



Jim Crow Blues

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Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Jim Crow (Jan., 2004), pp. 7-11, 58

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163654>

Accessed: 30-01-2017 03:00 UTC

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Jim Crow Blues

What the white South lost on the battlefields of the Civil War and during Reconstruction, it would largely retake in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In what has been called the Nadir of African American history, a new generation of black southerners shared with the survivors of enslavement a sharply proscribed and deteriorating position in a South bent on commanding black lives and black labor by any means necessary. The most intense years were between 1890 and the first Great Migration in the 1910s, but the seeds had been planted in the forcible overthrow of Reconstruction in the 1870s, and the Age of Jim Crow would span more than half a century.

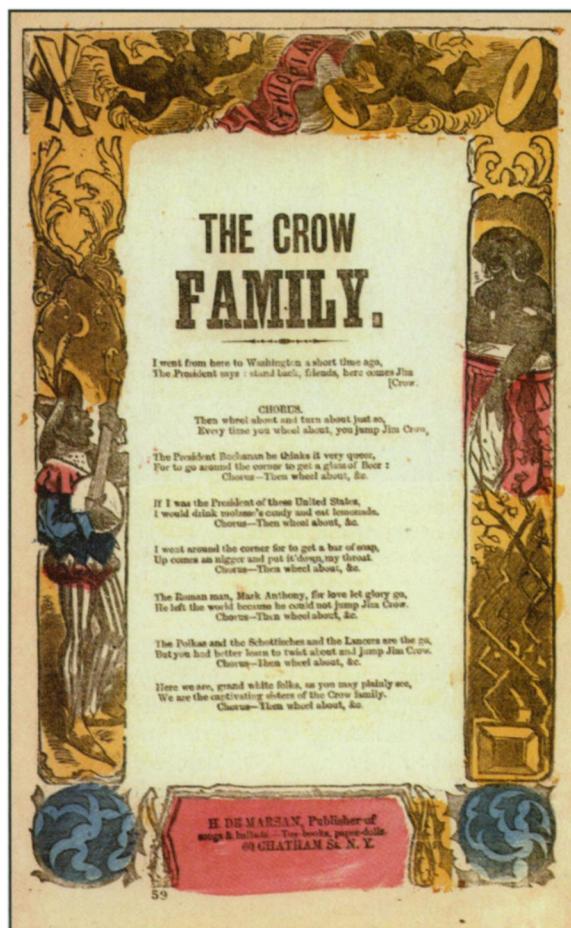
The term “Jim Crow,” as a way of characterizing black people, had its origins in minstrelsy in the early nineteenth century. Thomas “Daddy” Rice, a white minstrel, popularized the term. Using burnt cork to blacken his face, attired in the ill-fitting, tattered garment of a beggar, and grinning broadly, Rice imitated the dancing, singing, and demeanor generally ascribed to Negro character. Calling it “Jump Jim Crow,” he based the number on a routine he had seen performed in 1828 by an elderly and crippled Louisville stableman belonging to a Mr. Crow. “Weel about, and turn about/And do jis so;/Eb’ry time I weel about,/I jump Jim Crow” (1). The public responded with enthusiasm to Rice’s caricature of black life. By the 1830s, minstrelsy had become one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment, “Jim Crow” had entered the American vocabulary, and many whites, North and South, came away from minstrel shows reinforced in their distorted images of black life, character, and aspirations. How a dance created by a black stableman and imitated by a white man for the amusement of white audiences would become synonymous with a system designed by whites to segregate the races is less clear. Abolitionist newspapers employed the term in the 1840s to describe separate railroad cars for blacks and whites in the North. But by the 1890s, “Jim Crow” took on additional force and meaning to denote the subordination and

separation of black people in the South, much of it codified and much of it still enforced by custom, habit, and violence.

Fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the white South reached a consensus about how to resolve growing racial tensions. Approximately 90 percent of black Americans still lived in the South and the dominant racial attitudes were nothing less than a religious

and moral creed. Whites feared that a New Negro, born in freedom, undisciplined by slavery, and unschooled in racial etiquette, could not be trusted to stay in its place without legal force. In response to this fear, the white South constructed an imposing and extensive system of legal and extra-legal mechanisms between 1890 and 1915 designed to institutionalize the already familiar and customary subordination of black men and women. State after state denied blacks a political voice through disfranchisement, imposed rigid patterns of racial segregation—nicknamed “Jim Crow”—sustained an economic system—tenantry and sharecropping—that left little room for ambition or hope, and refused blacks equal educational resources—ultimately, they “enforced ignorance.” The criminal justice system operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command the labor and subordination of blacks. This was not the work of racial demagogues but of the “best people”—the most educated, the most refined, and the most respected.

Disfranchisement, mostly through state constitutional amendments, came to the South in the 1890s because the issue of political participation remained linked in the white mind with black assertiveness and social equality. Nearly every newspaper editorial on the “race problem,” nearly every speech of candidates for public office, and nearly every constitutional convention and state legislature insisted on linking social and political equality. If blacks voted with whites as equals, they would insist on living and sleeping with whites as equals, and no white southerner could contemplate such degradation.



“The Crow Family,” published by H. De Marsan in the nineteenth century, capitalizes on the popular image of Jim Crow. (Image from the American Song Sheets Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.)

Racial segregation was hardly a new phenomenon. Before the Civil War, when slavery had fixed the status of most blacks, there seemed to be no need for statutory measures segregating the races. The restrictive Black Codes, along with the few segregation laws passed by the first postwar governments, did not survive Reconstruction. What replaced them, however, was not racial integration but an informal code of exclusion and discrimination. Even the Radical legislatures during Reconstruction, in which blacks played a prominent role, made no concerted effort to force integration on unwilling and resisting whites, especially in the public schools. Constitutional or legislative provisions mandating integration were impossible to enforce. The determination of blacks to improve their position during and after Reconstruction revolved largely around efforts to secure accommodations that equaled those afforded whites. Custom, habit, and etiquette, then, defined the social relations between the races and enforced separation in many areas of southern life. Whatever the Negro's legal rights, an English traveler noted in Richmond in 1866, he knows "how far he may go, and where he must stop" and that "habits are not changed by paper laws" (2).

Segregation, even more than disfranchisement, came to be linked to white fears of black aggression and social equality. The railroad and the streetcar became early arenas of confrontation, precisely because in no other area of public life, except the polling place, did blacks and whites come together on such an equal footing. To resolve this growing problem, state after state began to designate cars for whites and blacks in the 1880s, in many instances making the "smoking" or second-class car the only car available to African American passengers. The growing assertiveness of blacks on the urban streetcars and trolleys, including their refusal to sit in separate sections or to give up seats to whites, prompted municipalities to take similar action. Some municipalities prescribed separate cars, but most settled on partitions that separated the races on the same car, with blacks relegated to the rear seats.

Although blacks had previously experienced segregation in various forms, the thoroughness of Jim Crow made it strikingly different. The white South successfully segregated the races by law and enforced custom in practically every conceivable situation in which whites and blacks might come into social contact: from public transportation to public parks, from the work place to hospitals, asylums, and orphanages, from the homes for the aged, the blind, deaf, and dumb to the prisons, from saloons to churches. Not only were the races to be kept apart in hospitals—including a special section for black infants requiring medical attention—but some also denied admission to blacks altogether. Laws or custom also required that black and white nurses tend only the sick of their own race. By 1885, most states had

already legally mandated separate schools. Where intermarriage and cohabitation had not been outlawed, states quickly moved to place such restrictions in law.

The demands made by Jim Crow worked their way into the daily routines of African American men and women. Pauli Murray remembered all too vividly how the signs had "screamed" at her from every direction: "FOR WHITE ONLY," "FOR COLORED ONLY," "WHITE LADIES," "COLORED WOMEN," "WHITE," "COLORED" (3). The signs instructed blacks where they could legally walk, sit, rest, eat, drink, and entertain themselves. They punctuated the southern landscape, appearing over the entrances to parks, theaters, boarding houses, railroad station waiting rooms, toilets, and water fountains.

