

## Chapter 1

# 'I Traveled, Ate, Black'

By Ray Sprigle

For four endless, crawling weeks I was a Negro in the Deep South.

I ate, slept, traveled, lived Black. I lodged in Negro households. I ate in Negro restaurants. I slept in Negro hotels and lodging houses. I crept through the back and side doors of railroad stations. I traveled Jim Crow in buses and trains and street cars and taxicabs. Along with 10,000,000 Negroes I endured the discrimination and oppression and cruelty of the iniquitous Jim Crow system.

It was a strange, new-and for me, uncharted world that I entered when, in a Jim Crow railroad coach, we rumbled across the Potomac out of Washington. It was a world of which I had no remote conception, despite scores of trips through the South. The world I had known in the South was white. Now I was black and the world I was to know was as bewildering as if I had been dropped down on the moon.

The towers and turrets of the great cities of the Southland, painted against the falling night, as we rolled along the highways, represented a civilization and an economy completely alien to me and the rest of the black millions in the South.

### **Questioned Only Twice**

Only twice in my month-long sojourn was my status as a black man even remotely questioned. A Negro doctor in Atlanta, to whom I was introduced and with whom I talked briefly, later turned to my Negro companion, who was leading me along the unfamiliar paths of the world of color, and demanded:

"What are you carrying that white man around with you for?" To which my friend replied:

"He says he's a Negro and that's enough for me. Have you found any way of telling who carries Negro blood and who doesn't?" And if the doctor wasn't convinced, he was at least silenced.

Another time my membership in the black race was doubted was my own fault. I broke my resolution to keep my mouth shut. For a couple of days I was alone in Atlanta, living in the Negro YMCA and eating in a small but excellent restaurant. Mrs. Hawk, the proprietress, tangled me in conversation one day-never a difficult task for anyone. So, I talked too much, too fast and too expansively.

A couple of days later she met my friend and remarked:

"That friend of yours — he talks too much to be a Negro. I think he's white."

## **Detected No Suspicion**

But in literally thousands of contacts with Negroes, from nationally known leaders of the race to sharecroppers in the Cotton rows I was accepted as a Negro. I sat for long hours in Negro groups where we discussed everything from Shakespeare to atomic energy and the price of cotton. Neither I nor my companion ever detected any reserve or suspicion that I wasn't just what I pretended to be, a light-skinned Negro from Pittsburgh, down South on a visit. I attended half a dozen Negro meetings, from YMCA banquets to political conferences and church gatherings — and was even called upon to speak.

My Contacts with whites were few indeed but here, too, I went unsuspected and unquestioned. Southern whites have long taken the position that when a man says he's black, so far as they are concerned, he is. So the white folks never lifted an eyebrow when I sat in the Jim Crow sections of trains, buses and street cars, drank from the "For Colored" fountains in courthouse and railroad station, ate in Negro restaurants, sat in the 'For Colored" sections of rail and bus stations. Rarely is a light or white Negro questioned in the South when he seeks Jim Crow accommodations. Now and then a conductor or policeman will remind a passenger, apparently white, in a Jim Crow coach, or a light-skinned Negro entering a "For Colored" restaurant — "That's for Negroes, you know." But the usual response of "I'm where I belong" ends the matter right there.

## **He Took Guide**

Of course I realize that if I had tried to make my way through the black South on my own, alone, I would have met with suspicion and rebuff on every hand from blacks and whites alike.

Fortunately, though, I didn't have to go alone into the black world of the South. Walter White, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, took care of that. Out of his vast store of friendships of Negroes, North and South, he chose a man to lead me through the warrens of the black South.

And if there is any commendation due anyone for these chronicles, surely the lion's share must go to that companion of mine. I doubt if there is a man living who knows the South, black and white, as he does. We ate, slept, lived, and traveled for four weeks. If I learned anything about the life of the Negro, it is because he took me to the places, the men and the women from whom I might learn.

## **Roll Along Through Night**

We'd roll along through the night, our destination the Negro section of a town perhaps 200 miles away and for hours I'd listen while he recited long passages from Macbeth and Hamlet, Ingersoll's essay on Napoleon — page after page from the best in English literature. All his life he has fought against the oppression, the injustice and the discrimination weighing on his people. But there is no bitterness, no hatred in the man. To him, his "Southland," as he always calls it, is the fairest country in the land. He loves his Georgia above all other states — he would live nowhere else in America.

In four weeks and 4,000 miles of travel we met and talked with the Negro leaders of the South. If in four weeks anyone can get the actual picture of the life of the Negro in the South — then I got it. Because that friend of Walter White showed it to me.

One last word as I begin this account of my four weeks of life as a Negro in the deep South. Don't anybody try to tell me that the North discriminates against the Negro, too, and seek to use that as a defense against the savage oppression and the brutal intolerance the black man encounters in the South. Discrimination against the Negro in the North is an annoyance and an injustice. In the South it is bloodstained tragedy.

In the North the Negro meets with rebuff and insult when he seeks service at hotels and restaurants. But, at least in states like Pennsylvania and others, he can take his case to court and he invariably wins.

But in the South he is barred BY LAW from white hotels and restaurants. He is fined and jailed, and frequently killed, if he seeks to enter a railroad station through an entrance reserved for whites, to ride in the forward end of a street car or bus, or a railway coach sacred to the white man. His children are barred from white schools and denied an adequate education in the tumbledown shacks in which little black citizens are forced to seek learning.

No Northern white can deny that there is discrimination against the Negro in the North. Prejudice against the black citizen breaks out in race riots from time to time, as witness Detroit in recent years, and Chicago and Springfield, Ill., in an earlier day. But in the North, both black and white rioters go to prison. In the South only the black ones climb the steps to a gallows or serve term in a cell.

In short, discrimination against the Negro in the North is usually in defiance of the law. In the South it is enforced and maintained by the law.