

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Ronald Davis Remembers



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[Dr. Ronald L. F. Davis is a history professor at California State University at Northridge. He also runs the Natchez Courthouse Project in Natchez, Mississippi, working with graduate students to preserve courthouse records dating from the 18th century. In the 1800s, Natchez was home to one of the biggest slave auction houses along the Mississippi River.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life during Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- When relating his early experiences and feelings about blacks, Dr. Davis reveals a lot about the community in which he lived. Using his particular story as an example, can you show how the community, parents, laws, and customs, coupled with ignorance on the part of the child, create racism?
- What were the key factors that made Dr. Davis reassess his outlook toward blacks?
- Examining his description of Natchez, what do you think about the anecdotes he gives to illustrate how "the Old South still lives?"

From Kansas City to Natchez, 1942 to 1968

I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, in the 1940s and early 1950s only halfway conscious of the fact that black people lived in the poorer parts of the city. Until high school, I had never really met a black person except for the neighborhood garbage men, who seemed less than human because of their attire, bulging muscles, nearly incomprehensible dialect, and low-down-dirty jobs. But, I also remember specific incidents between 1945 and 1968 that clearly marked the hold of Jim Crow on the lives of average white Americans.

One of my most vivid memories is of the occasional shopping trips via streetcars to downtown Kansas City. After a day of shopping at the big department stores, my mother would always take my two sisters and me to a local dime store for hot dogs and root beer at a special "stand-up" counter. They were the best hotdogs in the world, with wonderful steamed buns and tangy relish. Blacks ate there, too, but lined up at a separate counter from the whites. There we stood, enjoying the same hotdogs and drinks but with our backs to each other, separated by an invisible color line that ran down the middle of the store's hall. I also remember that the white kids could sit on the steps leading up to the main floor of the dime store, whereas the black kids, who had to squat at their mother's feet on the floors, couldn't. Upstairs, white folks, but not blacks, could sit at a soda fountain, although black waitresses did serve the seated whites.

Once, when a black family moved into our working-class neighborhood, I remember us white kids riding our bicycles the three or four blocks to their house just to get a look. We'd heard that some older kids had tossed sacks of dog poop at the nicely painted white house. I remember my father bemoaning the likes of them "invading" our neighborhood. I also remember that, a few years

later, some of my teenage friends would go "coon hunting" on Friday nights, which meant driving into black neighborhoods and tossing bottles or sacks of garbage at elderly blacks walking alone on the streets. It just was something working-class white boys did in Kansas City in the 1950s.

School: The Military Academy

My high school was an integrated private military academy that catered to troublemakers and Catholic kids whose parents could afford the tuition. I never remember any special favors being given to the white students who attended, and at least as many blacks as whites stood out academically and in leadership roles. It was here that I first realized that the racial stereotypes I had been taught at home just didn't apply. I even had black friends at school, though I never thought to invite any of them home. Still, I ended up graduating and, because of the black kids I knew in high school, was no longer a racist. This was in the mid-1950s. But, the school was in an older part of the city near an all-black high school. To avoid confrontation, the Christian Brothers let us out 30 minutes earlier than the black school, thus allowing us to rush home before the black students filled the streets. Sometimes, we didn't make it away in time and fights broke out. In those cases, the black cadets usually fought alongside white cadets as we defended our turf.

The Natchez Connection

After four years of college and several years of post-graduate work in history, I found myself concentrating on southern history. My project, a Ph.D. dissertation on the transition from slavery to sharecropping in Mississippi, took me, in the summer of 1968, on a road trip to various southern archives—it was my first trip south. My mentor, Dr. Harold Woodman, allowed another graduate student and me to accompany him on a summer research trip. He drove his big Buick, and we went along for the ride.

