

BEHIND THE COLOR LINE

Five-year-old Mary Church was thrilled when her father took her along on a business trip to the North. She smiled proudly as the other train passengers greeted Robert, an important man in their hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. When her father left her to visit the smoking car, she remembered to sit “straight and proper,” just as her mother had told her.

Suddenly the conductor was looming over Mary. The angry white man wanted to know what she was doing in the first-class car. When the frightened girl could not answer, he yanked her from her seat. Turning to a white passenger, he asked, “Whose little nigger is this?”

At that moment Robert Church hurried back. The conductor backed down in the face of the angry black man. Confused and unhappy, Mary asked her father what she had done wrong. Why

had the conductor tried to force her from the clean train car into one that was shabby and dirty? "He refused to talk about the affair," she later recalled, "and forbade me to do so."

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Following the Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Jim Crow spread like a plague across the South. State and local governments passed laws introducing segregation into practically every area of public life. Blacks were required to sit in the "colored" sections of trains, streetcars, steamboats, and stagecoaches. They were housed apart from whites in hospitals, mental institutions, prisons, reform schools, and orphanages. They used separate doors, stairways, pay windows, and toilets when working in factories and offices. They were assigned to separate sections of theaters and separate pews at the back of white churches. They were even buried in separate cemeteries. Some towns dug up the bodies of African Americans who had been buried for years and moved them to new locations, where they would not trouble any neighboring white corpses.

The legal restrictions of the Jim Crow system were often spelled out in elaborate detail. Laws might specify the thickness of the barriers required to separate the races in public places or the distance permitted between lines of white and black ticket buyers. One Georgia law prohibited any black amateur baseball team from playing ball "on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of any playground devoted to the white race." In Birmingham, Alabama, it was illegal for "a negro and white person to play together or in company with each other in any game of cards or dice, dominoes or checkers."



This run-down store in rural Florida was restricted to black customers by "police order."

In South Carolina, circuses were required to “maintain two main entrances . . . , and such main entrances shall be plainly marked ‘For White People,’ and the other entrance shall be marked ‘For Colored People.’”

The separate facilities provided for blacks were generally smaller, dirtier, and more poorly maintained than those for whites. W. E. B. DuBois, the great black writer and educator who grew up during Reconstruction, described the typical Jim Crow train car as

half or a quarter or an eighth of the oldest car in service on the road. . . . The plush [seat covering] is caked with dirt, the floor is grimy, and the windows dirty. . . . It is difficult to get lunch or clean water. Lunch rooms either don't serve niggers or

serve them at some dirty and ill-attended hole in the wall. As for toilet rooms,—don't! . . . There is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the “Jim-Crow” car of the southern United States.

Sometimes it was impossible or inconvenient to create separate facilities for the races. In those cases African Americans were simply excluded. Blacks were barred from most hotels and restaurants in the South (although eating places might serve them at the back door). They were forbidden to enter most libraries, amusement parks, bowling alleys, and swimming pools, along with many other public and private facilities. Factories and other businesses that could not set up separate work areas for white and black employees found a simple solution: they eliminated black workers altogether.

JIM CROW AT SCHOOL

For African-American children, the most compelling evidence of Jim Crow was often found at school. Most northern schools had long been segregated. That practice became common in the South, too, when the public school system was established there during the Reconstruction era. After the end of Reconstruction, the informal practice of school segregation was written into southern state laws. Florida's education law was typical. It decreed that “the schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately.”

As always, *separate* did not mean *equal*. While many white children learned their ABCs in bright, modern, well-equipped classrooms, schools for black children were usually dilapidated



one-room shacks. The floors were bare, splintery wood. The furniture consisted of crude tables and hard benches made from split logs. The plumbing often leaked. The toilets were often out of order. The textbooks were old and torn. Class sizes were large, with one poorly paid teacher responsible for fifty or more children of varying ages. As a teacher in a North Carolina black school noted, attending classes in a building that resembled “a tobacco barn” did not necessarily rule out a good education. “It does hurt, though, to have the largest classes, the poorest paid teacher, the shortest school year, and an acute shortage of books, paper, pencils, blackboards, and maps.”

Behind these deplorable conditions was the racist attitude that educating African Americans was a waste of time and money. White civic leaders argued that black children did not have the same capacity for learning as white children. Furthermore, since blacks could not possibly use their education to get ahead in the world, it was pointless—even dangerous—to fill their heads with

A segregated school in Kentucky, around 1916