

Chapter 18

A Leaf out of the Jim Crow Book

By Ray Sprigle

Here and there and now and then in the deep South you'll find a Negro with a shrewd Yankee instinct for business, who is smart enough to turn the Jim Crow obsession of the southerner to his own substantial profit. And quite frequently that profit stems not from his own oppressed people, but from the lordly white man. I know at least one Negro who is an operator in a big way in downtown Atlanta business property. He works through a dependable white lawyer and his name rarely if ever appears in a transaction. Usually you'll find Negro real estate operators dealing in white occupied property have to work that way.

But in one up and coming Georgia city we found a Negro real estate man who works it exactly in reverse. He's one of the richest men, black or white, in his county. We stopped over with him one night. Nowhere but in the South with its inviolable Jim Crow tradition could you hear a success story like this one.

Buying on a Shoestring

"These crackers who insist upon buying farm or city property on a shoestring are almost bound to get behind on their mortgage payments after they have laid down all their ready cash," he told us.

"Then they come to me to borrow money after they've been turned down by white bankers and mortgage companies. I tell them the truth, that I can't lend money to a white man because I'd never be able to collect if I had to sue in a Georgia court. They know it as well as I do. But I tell him that if he wants to sell his equity, I'll buy at a substantial discount, of course. I don't fool him there, either. He knows he can either take a small cash settlement from me or walk off his place without a nickel to his name. Then I pay off the mortgage and tile property's mine.

"Now I know it would be worth my life to try to sell to a Negro, even if I could find one crazy enough to buy. But I just sit back, hold the property, do nothing and say nothing. It's not long before the white people in the neighborhood begin to get restless. The mere fact that a Negro owns property in the neighborhood is bad for white morale. Worse, it's bad for property values. So before long somebody shows up wanting to buy. I sell. At my price. And you can be sure I never cheat myself."

Proudest Realty Exploit

His proudest exploit, however, is a Florida deal he put over. He bought a clouded title for a pittance to help out a friend. Then he got to nosing around for a profit. He cleared the title without too much difficulty. He drove down to see his newly-acquired real estate and found that it lay directly in the rear of the somewhat pretentious estate of a Florida judge.

"Here, too, a threat - even implied - to sell to Negroes, would have been suicidal," grinned the black Wallingford

"But there was nothing in law, tradition or custom that said I couldn't sell to a white man - any white man. So I just scouted around the community until I found the meanest, drunkenest, most shiftless cracker in 20 miles. And the one with the biggest family of tatterdemalion kids. He was famous for worthlessness which suited me fine.

"I asked him if he wanted to make himself a ten-spot just for taking a 10-minute automobile ride with his family. He did. So I picked an afternoon when I knew the judge would be sitting on his front porch enjoying his mint julep. I drove up to my house and unloaded the cracker family. I marched them through the house and back again and loaded them into the car under the astonished eyes of the judge.

Phone Call From Judge

"You'll never get a better buy," I assured them loud enough for the judge to hear. I took them home, slipped the cracker his ten and then kept right on going over the Florida line.

"Day or so later I got a telephone call from the judge. I'd seen to it that he didn't have any trouble getting my phone number.

"Look here, you black so and so," was his opening gambit. After that he really warmed up.

"You sell or rent to them damn shiftless crackers, he assured me, and I'll come up there and shoot you dead. What do you want for that place?"

"I told him and you could have heard his screams of anguish for miles. I just kept on talking about what a valuable property it was and how I would have to wait for a more generous buyer. Finally he fought off apoplexy long enough to tell me:

"Make out your deed and send it along with a sight draft. And if I ever see you again I'll kill you."

Well, it was funny. But when I reminded him that the judge could very well kill him and never do a day for it, the joke lost a lot of -its savor.