brief suspension, during which 100 townspeople drove down Main Street hollering in his support, the board re-instated Mr. Humphries.

"Even those of us who knew we had a problem with the principal still thought we didn't have a problem with the school board or the community as a whole," said Ms. Clark-Frieson, who has the booming voice and forceful manner of her late father, Wilkie Clark, a legendary Randolph County civil rights leader. "But now everyone was standing on their side of the fence and we could see there was racism in Wedowee." Divergent Views

The veil, in effect, had been pulled from their eyes. "The real rot of the system wasn't really known by the average black person in Wedowee," said the Rev. Emmett Johnson, pastor of the Grace Missionary Church, here, who has started a chapter of the Black Panther Militia. "They thought the whites cared about them."

The whites insist they do care, saying that both races lived in harmony until "outside agitators" came in and stirred things up.

"This is an all-blown-out-of-proportion situation," said Don Strain, an assistant principal and former football coach, as he worked this week at cleaning up what remained of the high school. "Outsider folks came in and pushed it, and the news media hasn't helped us at all. It was real quiet here till you all came."

What were race relations like here before? Mr. Strain was asked.

"There wasn't any," he said, turning brusquely to his work.

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The sheriff, Larry L. Colley, struck the same chord. "Oh, there may be one or two or three that's unhappy, but not blacks in general," he said. "We got some of the finest black folks you'll see anywhere. But those few -- and it's isolated people listening to these so-called leaders from out of town -- if you gave them a hundred-dollar bill they'd think they was mistreated cause it wasn't 150."

Joyce Sledge, a lifetime resident, spoke more with sadness than anger and harked back to a childhood working the fields and digging manure from the chicken house alongside black neighbors. "You all have misconstrued everything," Ms. Sledge said, the light of a street lamp showing tears on her cheeks late one evening after she had finished custodial tasks at the Alabama Power and Light Company, one of her three jobs.

"People here were born and raised with each other," Ms. Sledge continued. "They don't have no problems. Look down the street. Don't you all see that it's peaceful? It's a good place. And we'd still have a school if the media went home. You're the ones profiting. Can't you help make us whole again?"

Ms. Sledge's three children graduated from Randolph County High School, like their mother and grandmother before them, and they, too, are grieved by the turn of events here. Seventeen-year-old Tommie Sue has wept because black friends will no longer associate with her and have turned up on television making hostile remarks about whites.

"I never knew they felt that way," Tommie Sue told her mother. The Aftermath
Sense of Optimism, And Skepticism

Like other unwitting heroes and heroines of the civil rights movement, Ms. Bowen's life has been changed both for good and for ill. The \$25,000 settlement will pay for her college education, but she, too, reports friendships breached since her confrontation with Mr. Humphries. Now, Ms. Bowen said, she avoids girls whose parents paraded down Main Street in support of the principal. "Once I saw that," she said, "I didn't feel comfortable going over to spend the night."

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But also, Ms. Bowen said, some whites who had always been kind to her and her parents now scorn them. A close friend of her father, who once gave Ms. Bowen and her white boyfriend a tow when they ran out of gas, has been on television saying that blacks and whites should not be holding hands, Ms. Bowen said, and has hung a Confederate flag outside his house in a down-at-the-heels area north of town, less than a mile from her own.

Despite the stirring of once-buried racial tensions here, blacks report new optimism. Its source, they say, is the fact that they stood up for their rights and won at least one victory: The removal of Mr. Humphries from Randolph County High School and his reassignment to the central office, where he is to oversee the reconstruction of the burned school.

Mr. Humphries has been replaced by Wayne Wortham, a 44-year-old white man who has taught agriculture at the high school for years. Lucille Burns, a black woman who was a classmate of Mr. Wortham at Randolph County High, has been named an assistant principal. 'They Are Sending Checks'

The pastor, Mr. Sterling, an organizer here for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said these moves had encouraged blacks to press forward. "In the beginning, last spring, many people came to me and said it was a good thing we were doing trying to get Humphries out, but it would never succeed," he said. "But now they are calling up to join our movement. They are sending checks. Black churches that wouldn't open their doors to meetings are opening up."

Ms. Clark-Frieson and others are more measured in their expectations. Mr. Wortham, many say, is a protege of the former principal and could wind up his puppet. This week, for example, Mr. Wortham asked Mr. Humphries's help in reinstalling computers before the start of school later this month in 14 portable classrooms. As they worked, a school board member called and demanded that Mr. Humphries leave, lest his presence be viewed by the Justice Department as intransigence.

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Apart from the intricacies of school governance, Ms. Clark-Frieson said that what was happening here did not quite meet her definition of "momentous change." She will be cautious about declaring a new millennium until there are more black teachers, more black businesses, more black police, until the power centers of Wedowee looks more like the structure she builds on the restaurant table as she talks: A dollop of pepper sprinkled atop a mound of salt.

"It's going to take another 100 years to straighten Wedowee out," she said. "We have a lot of hillbillies here who just don't know that mainstream society has gotten beyond this sort of thing."

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