

Chapter 21

What Does the Negro Really Want?

By Ray Sprigle

All my life I've regarded Eliza's stunt of crossing the Ohio on the floating ice floes, with bloodhounds baying at her heels, as a pretty heroic adventure. Not any more. The night I came up out of the deep South in a Jim Crow bus, I'd have been glad to take a chance crossing on the ice if anything had happened to stall our jolting chariot on the Kentucky shore. And there'd have been no need of any bloodhounds to put me into high gear.

We rolled out of Kentucky across that old Ohio River bridge into Cincinnati - into safety and freedom and peace. Again I was free with all the rights of an American citizen. Again I was no, not white. Not yet. It wasn't that easy. Down South my friends had done too good a job of making me into a Negro.

For many days I'd been looking forward to an elaborate meal in a luxurious restaurant with fancy food and prices and service and attention. I found one. And then -take it or leave it-I didn't go in. I found a little lunch counter and ate there.

How Crossing Line Feels

I took a cab to the Hotel Sinton

My first cab in four weeks that didn't have "For Colored" on the door. And, safely delivered at the hotel, I hesitated again. So I went down a block, found a telephone, called the hotel, made a great point of the fact that I was a Post-Gazette man from Pittsburgh, asked for a room and got it.

I registered, talked fast, slid past the clerk as swiftly as possible and followed the bellhop.

I'll bet I know one thing that no other white man in America knows. That's how a white skinned Southern Negro must feel when he quits his race, "crosses over" and turns white.

On that bus trip across three states from Atlanta to Cincinnati, as usual, nothing much happened. Only that we Negroes had the least comfortable seats, ate in squalid cubbyholes -or not at all - and found our Jim Crow rest rooms filthy and evil.

Allowed to Stand Outside

Bus stations along the line were strictly Jim Crow. Usually we ate at a counter across a corner of the kitchen, right beside the food being cooked for the white folks. At the last station just before reaching Covington, there was no accommodation for us colored folk at all. But we were permitted to stand outside and watch the white folks eat. However, none of it bothered me in the least. I could have put up with anything. I was on my way back to the white world.

On that long bus trip North, as in all my sojourn in the South, in 4,000 miles of travel by Jim Crow train and bus and street car and by motor, I encountered not one unpleasant incident. Nobody called me "nigger." Nobody insulted me. Nobody pushed me off the sidewalk.

As to that last, however, I might mention that I gave nobody a chance. That was part of my briefing: "Don't jostle a white man. Don't, if you value your safety, brush a white woman on the sidewalk." So I saw to it that I never got in the way of one of the master race. I almost wore out my cap, dragging it off my shaven poll whenever I addressed a white man. I "sired" everybody, right and left, black, white and in between. I took no chances. I was more than careful to be a "good nigger."

Could Have Gathered Scars

True enough, this would be a far better story if I could show scars left by the blackjack of some Negro-hating small town deputy whom I'd failed to "sir." Or a few bullet holes, mementos of an argument with some trigger happy Atlanta motorman.

I could have gathered them all right. Just by getting "fresh" at the right time and place. But for me, no role as hero. I took my tales of brutality and oppression and murder at second hand. And was mighty glad to do so.

But if I were to become a Negro for four years or 40 years instead of a mere four weeks there's one thing to which I could never harden myself. That's the casual way in which these black friends of mine in the South refer to slavery. I have read my history, of course. I know that for 250 years slavery was a respected and respectable institution in the South. Less so for a shorter period in the North.

But to these people with whom I lived, slavery is no mere matter of history. They didn't learn about slavery from any book. They learned about human bondage and the lash and the club at their mother's knee. Most Southern Negroes, 65 or more, are the sons and daughters of slave parents.

Few former slaves are still living. They'd have to be well past 85 to know anything of it at firsthand. But sons and daughters of slaves are leaders of the Negroes in the South - and for that matter in the North, too.

Barbarism Still in Background

And when you hear a cultured, educated Negro, doctor, lawyer educator casually remark, "My mother was sold down from Virginia to a breeding plantation in South Georgia" - Well you realize that you're not so far away from barbarism after all.

That pattern of 250 years of slavery still endures in the South. For 250 years, for instance, it was a crime, in some places, to teach a slave to read and write. And looking at some of the Negro schools in the South, it must still be a crime.

Discrimination, denial of the franchise to the black man, the South's indifference to wanton murder of a Negro - all these, Negroes say, exist because the psychology of slavery still endures in the mind of the white South. Maybe that's what a Negro friend of mine, a \$20,000-a-year executive of a big corporation, had in mind when he told me before I started on this adventure:

"You're going to learn that it's hell to be a Negro in the South."

Final Word to White Man

One thing more as this chronicle draws to a close. I don't know if anybody in the South will read these articles. But if they do I hope no Negro gets killed or harmed because of them. No Negro that I talked to had any idea that he was going to be quoted. He thought he was just talking to a fellow black man from the North who wanted to find out how his people lived in the South. In many episodes related I have changed names and even locations. But where the story involves relations with the whites, the white man concerned is going to know that a Negro talked. I hope he'll have forbearance in his heart.

And finally too, one last word to the white man in the South from a Negro, even though a temporary one.

Don't be concerned that the Negro seeks to rise to the stature of manhood and American citizenship.

Don't worry about him defiling either your hotels or restaurants or, above all, your race. Not one Negro did I meet who wanted to associate with white folks. True, all of them condemned segregation bitterly. But as they talked on, it developed that it was discrimination rather than mere segregation that they hated. Every man and woman I talked to, field hand or educator, betrayed the fact that he wanted as little contact with the white world as possible.

But here are a few things with which, it seems to me no decent Southerner could quarrel.

Plea for the Franchise

Quit killing us wantonly just to try out a new gun, or to teach us that it's not good for us to try to vote, or just because you "don't like a damn nigger no how."

Next, let us exercise the franchise guaranteed us by the Constitution and the Supreme Court. You'll never see a Negro party in the South. You'll find that the Negro vote, when there is one, is going to split along the same lines as the white vote.

Give our children a decent chance at a decent education - the same kind of an education that you want for your children. And give our young men and women a chance for a university education - in law, medicine, engineering. We might even be of service to you.

Surely none of that is going to destroy the way of life of the white South. It probably won't even appreciably dent white supremacy.

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