

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Ralph Jennings Remembers



"If anyone's ever going to appreciate humanity, man needs to be humane to man."

[Ralph Jennings is the President of the Natchez Historical Society. He was born and raised in Natchez, MS, and while he now resides in Louisiana, his ties remain close to home.]

To the student:

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

- In Mr. Jennings' anecdotes of his childhood, what themes from his father's teachings come up again and again?
- How did the Jim Crow system of segregation in the education system actually benefit Mr. Jennings and his classmates in Natchez?
- When reading Mr. Jennings' recollections of his experiences outside the South, notice the way the racism is "veiled" behind excuses and facades.
- What did the community's response to the fire teach/show Mr. Jennings and his classmates?
- What is Mr. Jennings' challenge to young people today?

My mother started out as a high school and elementary school teacher, but left the profession to practice seamstry on a professional basis. My father taught for most of his career from 1928 to 1953 at Broomfield High School which is now an apartment complex on St. Catherine Street. My father became the assistant principal of Broomfield High School, and then principal. In 1953, December, the high school for blacks--negroes at the time--was transferred to a new building on the north side of town called Sadie V. Thompson High School. He (my father) transferred to Thompson as the principal of that school.

He engrained in us how careful we had to be to survive. It's interesting, because I'm not sure how he got that point over to us, because I don't recall ever sitting at the dinner table and him actually saying to us that you have to be careful. But I do remember him making comments like this, that, "You must guard against giving the majority community--the white community--an opportunity to harm you." It was interesting how some of my classmates and I went about trying to preserve that security that he was trying to advise us that we needed.

Let me describe another impression that I really don't have much of a concrete memory of, but I can remember as a very young child walking down Franklin Street with my father holding his hand. I can remember holding his hand like this, (raising his hand overhead, as if holding onto a much taller person's hand) so I must've been rather young. But I remember white children coming in and out of the stores as we would pass, and I truly don't know what the root of this memory is, but I was afraid that I would be singled out. This is prior to the incident with Emmett Till in northern Mississippi where he was killed--lynched for whistling at a white woman. But I can

remember having the fear that I would be accused of doing something that would end my life. I don't really know why. But it was a very real fear as I remember it even today.

But to be more specific about how it [this fear] was brought home to me, I remember being stopped one night. As a young fellow, I used to bring my father's lunch to him. I would carry it to him. I was 12 or 13 years old. We would be charged with carrying my father's lunch from where we were living at the time to Broomfield High School where he would be working in the shop late at night to supplement his income. He would make furniture and things like this. (I was aware of my father's salary, but he and mother never talked to us about it. We saw one of his checks. My sister was leaving to go to school at Southern in 1948 and he was still making \$60 a month.) On my way to carry the lunch to him one night, I was stopped by two young white boys in a truck and they asked me to tell them how to get to the bridge. I described to them that if they proceeded up the hill to the top of the hill where it ended, if they turned right and stayed on that street as far as they could go on that street, and turn left, they would get to the bridge. They said, "No, we don't understand." I became suspicious when they didn't understand. So I stepped up onto the running board of the truck, and he was rustling some paper. He said it was a map. When I got high enough to see his hands, it didn't look like a map, so I was alert enough to start to lean back, and he tried to hit me. He missed. When he missed, he drove off immediately. That would be described by some as kids who were just wanting to jump on somebody else, but I took it as a racial incident. A few nights later, a friend of mine who was walking in the same area suffered a fractured skull from a baseball bat.

Girls had one serious problem that boys didn't have. Girls would be accosted. Girls would be stalked by the police and harassed, and if they were uncooperative--they had to be in very large groups when they went anywhere. Had they not had men, they might have been accosted. None of my friends made the mistake of getting caught out there by themselves, so I don't know of cases of rape or of that kind of thing. But I am aware that even adult women might be stalked by the police and harassed if they happened to be caught alone.

My father sort of made it clear to the children. I have two brothers and a sister. He sort of made it clear that the system was going to be unfair in the resources that were going to be devoted to the development of children. He helped us to understand that we may see a (white) child on a school bus with a packet of new books, that we could still use those books as good resource, though when we got them, they were tattered. Those kinds of things he made us understand.