Movie houses were becoming increasingly popular and Jim Crow demanded not only separate ticket windows and entrances but also separate seating, usually in the balcony—what came to be known as the "buzzard roost" and "nigger heaven." And blacks came to learn that in places where they were permitted to mix with whites—stores, post offices, and banks, for example—they would need to wait until all the whites had been served. Special rules also restricted blacks in shopping in white stores, forbidding women, for example, from trying on dresses, hats, and shoes before purchasing them.

Separation of the races often meant the total exclusion of black men and women from certain facilities. The expansion of recreation in the late nineteenth century mandated exclusion of blacks from most amusement parks, roller skating rinks, bowling alleys, swimming pools, and tennis courts. It was not uncommon to find a sign at the entrance to a public park reading, "Negroes and Dogs Not Allowed." Excluding blacks from parks not only deprived them of a recreational area but of free public entertainment. With few exceptions, municipal libraries were reserved for the exclusive use of whites; some cities chose to establish separate branches to serve black patrons.

In the early twentieth century, the growing availability of automobiles to both races precipitated a variety of measures. While some communities limited the access of black motorists to the public streets, others placed restrictions on where they might park. In much of the South, racial etiquette dictated that black drivers should make no effort to overtake buggies and wagons driven by whites on unpaved roads. Not only could such behavior be construed as "impudence" but the white passengers might be enveloped by a cloud of dust. "As a rule," Benjamin Mays recalled, "Negroes did not pass white people on either a dusty or a muddy road . . . I have been with my father when he apologized for passing a white driver by saying, 'Excuse me, Boss, I'm in a hurry.' Did this mean that my



Tenant farmers' home in Harmony Community, Putnam County, Georgia, ca. 1941. (Image courtesy of the Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Economic Information, National Archives and Records Administration.)

father mentally accepted or emotionally approved this cringing behavior? I doubt it . . . It was a technique of survival" (4). If the use of roads could be legislated, so could a town's sidewalks, where custom had always dictated that blacks step aside to provide ample room for whites.

In the urban South, segregated residential patterns were now legally sanctioned, making it difficult for blacks of any class to move into a white block and accelerating the appearance or growth of a distinct district designated as "darktown" or "niggertown." Whether by custom or ordinance, the newer and most rapidly growing cities tended to be the most segregated. By the mid-1890s, for example, racially exclusive sections characterized Atlanta, Richmond, and Montgomery. In some of the older antebellum communities, where house slaves and free blacks had lived near their white employers, black housing tended to be more widely scattered. Some whites thought laws or ordinances restricting where blacks could live were unnecessary, that public sentiment would expeditiously settle the issue. "In this white man's town," a resident of Greensboro, North Carolina, argued, "when an African proposed to 'move into' a white section, he was given to understand that it wouldn't do. And if he had moved in he would have moved out a great deal quicker—and a pile of ashes would have marked the house. That is what the White Man will do, law or no law, and that is understood" (5).

The legislation of Jim Crow affected all classes and ages, and it tended to be thorough, far-reaching, even imaginative: from separate public school textbooks for black and white children and Jim Crow bibles on which to swear in black witnesses in court to separate telephone booths, separate windows in the banks for black and white depositors, and Jim Crow elevators in office buildings, one for whites and one for blacks and freight. New Orleans went so far as to adopt an ordinance segregating black and white prostitutes—Atlanta confined them to separate blocks, while a Nashville brothel settled for a plan by which black prostitutes were placed in the basement and white prostitutes on the ground and upper floors.