Somewhere in Mississippi, late at night, we stopped at a remote motel. It was poorly lit but looked full, with cars parked in front of a row of old cabins set off from the main office. We approached the office and found it locked. Behind its screen door, sat a big white man in a soiled T-shirt with a shotgun across his lap. When he saw us clearly, he put the shotgun down and opened the door. We were tired, and he told us that he had rooms available for a cheap price that seemed like a bargain. We took them, paid, and went to bed—the cabin rooms were dingy but okay. The next morning in the light of day, we noticed as we left that all the cars in the parking lot were wrecks: old cars on cement blocks instead of tires or just broken down jalopies. We asked the old guy in the office what was up. He smiled and said that, with the cars so positioned, he would be able to turn down any "civil rights niggers" who might think of asking for a room. He could just tell them that he was filled up with guests. And, if that didn't work, well, he had his shotgun close at hand.

A few days later, we pulled into Jackson, Mississippi, to do research at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The town was full of black people, and our downtown motel was teeming with African Americans from all over the nation. On every street corner, one or two fully armed state troopers or municipal police were stationed in full gear. Unknown to us, the NAACP was in town for its annual convention—one of the first times it had held a convention in the Deep South. One white police officer told us that they were on guard to make sure no "yahoos from the country come to town and shoot or beat up any of the visitors." When I asked a local white fellow out strolling why all the municipal swimming pools were closed, he smiled and said it would take a Ph.D. in sociology to answer my question. When I persisted, he said it boils down to one simple fact: "White Mississippians can't tolerate the thought of black men in bathing trunks anywhere near white women in bathing suits. We would rather shut down all the pools and the schools and the buses before allowing such things to happen."

A few months later, I returned to Mississippi via Greyhound bus. I remember several incidents from that trip. The first was the night I arrived in Natchez, Mississippi, the focal point of my

research. It was late at night, and I had to walk several blocks to an old, seedy hotel. As I walked up the street, I noticed a big black man standing in the shadows. He looked like a giant dressed in bib overalls. I was a little worried. As I walked past him, he stepped back, took off his hat, and said: "Good evening boss. Nice night, boss." I had never before witnessed such subservient behavior on the part of an adult towards me. I was relieved. Why? Because back in Kansas City in the 1960s, blacks and whites were battling it out in race riots and militant confrontations, whereas, in small-town Mississippi, blacks still related to whites as inferiors. That big black man was not afraid of me, I suspect, because he knew what was expected of him: docility and meekness. I felt safe with him, but I also felt sad about him having to live his life fearful of all white people.

Over the next six weeks in Natchez, I found evidence of Jim Crow America all around me. Remember, this was in 1968, 14 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and three years after the Civil Rights Act of 1965. The town sported two downtown movie houses. Only blacks attended one, principally because no whites would go there. The other was a segregated movie house with a side entrance to the balcony where blacks were allowed to sit. I remember sitting downstairs in the white section and thinking how noisy everyone was upstairs. Sometimes, a discarded candy wrapper would come sailing down from above, accompanied by laughter. Then, it would be quiet for a little while as the white managers hushed the balcony down.

I remember the separate bathrooms in the county courthouse, with the "colored" ones off behind the stairs and out of sight. I remember the local main street restaurant where only white people ate. Indeed, from 1968 to 1997, I never saw any local blacks eating at this restaurant. In the 1960s and earlier times, black patrons would order food to go in brown bags and boxes from the front of the restaurant. I remember the Mammy-shaped restaurant on the outskirts of town, located on Highway 61 not far from a sign that welcomed tourists to Natchez with the words: "Where the Old South Still Lives." I can remember the old white man, who roamed the County Hall of Records where I worked. He usually confronted me with questions about my "nigger research," questions uttered loudly enough so that the numerous black patrons and staff could hear him. I once asked a black clerk how she tolerated him. She said that there was nothing they could do so they just turned a deaf ear on him. But, I also remember how courteous they were to him and how kindly he was to them in return--almost as if the "niggers" he railed against were not in the room with him at all. It was as if they were a people only in his mind.

