

Hazel Smith's Story

In class at the moment we are studying *The Help*, a novel by Kathryn Stockett. *The Help* is based in the 1960s and discusses issues such as segregation and discrimination. Hazel Brannon Smith was a journalist in the 1960s who lived in Lexington and owned and edited the Lexington Advertiser.

The article, "Bombed, Burned and Boycotted" tells the story of Hazel Brannon Smith who won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize for her editorials.

The Lexington Advertiser is the only newspaper in Lexington a town that was 55 miles north of Jackson (Jackson is the setting of *The Help*). Hazel was told by a man that a meeting was going to be held one night at the Lexington elementary school. She assumed that he wanted publicity for the meeting but he said only men would be allowed to attend. He also said that he wanted Hazel's "cooperation" with something called a "Citizens' Council" to be organised that night. We can already see that we have discrimination showing already. The US Supreme Court had just weeks before handed down its landmark decision against school segregation. The Citizens Council said that they would work to maintain segregation in public schools using legal, nonviolent tactics. Hazel said to him that people can't live under fear and it will end up with all of us scared. Despite her protests the meeting was a success.

Members donated money to fund private, white-only schools in the country. The council said it would use "economic sanctions against any blacks who tried to break the colour barrier in the state and if any whites should oppose the Council's objectives..." it would place pressure on them. Their slogan seemed to be: "You are for us or against us. There is no middle ground" Hazel spoke out against it in her two weekly newspapers, which also made Hazel the Council's number one chief target. The council would always say that "if we buried our heads in the sand long enough, the problem would go away". It was the technique of the big lie, like Hitler: Tell it often enough and everyone will believe it. Well it finally got to the point where bank presidents and leading physicians were afraid to speak their own opinions because of this "monster among us". Hazel also stated that "Over the next fifteen years, the Councils influence will spread to the highest office in the state." Her newspapers were boycotted, bombed and burned, so a new

newspaper was organized in Lexington to put her out of business, her life was threatened and her poor husband lost his job.

Each Monday morning when the Advertiser came out, Council members would canvas the town in groups of two. They would always go into a store and confront the owner with "We see you had another ad in Hazel's paper this week". Hazel also came across that a small group who began a campaign to find someone who would come to Lexington and start a newspaper, it was published just long enough to be awarded a year's contract to print the proceedings of the monthly country board of supervisor's meetings. Hazel continued to publish the monthly proceedings without pay because she didn't want anyone to be forced to subscribe to a newspaper just to keep up with the supervisors.

During this time, she made up her mind that she was going to live in Mississippi for the rest of her life. So, one night at about 9 pm, Hazel and her husband Walter B. Smith finished that week's edition of one of our newly acquitted newspapers in Suburban Jackson. Smith had been fired as administrator of the local country hospital, all of sudden the phone rang, it was Hazel's shop foreman at the Advertiser. It turned out that those Council members in Lexington had decided to form a corporation and start publishing a new newspaper, they called it the Holmes Country Herald and they offered my foreman the job of editor. Hazel knew that this was just to put her out of business.

Hazel also explained how her life was always comfortable in Lexington, her two papers in Holmes Country were paid for, she also wore good clothes and drove a Cadillac convertible. Over time Hazel's business fell into huge debt, forcing her to mortgage her property. Hate leaflets were given out against her, her outdoor furniture was destroyed and her tree was set on fire even her personal life was at risk. Despite the potential danger, Hazel continued to write editorials, talking about inevitable change, The FBI even told her husband that there was a segregationist group was going to "kill her". Shortly after she appeared on the nationally television "Today" one of her newspapers were firebombed, the dark room and some photographic equipment was destroyed. A group called "Americans For the Preservation of the White Race" claimed responsibility.

Some weeks later a fire started in the press room of the Advertiser, causing minor damage. State fire officials determined that it was arson. The guilty party were never found, even during the entire time Hazel was there, not one person came up to say they were sorry for her loss. The era of terror and violence continued through the 1960s, but now the circle was complete. One of the high school boys who participated in the cross burning on her lawn recently came back to ask for Hazel's apology, he is now the head of a large government agency in Mississippi. Where Hazel buried her husband Smitty, who died in an accidental fall, our old enemies were there to express the sorrow at his death.

Hazel lived a life full of discrimination and bullying, she didn't deserve this and neither did her husband. Will it ever stop? I really hope one day we can finally have peace and love in our world.

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