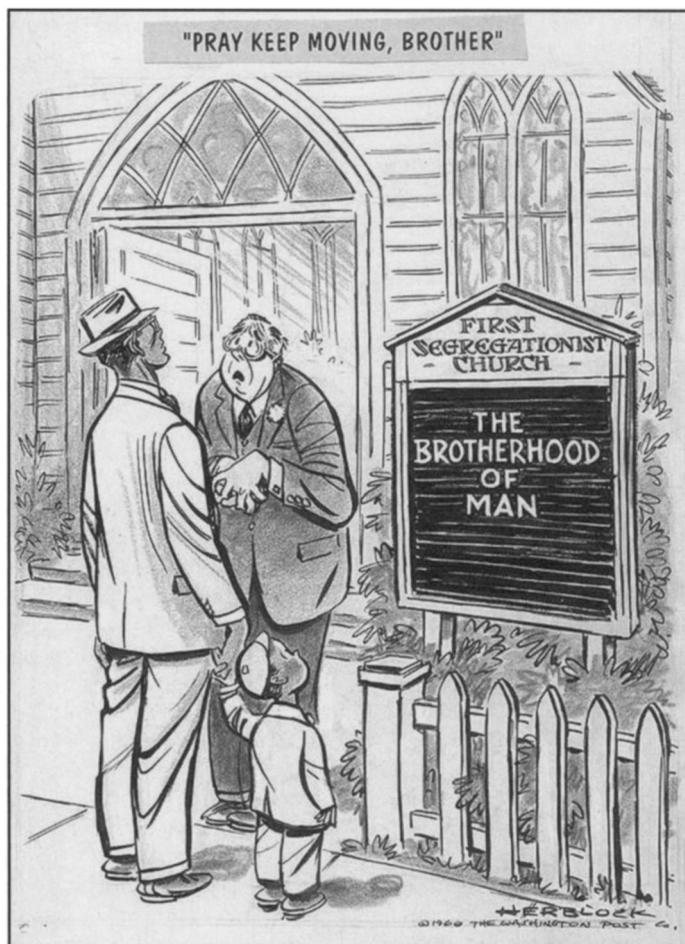
Even as the laws decreed that African American babies would enter the world in separate facilities, so blacks would occupy separate places at the end of their lives. The ways in which Jim Crow made its mark on the ritual of death could assume bizarre dimensions. Will Mathis, a convicted white felon, appealed to a judge that he be hanged at a different hour than Orlando Lester, a black man, and from a different set of gallows. The same plea was made by a white Tennessean convicted of the brutal murder of his wife. After he objected to going to the gallows with three black men, the authorities agreed to hang them first. Custom, if not ordinances, dictated that blacks and whites be buried in separate cemeteries.

The mechanics of repression, both the ritualized and institutionalized subordination demanded of blacks, exacted a psychological and a physical toll, shaping to an extraordinary degree day-to-day black life and demeanor. Perhaps the most difficult revelation to absorb was that color marked them as inferior in the eyes of whites, no matter how they behaved and whatever their social class.

Our seedy run-down school told us that if we had any place at all in the scheme of things it was a separate place, marked off, proscribed and unwanted by the white people. We were bottled up and labeled and set aside—sent to the Jim Crow car, the back of the bus, the side door of the theater, the side window of a restaurant. We came to know that whatever we had was always inferior. We came to understand that no matter how neat and clean, how law abiding, submissive and polite, how studious in school, how churchgoing and moral, how scrupulous in paying our bills and taxes we were, it made no essential difference in our place (6).

Black southerners were left to brood over the message imparted by the Jim Crow laws and the spirit in which they were enforced. For all African Americans, Jim Crow was a daily affront, a reminder of the distinctive place "white folks" had marked out for them—a confirmation of their inferiority and baseness in the eyes of the dominant population. The laws made no exception based on class or education; indeed, the laws functioned on one level to remind African Americans that no matter how educated, wealthy, or respectable they might be, it did nothing to entitle them to equal treatment with the poorest and most degraded whites. What the white South insisted upon was not so much separation of the races as subordination, a system of controls in which whites prescribed the rules of racial conduct and contact and meted out the punishments.