Incidentally, school buses were not used in the black community. The school buses that you saw were white kids being ferried out of the black community to the white schools. I don't know of very many children in my school who were black who ever rode a school bus. It's kind of an irony that in the 60s, 70s and 80s, Boston residents railed against bussing when they were the children that rode buses if they were in the south. It's kind of an irony to have the people who rode the buses past me to go to their schools through these communities now don't want the buses to be used to get me to that school.

He [my father] had also told us that one of the few ways that you are going to be sure to keep people away from you and from bothering you is to make them feel your intelligence without insulting them, and let me give you an idea of how we did it. I remember a friend--young lady of mine and I--were rather young. I don't remember being large enough to be standing above the counter on which clothing was placed, but she and I went into the store and we were shopping for her mother's birthday. No clerk was devoting any time to us, so we decided we'd see if we could get the clerk's attention. So we started looking at the lingerie. Now, here I am a black boy and young black lady looking at lingerie and discussing whether or not it was large enough for her mother. But when we described it, we called it "Lon jer ay"(heavy French accent). There's a heavy French residue in this community, and her (his friend) name was Mazique incidentally, which is a French name--Mamie Mazique. We watched the clerks as they paled and then flushed while we were discussing this, so we knew we had their attention. We knew that they were aware

that we were there, but never came to serve us. While she and I did that, I later realized that this was one of those examples that my father was talking about. Make sure that persons feel you without insulting, without giving them an excuse for harming, and this was one of those times. We finally got served, but those were not the items we were really interested in. But we were concerned that we would not be served and that the memory of that still resides.

We were taught to concentrate more on some positives, and let me describe one of them for you. We were aware that our teachers were devoting far more of their lives to our teaching than the average teacher would have been expected to do. And if you ever had an opportunity in a gathering, we would go up to Jackson, Mississippi sometimes and sing over Channel 12's television station. While we were there preparing for these songs, we would hear other groups. Some of them would be white. You could hear them talking about the teachers in a rather derogatory manner. We in our experiences didn't have the teachers about whom we would have spoken that way. The teachers that we would have been deriding would have been because she pushed me into the corner because I didn't know the answer to the question she was asking me, and I didn't do what she told me to do. We recognized those kinds of differences when we had experiences that would enlighten us as to what might have been (prevailing?) at the other school. We became aware of some of those kinds of things and began to watch for them. When I went to college, I began to realize that those teachers were devoting far more than the five or six hours of classroom work in the classroom to our education. They were devoting far more than that and spending a lot more of their time coaching us in the evenings.

The Natchez fire occurred in April of 1940. It was a nightclub--not a nightclub, it was a dance hall. The Rhythm Nightclub. 208 people died out of my community, and Natchez was what we call a sister city to New Orleans, kind of a fun-loving town, and dances and nightclubbing were common. This was a big club and many of the popular citizens of the city were there. My father and mother were dressing to go. They were just a little late getting there. Of course the common conclusions I think that were drawn from the fire is that the building was decorated with Spanish moss inside. It did not have an interior ceiling, it was kind of a gabled tin roof on rafters. The building got very hot during the day after they had been decorating, and when Spanish moss dries, it generates methane gas, and methane gas is flammable. The building itself flashed with cigarettes and things like that. Many people died from the flash burns--those that were closest to the flash--and others died of smoke inhalation, and some were scalded, because when the fire department got there, they put water on the hot tin roof.

For about 12 years (after the fire) we didn't have a band in the black high school because there wasn't a band director. My father started coaching athletics in the high school--basketball--because the coach was gone. We saw other teachers volunteering their time to coach, to do other things after school to help us with those kinds of activities. That was kind of a unique problem with us, because Natchez's fire wiped out of a large numbers of the educators.

It was more of a community response (to the fire) I believe. For example, we would have sometimes large numbers of students would gather together in the study hall after school after hours and study. We would finish those studies, before we would go home, we might stop by the home of a Mrs. Lillian Whitmore who was interested in us learning to sing together, and music, and we had a community choir. Now this is in addition to the choirs at the church. This was just a teacher who wanted to devote more time to the students in the community in what she thought was a good cause, and of course, I'm still benefiting today in my experiences with my choir with the training that she was giving us. We were not paying her as a music teacher, she was hosting us. We caroled at the homes of the elderly. So these I'm saying are the kind of positive experiences we had as a result of the segregation, because there was a devotion in the community to the community. Once we started to bridging outside of the community, we recognized very quickly that the level of devotion diminished.

