

Chapter 16

The Falsity of "Separate but Equal"

By Ray Sprigle

This thing of bald and unashamed discrimination against little black American citizens in the matter of education can get really brazen. Witness the situation down here in District No.4, Madison county, Miss. What these lordly exemplars of white supremacy have done down here in the Delta country is to use the tax money paid into the county treasury by Negro property owners to build themselves a magnificent school plant at the Negroes' expense.

What the Negroes got out of their tax money and the usual state contribution for school purposes is right here in front of us, hidden away on this back country road, a desert to dust in summer and a morass of mud in winter.

This school is new. And that's all that can be said for it. When the white folks took Negro tax money and built themselves their fine school, they at least built a new school for the Negroes. But not until there was a storm of protest from all over the state - from whites and blacks alike.

The white folks of District No. 4 were going to let the little Negro pupils continue to pick up what education they could in their two schools, one in a church and the other in a lodge room.

Pay 90 Percent of Taxes

In this school district there are four Negroes to every white. That, however, is common in the South.

The unusual part is this: The Negroes own about 90 percent of all the land in the district and pay 90 percent of the taxes. And they haven't one single little word to say about how their tax money is spent.

This new school building is just a big square box with two partitions breaking it up into four rooms. Only one of the rooms has desks. They are hammered together out of the scrap lumber left over from the building of the school. The scraps were picked up out of the mud. The mud is still on the desks. In the other three rooms there are no desks - not even muddy ones - just home-made benches and tables. There is one toilet for both boys and girls. It leans drunkenly in the wind.

Now let's go back up to the highway to take a look at what the white folks built for their children with Negro money.

Here you've got a really up-and-coming school plant. Five buildings designed by a good architect. There's the main school building, an agricultural building, a vocational school building, a gymnasium and a beautiful little bungalow for the principal. And nine-tenths of every

stick and brick in it paid for by the despised and hated Negro. What price "separate but equal" now?

Teachers' Pay Rates

Oh, in passing - let us not forget that the Negro teachers in that bare box back in the country get from \$55 to \$90 a month - there are four of them. Only the principal gets the \$90. Minimum salary for white teachers in Madison county is \$150 a month. There are 15 of them in the white folks' school.

And why is the Negro school away back there on that dirt road? Well, when the white folks finally decided to open their hearts and the Negroes' purses they called a meeting of the tax-paying colored folk to discuss the prospective new school. One young Negro property owner got up and broached the matter of location. A colored church organization offered a couple of acres on the highway for the new school. And free.

Somewhat shamefacedly the white school superintendent told the group:

"I guess I might as well tell you that the location is all settled. Mr. Pearl Hawkins wants it down by his cotton gin. So that's that."

And that was that. "Mr. Pearl Hawkins" is "The Man" in District No.4, one of the big plantation owners - and white of course. He wanted the school near his acres and his cotton gin because that makes it easier for him to keep his hands. Negroes throughout the South are literally desperate for education for their children. Given a school in the neighborhood they'll put up with almost any working conditions, no matter how bad. So in Madison county many of the little Negro kids walk six miles to school every morning - and six miles home at night.

Discrimination Is Universal

Discrimination against the Negro school child in Mississippi is universal and vicious. Many counties do not even pretend to provide school buildings for Negro children. In rich Bolivar county in the fabulous Delta country there are 121 Negro schools. Only 31 operate in school buildings. The others stumble along in churches, lodge halls and even garages.

Bulk of the state's school budget comes from a 2 percent sales tax. A million Negroes - half the population - pay their share of that sales tax. But, believe it or not, the white masters of Mississippi pay more just to haul their white children to their schools than they spend on the entire statewide Negro school system. The figures run 31/2 million dollars to haul white children - only 31/3 million to educate the little Negroes.

Nearly half the state's 477,000 Negro children of school age have never even been enrolled in school. The southern states have compulsory school laws, just as in the North. But no state enforces the law as regards Negro children.

Trudge Along Dusty Highways

In Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, I saw groups of bright-faced, neat, little Negro children trudging the dusty or dangerous highways morning and evening to and from their tumble-down schools. From time to time the swirling clouds of dust thrown up by school buses would engulf them. The children in those buses were white.

In the South white children ride to school. The black ones walk one mile, two miles - often enough, six miles. Only in four or five counties in Georgia and the same in Mississippi are there any buses for Negro school children. They walk.

"Separate but equal" tell that to a million little black Americans struggling for an education against almost insuperable odds.