The workings of Jim Crow often seemed downright ludicrous, but blacks had no choice but to tolerate it, even as they privately mocked its absurdities, contradictions, and obscenities. It took little time for Jim Crow practices to become a standard item in black folklore and humor. Perhaps the only way to fathom the depths of white desperation and absurdity in keeping themselves apart from blacks was to subject their actions and rationales to the ridicule they deserved. One story told of a white deacon in Mississippi entering his church only to find a Negro. "Boy," he called out, "What you doin' in here? Don't you know this is a white church?" The black man quickly explained, "Boss, I only just got sent here to mop up the floor." The response—and more importantly the manner in which it was rendered—reassured the



"Pray Keep Moving, Brother." (Reprinted in *Herblock: A Cartoonist's Life* [Time Books, 1998]. Image courtesy of the Herb Block Foundation and the Library of Congress.)

deacon, "Well, that's all right then. But don't let me catch you prayin'" (7). Still another story involved an elderly black man who managed to talk his way out of a traffic citation by telling the judge, "Lord, boss. I sho' thought them green lights was for the white folks and the red lights was for us cullud folks" (8).

The demands of the white South for black subordination often found expression in intimidation and outright terror. "Every Negro in the South," John Dollard observed in 1937, "knows that he is under a kind of sentence of death; he does not know when his turn will come, it may never come, but it may also be any time" (9). Between 1880 and 1968, nearly five thousand blacks met their deaths at the hands of white terrorists, better known as lynch mobs. As many if not more were quietly murdered in isolated counties and dumped into rivers and creeks. Between 1890 and 1917, some two to three black men and women were hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered each week. The offenses that precipitated lynchings related less to sex-related crimes than to questions of racial etiquette and economic competition—and all too often, an observer concluded, "There was just an assumption that you had to have a lynching every now and then to preserve equitable race relations" (10). The victims, men and women, sometimes entire families, were mostly young, those said by whites to have been born into the false teachings of Reconstruction and who had not yet learned the rituals of deference and submission.

Nothing so dramatically underscored the cheapness of black life in the South. "In those days it was, 'Kill a mule, buy another. Kill a nigger hire another,'" a black man remembered. "They had to have a license to kill anything but a nigger. We was always in season" (11). What was strikingly new and different by the late nineteenth century was the sadism and exhibitionism that characterized white violence. The ordinary modes of punishment no longer satisfied the emotional appetites of the crowd. The execution became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture, mutilation, and death, a voyeuristic spectacle prolonged as long as possible—once for seven hours—for the benefit of the crowd, with severed bodily parts distributed as favors and souvenirs. The brutalities meted out exceeded the most vivid of imaginations.

Excursion trains brought thousands on a Sunday afternoon in 1899 to Newman, Georgia, to see Sam Hose, a black man, burned alive, but only after his ears, toes and fingers were cut off and passed to the crowd as souvenirs, his eyes gouged, his tongue torn out, and his flesh cut in strips with knives; afterwards his heart was cut out and sliced. The crowd fought over the souvenirs and one of the lynchers was reported to have immediately left for the state capitol hoping to deliver to the Governor a slice of Sam Hose's heart. His severed knuckles were prominently displayed in the window of an Atlanta grocery store.

The examples abounded and the details could numb the mind and deaden the senses. Most disturbingly, the men and women who tortured, dismembered, and murdered in this fashion or who stood by as passive spectators were ordinary people—merchants, farmers, laborers, machine operators, teachers, doctors, lawyers, policemen, students. They were family men and women, churchgoing folk who came to believe that

keeping black people in their place, whether by statutes or by terror, was nothing less than pest control, a way of combating an epidemic or virus that if left unchecked would be detrimental to the health and security of the community. This was not the outburst of crazed fiends or uncontrolled barbarians but the triumph of a belief system that defined one person as less human than another.

No matter how many whites deplored lynching and terrorism, they often shared the racial views that fed the violence. Historians miseducated generations of Americans, interpreting the past in such a way as to justify the South's denial of constitutional rights to blacks. The newly emerging social sciences and reputable scholars validated theories of black degeneracy, cultural and intellectual inferiority, and genetic and hereditary deficiencies, providing scholarly footnotes to traditional racist assumptions and helping to justify on "scientific" grounds a complex of racial laws, practices, and beliefs. School textbooks taught the superiority of Anglo Saxons and disparaged blacks as primitive and inferior, the least civilized of the races. Popular literature, newspaper caricatures, commercial products, minstrel shows, and vaudeville depicted a race of buffoons and half-wits, reinforcing and comforting whites in their racial beliefs and

practices. And with *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the cinema did more than any historian to explain the "Negro problem" to the American people—the dangers, vividly depicted on the screen, posed by a race freed from the restraints of slavery.