The common person in Natchez in the black community had more than 12 years of education. The guy who in Chicago would've been called the "wino" --just the troublesome guy on the street, you would encounter these guys on the street (in Natchez)--Leslie Johnson was one. He's long since dead, but Leslie had a master's degree in political science from the University of Chicago, but he was just a wino. I don't know what happened to him, but his ambitions during my lifetime were simply to walk along the street talking to himself. There were large numbers of these people who outsiders would come in and just want to cast a peanut to or a coin to, but if they wound up listening, they'd wind up holding rather good conversations with them about the political ties, about what was happening in Germany. Now why? Because all of these people in Natchez would go to school. They would go to Natchez College and experience these professors in the black community and come out of there with perhaps no more ambition than they would've had, but with a proper education. I saw that as a very positive impact that the black colleges, the **Alcorn's**, the **Jackson States**, the Natchez Colleges and the Southern had on our community. Natchez sat right in the middle of all of that.

I left the south during my college years because I had decided that I wanted to become a chemist, and my father and his father, my mother and her father, had been teachers. I wanted to branch out from that. I wanted to devote my adult life to research. Now I had this notion that I would be much happier if I were doing something for the community, something that benefits to me, so I wanted to become a chemist. In my second year at Southern University in chemistry, I started applying to internships at corporations throughout the South where I resided. Now I admit that I did not have high expectations of success when I did that anyway. I went over to Armstrong Tire and tried to get a personal interview and I didn't succeed. I was told that they didn't have any openings. So I wrote to International Paper. I got a response from International Paper that my application was being referred to corporate headquarters down on the Gulf Coast. When I got a response from them, it was a response that they had no openings.

The job applications didn't have a blank that indicated race as I recall. All I had to do was list my school. When I listed Broomfield High School, it was very clear. Anyway, that was negative, so in 1955 during the summer, I went to Chicago because some relatives were already there from my mother's side of the family, and we were going up to do some summer work. When I got there, I saw these notices in the paper that applications should be submitted to Procter & Gamble for work, for laboratory work, for professional work, and for interns, so I submitted mine. I got an invitation for an interview. I went to Procter & Gamble in southwest Chicago in an area called Cicero to have the interview, and was told by a secretary that an error had been made and I was not going to be interviewed, and that ended that.

I graduated from college in '58, and I left there going to Michigan State University in '58. I was drafted into the military service out of Michigan State University, served in the military. Now frankly, I would like to make a point about the draft, because there were no blacks on the draft board, and when black students got deferred to go to college, they had to be sure that they stayed in school, because if they didn't, zoom! They were zapped up. Now in my case, the process was started early because I went directly from Southern to Michigan State, but the draft board there in Natchez was onto that because draft procedures were started on me without me knowing it. When I got to Michigan State, it was explained to me later that the Form that they were supposed to have submitted, didn't get submitted immediately because of the large volume of forms they had to complete, so mine was late getting there. The draft board acted quickly enough to get draft procedures started on me before they ever got me any notices that I was in graduate school, and those were the kinds of experiences many of us had.

I (in attempting) to describe to them how comfortable some people could become being very mean and brutal to other people, and how just as the caricature of the black minister in the church is that he entrances himself and starts to mourning and wailing, so do those who hate others in a group, and they can really become a part of an entrancement that can lead to brutal death of a person with no remorse. That's a danger that I would try to make every one understand - that

they could become entrapped, just as many who witnessed hangings and lynchings weren't all persons who had lifted the rope, but they had no remorse when they left the scene.

My father had an old adage that he used to pronounce to us. He used to say, "Those people in all the world who forget their history are doomed to relive it." And if that's even possibly true, then it is absolutely essential that everybody learn what human behavior toward humans has been and how gross it can be. And if anyone's ever going to appreciate humanity, man needs to be humane to man. Then these stories ought to be told to clarify that.