

Chapter 9

Jim-Crow Is Kicked In the Pants

By Ray Sprigle

Not since my boyhood days in the homes of my Pennsylvania Dutch relatives have I sat down to a table loaded as this one is.

Great platters of fried chicken - and listen, it's Pennsylvania Dutch fried chicken, the gooey kind - not that abomination known as southern fried chicken that I've been getting for the past two weeks. And biscuits - light, fluffy and piping hot. And here's a new wrinkle. The biscuits are baked in small pans - in the oven at a time. So when you call for a fresh one it's right out of the oven. Three or four kinds of jam; big gobs of country butter. And great pitchers of real buttermilk - what's left after you churn country butter - the first I've tasted in 20 years.

This 65 acres a few miles outside Chickamauga, Ga., is another little oasis in the desert of discrimination and injustice that is the black South. It is the farm of C. D. Haslerig, who has carved out a way of life for himself and his children on this fertile North Georgia farm.

The rest of our group attends a district meeting of a Negro fraternal order. I am here to eat.

Gather in Little Church

After the lodge meeting and a Gargantuan picnic dinner in a grove on the Haslerig farm we repair to a little church in a grove of pines. The ladies of the women's auxiliary of the order have worked diligently preparing a little entertainment for the visitors from downstate. There are piano solos and some really excellent singing. There are several essays and recitations.

And here again, in this quiet country church, you realize anew the obsession the southern Negro has with this racial problem. It colors all his thinking and every phase of his life. Every recitation, every theme so laboriously written stresses only the one great facet of these people's lives - their relations with the whites.

Called on to Speak

Brother Haslerig is chairman of the meeting. So it's not too much of a surprise when he calls upon his house guest, Brother James R. Crawford, to offer a few remarks, preferably regarding the status of our people back in Pittsburgh. Now I have no objection to my deception of all these good people because if my mission succeeds it may be of some slight service to them. But making speeches as the representative of the colored folk of Pittsburgh would be carrying the deception a little too far. So I stand and bow and thank Brother Haslerig for the opportunity - and sit down again. To really sincere applause. Because the afternoon is getting on and the audience wants to go home.

This Haslerig family demonstrates that you can wring success out of anything. On their 65 owned acres they run a herd of prize Guernseys, raise thousands of broilers each year, eggs and hogs. In recent years they have farmed 200 acres of leased land which they expect to buy. Their nine children have graduated from Chattanooga High school, the oldest in turn driving the 15 miles each morning and evening.

Could Quit Right Here

Me, I'd be perfectly content to finish out this assignment in the Haslerig dining room - with, of course, rest periods in a rocking chair on the front porch.

But the rest of our group from Atlanta has to be back for the Fulton county Republican convention to pick delegates to the state convention. Political conventions run true to form, North or South. We even have a smoke-filled room in which to operate, a courtroom in the Fulton county courthouse where for an afternoon politics spreads Jim Crow like a rug on the floor.

But a week later when the state Republican convention is held in the same courtroom we learn that in other counties Jim Crow more than holds his own even in politics.

The DeKalb county delegation ran into difficulties. Republican national committee rules require that in Georgia, county conventions must be held in the courthouse. Which was OK with DeKalb county commissioners. Except that Negroes and whites couldn't meet in the same court room. So the white delegates met in one courtroom and the Negro delegates in another. Messengers ran themselves ragged from one courtroom to another, taking two votes on every measure and proposal and then adding the ayes and noes to find out where they stood.

White Supremacy Jolted

So the state convention passed a resolution condemning the action of the DeKalb commissioners. The convention also passed unanimously resolutions demanding that all Georgians of whatsoever shade should not only be permitted to vote, but encouraged to do so. The convention also called for equal school facilities for all citizens of Georgia. All of which was giving Jim Crow a hefty kick in the seat of the pants when you figure that among the white delegates who voted for the motion were such figures as Harry Sommers, former president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Colonel Elliott F. Tuttle, veteran of both world wars and retiring president of the Fulton County Bar Association, and C.J. Hilkey, dean of the law school of Emory University. Just a little more evidence that if the Negro is ever going to dent the more evil and vicious aspects of Jim Crow in the South it's going to be accomplished through the franchise.

Despite the determination of the southern white never to "Mr." a Negro, black and white delegates were mistering each other all over the place. They crippled their fingers shaking hands and even on occasion hugged each other. Southern white supremacy got an awful kicking around that day.

I found myself wedged in between a couple of white delegates from North Georgia. I was distinctly uncomfortable. I hadn't been so close to white folks in weeks. Until one of them leaned over to me and confided:

"You know we don't have many colored people up in our country, but you people ought to be allowed to vote. I served with a lot of your people in the Navy. They were damned good shipmates. Most of this stuff about you Negroes is just damned foolishness."

—So much for one lily white Georgian.