Between 1890 and World War I, blacks responded to the new Jim Crow laws by organizing boycotts of streetcar lines in more than twenty-five cities in every state of the former Confederacy. The boycotts varied in effectiveness, ranging in length from a few weeks to as long as two or three years, and in a few places resulted in "crippling" losses for the transit companies and even a temporary suspension of the Jim Crow ordinance. Blacks walked, they mobilized

private carriages, drays, and hacks, and in several cities, protestors developed informal transit systems and companies. Lucy Rucker recalled a childhood in Atlanta in which she walked to school every day rather than ride on the segregated streetcar. "If you can't get the same accommodations," her father told her, "you're going to walk." Non-compliance with Jim Crow in this family became a matter of self-pride. "We didn't ride the streetcar; we did not go to the theater. And any place where it was segregated, we didn't go" (12).

Although the boycotts and protests energized black communities, they altered neither white attitudes nor the "gratuitous insult" of Jim Crow. Few of the boycotts could be sustained for very long, and blacks lacked the financial resources necessary to run competing lines. In the absence of community-organized protests, blacks increasingly focused their energies on improving segregated facilities, trying to make them the equal of their white counterparts. A number of black spokesmen made it clear they did not wish to impose their presence where it was unwanted by whites, but they resented paying first-class fares for second-class accommodations. The idea was not so much to end racial separation as to eradicate inequality. Not until World War II would individual black men and women in substantial numbers challenge Jim Crow laws by violat-

**We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.**

**Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.**

**—Paul Laurence Dunbar,
Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896)**

ing them, sitting and refusing to leave their seats in the white-only compartment, risking forcible ejection, injuries, jail, and fines. And nearly half a century would have to pass before the very foundations of Jim Crow were confronted directly by an organized mass movement.

Like so many of the segregation statutes, the law enacted by Louisiana in 1890 forbade any railroad passenger to enter "a coach or compartment to which by race he does not belong." Homer Plessy, a light-skinned black, claiming the statute violated his rights under the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, chose to challenge it in court. After purchasing a first class ticket on the East Louisiana Railway from New Orleans to Covington, he took a vacant seat in a whites-only car. Not heeding the demand that he leave that car, Plessy was forcibly ejected and placed in the parish jail of New Orleans.

In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the United States Supreme Court, by an overwhelming eight to one vote, rejected Plessy's appeal and found no problem with accommodations that were "equal but separate." The majority opinion embraced popular views on race. "Social prejudices," wrote Justice Henry B. Brown for the majority, may not be "overcome by legislation," and legislative bodies were "powerless to eradicate racial instincts." Rejecting the idea that "the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority," Justice Brown observed, "If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it." Equal rights, in any event, did not require "an enforced commingling of the two races," and any effort to force such commingling would only exacerbate race relations. "If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane." The doctrine of white supremacy could not have been enunciated more clearly. Ironically, the lone dissent came from John Marshall Harlan, a southern justice and son of a slaveowner. By permitting the states to regulate civil rights "solely upon the basis of race," he argued, the Court had deprived black men and women of equal protection before the law (13). It would require another fifty-eight years for a majority of the Supreme Court to agree.

The decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* was less than dramatic in its impact. For most black southerners, it simply underscored and reinforced what they already knew from personal experience—that the quality of their lives and freedom depended on the whims, will, and toleration of a majority of whites in their locality or state. The court's decision, along with the elaborate structure of Jim Crow, remained in force for more than half a century, as did the reality of separate and unequal treatment.

Through the first three decades of the twentieth century, the mechanisms that regulated the place of black men and women remained mostly intact. No wonder the cynicism and questioning ran so deep in the black community during World War II. How could white Americans express outrage over the plight of Jews while remaining indifferent to the lynching and brutalization of black Americans? How could a Jim Crow army fight for a free world? How could black Americans fight abroad in defense of freedoms denied to them at home? The questions only grew more insistent as the war progressed. The patriotic hype and sloganeering found no ready acceptance in black America. "Fight for what? . . . This war doesn't mean a thing to me. If we win I lose, so what?" A black youth about to be inducted into the Army exclaimed, "Just carve on my tombstone, 'Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man'" (14).

