

Chapter 17

Atlantic Ocean for White Folks Only

By Ray Sprigle

For three hot and dusty weeks and 3,000 hot and dusty miles I've been looking forward to Brunswick and Savannah; the broad white beaches of the Georgia coast and a couple days of ocean swimming.

All right - here are Savannah and Brunswick. Here are the broad white beaches. Here is the wide blue Atlantic Ocean. But there'll be no sea bathing for me. I've dragged those swim trunks all these miles for nothing.

And why? Because this is a strictly Jim Crow ocean and I'm black.

Along all the hundred miles of Georgia's coast line with its scores of beautiful island and shore beaches, there's not a single foot where a Negro can stick a toe in salt water. North and south, South Carolina and Florida have public and private beaches reserved for us black people. Not Georgia. Georgia is going to keep her share of the Atlantic pure and undefiled - and lily white.

Standard Fine Is \$50

And if you're black and you think that either I or Georgia is fooling about this thing - just try dunking yourself along Georgia's ocean strand. The resulting fine is standard - \$50 and costs. For trespass - no less. To get to the ocean you must cross someone's land. That's trespass. And that's \$50 and costs.

Last time anybody tried going to the mat with the sovereign state of Georgia on this issue was a couple of years ago when three young colored girls decided they'd strike a blow for the freedom of the seas. Rena Atkins, Winsor Roberts and Inez Walke of Brunswick donned bathing suits, hired a cab and went to a deserted section of the Glynn county waterfront.

They never even got their feet wet. A county policeman herded them back into their cab, directed the driver to take them to the police station and locked them up. They were in cells all day until a professional bondsman seeking a fee notified friends and put up bail. Next morning they were each fined \$50 and costs. Since then the Atlantic, around here at least, has been strictly white.

More recently the black folk of Savannah and Brunswick have been passing along another story about their Jim Crow briny deep. I didn't bother checking it because it isn't important except as it is so strikingly reminiscent of the jokes about Hitler that used to be current in Germany and the similar witticisms at the expense of Stalin, that come out of Russia now. And incidentally that faculty of laughing at their strutting overlords and their pretensions of superiority acts as a mighty efficient safety valve for the resentment that inevitably, now and then, must fill the Negro heart in the South. But to get on with the story.

Mangy Poodle Dunked

It seems that a poodle belonging to one of the rich society dames in the exclusive Sea Island Beach colony - white, of course had contracted a slight case of mange. Her veterinary suggested that daily salt water baths might ease the itch of the pooch. So the white lady ordered her maid to dunk the mangy poodle in the sea each morning. The maid obeyed, but after a few days of dog-dunking rebelled.

"I don't thing it's right," she tearfully told her mistress, "that I have to take that dog swimming every day and if I tried to go in myself I'd be arrested. And that dog's got mange and I haven't."

According to the story, the mistress dunked her dog herself after that, but she told the maid that she "found her attitude very unfortunate."

All this in Brunswick and Savannah, known as the "best Negro towns in the South," better even than Atlanta.

True enough the lot of the Negro in these cities is infinitely better than in most areas of the South. Records of both towns are free from outrages against Negroes that mar the history of many communities down here.

Never Had a Lynching

In all its 215 years Savannah has never had a lynching. It came close back in the days when the Klan was at the height of its power. A Savannah Negro was jailed, charged with shooting a white man. Savannah whites were content to wait for the law. But from Statesboro, seat of one of the adjacent counties, came a mob of Klansmen led by their Kleagle, intent on lynching the prisoner if Savannah folk were too soft to do their duty by the white race.

So the Savannah sheriff waited on the steps of the jail with a tommy-gun across his arm and when the mob arrived he calmly shot the leader to ribbons. There was no lynching.

In both Brunswick and Savannah there are parks for both black and white. Savannah has a small swimming pool for Negroes.

Savannah also has a modern 100 bed hospital for Negroes. Joker is, however, that city and county only contribute one-fourth of its budget. Three-fourths of the running expenses come from private sources-mostly from the North.

Twenty thousand Negroes vote freely in Savannah and hold the balance of power. The city has 12 Negro policemen, and they are making excellent records. In Brunswick 3,700 Negroes vote. A new juvenile detention home is projected for Savannah, and it will house both black and white children. In separate wings, of course.

But Jim Crow Rules

But Jim Crow rules both towns with an iron grip. In Savannah's stately courthouse the only restrooms for Negroes are down in the janitor's quarters. Negroes may ride only in Jim Crow cabs.

Glynn county, Brunswick the county seat, voted a \$100,000 bond issue for a beach for Negroes. But the white folks killed the plan, and the Negroes are only going to get another park out of it.

Georgia bought the fabulous Jekyll Island, playground of the Rockefellers, Whitneys and Bakers for \$800,000. It will build a great seashore resort for the citizens of Georgia. But there will be no accommodations for Negroes, despite pleas by most of the Negro organizations in the state.

In beautiful Forsythe Park, in Savannah, both white and black folk sit where they please. But in an adjoining extension park the tennis courts and ball diamonds are for whites only.

Dixon Park is a beautiful little spot running from Henry to Duffy streets. A few years ago park benches dotted the park. But now the Negro section has moved onward, so that the park is half in the white section and half in the black. Those benches might spell trouble under the circumstances, decided the city fathers, and they took them out. Now you'll stand while you enjoy the beauties of Dixon Park.