

## Chapter 3

# Going South by Jim Crow Car

By Ray Sprigle

I quit being white, and free, and an American citizen when I climbed aboard that Jim Crow coach in Washington Union station. From then on, until I came up out of the South four weeks later, I was black, and in bondage not quite slavery but not quite freedom, either. My rights of citizenship ran only as far as the nearest white man said they did.

Not that that Jim Crow coach was particularly bad-when regarded solely as a railroad coach. In fact, it was surprisingly good. The reclining seats were comfortable. The wash room was really luxurious compared with those in some of the coaches I ride around home. Seats were numbered and reserved. There was no crowding.

But-even excellent accommodations are not going to reconcile intelligent, cultured Negroes to Jim Crow. My companion and I were having a little difficulty in finding the black section of the train. He encountered the daughter of an old friend of his, a handsomely-dressed, quite beautiful Negro girl, and asked where the Jim Crow coaches were.

"There's the things we'll ride in," she said with a contemptuous wave toward the two pieces of Jim Crow rolling stock. It developed that she was a school teacher from Harlem on her way home to visit her aged mother. (Weeks later we passed through the sunbaked, dusty, sprawling little town where the mother lived. There was a vast difference between that unkempt town and the fashionable, cultured-appearing girl from Harlem with upswept hair-do and latest doo-dads in the way of costume.)

Both coaches were filled. The crowd was like any other group of travelers one might encounter anywhere except, of course, that nearly everyone was on the decidedly brunette side. Everyone was courteous and quiet. Even the inevitable drunk who seems to be standard equipment on every railroad coach in the world was annoying only because he was so insistently polite.

o, early in the journey, some of the many absurdities-idiocies might be a better word-that mark the Jim Crow system began to develop. To get to the diner we had to traverse half a dozen Pullman coaches. My companion stopped to introduce me to at least three Negroes riding Pullman-a doctor from Atlanta, a minister and a businessman. And I was astonished to learn that Jim Crow doesn't go on a Pullman. If you've got the price you ride Pullman, no matter how black you are.

In the corridor of the dining car a long line of whites waited for vacant tables. My companion, leading the way, brushed unceremoniously past them.

"Oh, oh, now comes trouble, so early," I said to myself. But it was just that he knew the ropes and I didn't. There were no seats for white folks but at the end of the diner were two' tables curtained off from the rest of the car, and vacant. They were for us colored folks. So we. sat

down while the white folks stood. Just what protection that curtain affords the white folks I don't think that any living human has ever figured out. We could watch them eat and they could watch us eat. There weren't any curtains around the Negro waiters who served their food with black hands.

I don't know what kind of service the white folks got from those waiters. But ours was something right out of the old South. Our food arrived on the jump – promptly — and hot. Our waiter "sirred" us as I've never been "sirred" before.

Across from us a family group took over the other table. He was a navy petty officer-spick and span-and black. His wife was pretty and fashionably dressed. Their baby had everything hung on him that the magazines say a well-dressed baby ought to have. And then there was the baby's grandmother-also right out of the old South. She wore a turban just like the one in the pancake ads. I noticed that her hands were hard and knotted and gnarled. I was to see many hands like that on little old colored women in the weeks to come. They get that way from long hours on a hoe in the cotton fields.

### **Becoming an Alien People**

On our way back to our Jim Crow seats we pressed carefully through the queue of whites waiting to enter the diner. Then we staggered through the swaying Pullmans past the white folks but careful not to jostle or bump any of them.

Already I was in the pattern. Already I was experiencing the thing that was to grow upon me through the succeeding weeks. These whites already were a people entirely alien to me, a people set far apart from me and my world. The law of this new land I had entered decreed that I had to eat apart from these pale skinned men and women—behind that symbolical curtain. For 300 years these people had told each other, told the world, told me, that I was of an inferior breed, that if I tried to associate with them they would kill me.

Already I had begun to dislike them. It did no good to tell myself that I was white — or that I would be white again four weeks hence. I was beginning to think like a black man. Not that I wanted to ride with these whites, nor eat with them. What I resented was their impudent assumption that I wanted to mingle with them, their arrogant and conceited pretense that no matter how depraved and degenerate some of them might be, they, each and every one of them, was of a superior breed.

### **A Psychological change**

In weeks to come I was to become seriously concerned about the psychological change that was taking place in my thinking. There were to be nights when I had sat for hours listening to grim tales of injustice, and cruelty and the wanton shedding of innocent blood, that I began to be worried over the problem of turning my mind white again. To tell the truth, I doubt if I ever regain the satisfied, superior white psychology that I took South with me.

Came morning — and Atlanta. Now I had been briefed for days on my manners and behavior as a Negro. And I went wrong before I even got out of the Atlanta railroad station.

I was ahead of my companion and mentor since I was traveling light and he was laden with more bags than an actor. Through the front portal of the station I could see the line of waiting cabs. Eager to be helpful I hustled ahead, intent on staking claim to a cab.

"Wait a minute," I heard my friend call. "This way." I backtracked and he led me through a door branded "For Colored," to a small littered waiting room. Another door with the Jim Crow brand above it led outside. Here was no wide portico, no line of cabs. In fact, no cab. Not until you called one. I knew of course that white and Negro passengers must wait in separate waiting rooms in southern railroad stations. But I didn't know until then that there were black and white entrances to stations.

### **Just Police Inefficiency**

But my mistake gave my companion an idea. He led me around to the front of the station and we defiled the white folk's entrance by going through it. Nothing happened. So we tried it again. Still nothing happened.

"Well, why aren't we in jail? Looks like the white folks are easing up," I said to my companion.

He was actually disappointed. But his reaction was somewhat astonishing.

"Just another example of police inefficiency," he asserted. "There usually is an officer on duty at that front entrance with the sole duty of shooing Negroes around to the side entrance." My friend was all set for minor adventure and then the Atlanta police force let him down.

"Seriously though," he told me while we waited for our Jim Crow cab, ordinarily we'd have been stopped and told to go to the colored entrance. There'd have been no unpleasantness unless we had refused. They wouldn't even have called us 'nigger' as they would have a few years ago. But if you have any idea you can walk through the white folks' entrance to a railroad station—you just try it at any station in the South outside Atlanta. And I'll stand back and watch-and bail you out."

Politely I declined his challenge. That was the first, last and only time I disobeyed the white folks' law during all my stay in the South.

Finally our cab, with the "For Colored" legend that Georgia law requires on its door, arrives. Half an hour later we debark at the home of -my friend-the way I feel right now, my only friend in all the world-just off Auburn avenue, Atlanta's Black Broadway. Well — I'd asked for it. Now I was due to get it.