Perhaps nothing illustrated more graphically or symbolically the hypocrisy of the democratic slogans under which the United States fought than the sign appearing in all the Charleston, South Carolina, buses under a large red "V for Victory" emblem:

VICTORY DEMANDS YOUR COOPERATION. IF PEOPLES
OF THIS COUNTRY'S RACES DO NOT PULL TOGETHER,

VICTORY IS LOST. WE, THEREFORE, RESPECTFULLY
DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION TO THE LAWS and CUSTOMS
OF THE STATE IN REGARD TO SEGREGATION. YOUR
COOPERATION IN CARRYING THEM OUT WILL MAKE
THE WAR SHORTER and VICTORY SOONER. AVOID FRIC-
TION. BE PATRIOTIC. WHITE PASSENGERS WILL BE
SEATED FROM FRONT TO REAR: COLORED PASSEN-
GERS FROM REAR TO FRONT.

To look at the black experience during World War II is to discern few changes in the interlocking mechanisms governing race relations or in the dominant racial attitudes of white Americans.

The Jim Crow's car's still dirty.
The color line's still drawn.
Yet up there in Washington
They're blowing freedom's horn! (15)

And yet, in some significant and far-reaching ways—in the ways the war dramatized the disparity between the democratic rhetoric and racial practices, increased, even revolutionized black consciousness and expectations, in the heightened racial tensions, in the thousands of instances in which individual black men and women violated or challenged Jim Crow, and in the ways military service abroad gave black soldiers a new perspective on the provincial nature of their segregated society at home—World War II marked a shift in the relationship of African Americans to American society.

Nearly a century after the Civil War, on new battlefields—Montgomery, Selma, Birmingham, Jackson, New Orleans, Little Rock, among others—another struggle would be fought over the meaning of freedom in America. This time it would be fought in the context of the experience of World War II, a new generation of black Americans, a rapidly changing world, and a new climate of political necessity that would force the United States as a leader of the free world to reassess the traditional position of inferiority assigned to black people. More than a million black Americans had fought a war to make the world safe for democracy. After the war, even larger numbers developed new strategies and ideologies to make the United States safe for themselves. No longer did they feel the need to contain their anger, or to veil their feelings:

I feel my hell a-risin', a-risin' every day;
I feel my hell a-risin', a-risin' every day;
Someday it'll bust this levee and wash the whole wide
world away . . . (16).

The conviction grew that the way it used to be did not have to be, and black men and women would give voice to that feeling in ways white America could no longer ignore. □

Endnotes

1. As quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998) xiv.
2. David McCrae, *The Americans at Home: Pen and Ink Sketches of American Men, Manners, and Institutions*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, UK, 1870). See also Howard N. Rabinowitz, "From Exclusion to Segregation: Southern Race Relations, 1865-1890," *Journal of American History* 63 (September 1976): 325-50, and Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 197.
3. Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (New York: Harper, 1956), 268.
4. Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 26. On the etiquette associated with automobiles, see Neil R.

See Litwack / Page 58 ▶

bered questioning as a child the distinction between schooling for blacks and even the poorest whites and learning that “in that time, in the prejudiced way, they didn’t want blacks to get educated.”

The film conveys the texture and tone of life under Jim Crow through personal accounts as well as visual renderings. Dr. L. C. Dorsey talks about two local police officers, known as “Good Rockin’ Flemin” and “Good Rockin’ Floyd,” who routinely brutalized and harassed local blacks, effectively keeping most of them out of town. Among the most evocative episodes is a film clip, probably from the late 1950s, documenting an encounter between a group of four white men and one black man. The white men command “You tell these people, haven’t we been your friend for years?” One strains to read the facial expressions and movement of the black man as he grins, averts his eyes, mumbles a faint yes. It is a compelling enactment of the ritual of humiliation, white arrogance, and gestured subservience that marked the segregation system.

As Dr. Dorsey suggests, some people were beaten down by this cruel system, others developed strategies of resistance and accommodation. Mae Bertha Carter was notable for her willingness to stand up and fight. As soon as she had the opportunity, Carter enrolled her children in the public schools—the Carters were the only black family in their community to do so. “Somebody had to do it if it was in them,” Carter explained. “It was in me.” She understood that the freedom of choice plan was designed as a way to get around the desegregation order “because they think they know black folk so well.”

The experience of the first black students to enter previously all white schools is recounted here in a mosaic of memory from the youngest Carter child—who entered the first grade in 1965, to the oldest. The ways in which whites remembered the experience is highlighted as well. One white woman, looking back across the years, still seemed bewildered. Why would the Carters want to attend Drew High School when they would be excluded from all of the social events that defined the high school experience for many young people? “For me,” Gloria Carter remembered, “it was [about] getting to go to a better school . . . we were excited.”

The excitement quickly dissipated in the face of daily taunts, abuses, physical assaults, and ostracism. Ruth Carter seeks words to describe her feelings about the experience, “angry, sad, sick, depressed, everything,” Stanley Carter recalls, “I don’t even want to think about lunch time.” He and his brother and sisters avoided the cafeteria, a crowded

space where, if they sat down, white students scattered “as if a bomb had been dropped.” During the lunch period, they retreated to the outdoors, even on the coldest winter days. At A. W. James Elementary School, the teacher decided that no student should be required to sit near third-grader Pearl Carter for more than a week at a time. So she rotated them, and each time, the white students would pull their chairs and desks as far away from the eight year old girl as possible. Very few white students broke from the pack to reach across the chasm of race. Janet Free recalled how she and her sister, elementary students, tried to befriend Beverly and Deborah Carter. “Our hearts went out to them because they were children just like us.”

While the personal cost was not insignificant, in the end, the story of the Carter children is one of achievement and success. With the support of their parents and a small network of civil rights activists, they obtained an education that would not have been possible less than a decade earlier and went on to successful careers. But the last part of the film recounts what has happened to the Drew public schools since the 1970s. It is a tale of white flight to private academies, of the resegregation of public schools, and of starved budgets and crumbling facilities. As one local white citizen explained, in a regretful tone, the vast majority of white parents never gave integration a chance; they were unwilling or incapable of considering how it would benefit their children and the community at large. As veteran civil rights activist W. W. Law remarked, there was the “same kind of reluctant submission to change as after the Civil War.”

The Intolerable Burden offers a sober assessment of the cost in human lives and potential for a society that, while squeezing public education, devotes increasing resources to prison construction. Drew is a metaphor for many communities, illustrating the connections among a failing public school system, economic underdevelopment, and a growing prison population of disproportionately young black men. “Everything has changed; nothing has changed,” was how one person summed up the aftermath of the civil rights movement. In the spirit of Mae Bertha Carter, who continued to fight for the education of all children until her death five years ago, this film implicitly asks who has it in them to do something about it. □

Patricia Sullivan, associate professor of History and African American Studies at University of South Carolina, most recently wrote *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years* (2003).

▼ Litwack / From page 11

- McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 11.
5. McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 11; *Norfolk Journal & Guide* March 27, 1915, Hunter Scrapbooks, Box 13 (1871-1928), Charles N. Hunter Papers, Duke University Library; Thomas Bailey, *Race Orthodoxy in the South* (New York: The Neal Publishing Company, 1914), 79; and Donald L. Grant, *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 170.
 6. Murray, *Proud Shoes*, 269-70.
 7. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 311-12.
 8. Ibid.
 9. John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, Publication for the Institute of Human Relations (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1937), 359.
 10. McMillen, 224.
 11. Ruth Hill, ed., *The Black Women Oral History Project*, 10 vol. (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991), VIII:282, 287.

12. Ibid.
13. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
14. Earl Brown, “American Negroes and the War,” *Harper’s* April 1942, 546. Horace Clayton, “Fighting for White Folks,” *Nation* 155 (September 26, 1942): 268.
15. Popular song.
16. Anonymous blues musician.

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