

Surviving Jim Crow

By Ronald Davis, Ph.D



W.E.B. Du Bois

The Supreme Court's sanctioning of segregation (by upholding the "separate but equal" language in state laws) in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896 and the refusal of the federal government to enact anti-lynching laws meant that black Americans were left to their own devices for surviving Jim Crow. In most cases, southern blacks tried to avoid engaging whites as much as possible as the best means of evading their wrath. These efforts at separating themselves from whites meant developing their own schools and community-based support groups as much as possible.

In the 1860s and early 1870s, many southern blacks actually preferred segregated schools, especially their all-**black colleges**, as a means of local autonomy and independence—even though they had little choice in the matter after 1890. Many of these colleges became the primary centers of black resistance to Jim Crow, although their administrators and staff frequently differed over how best to make their stand. At the primary and secondary school levels, truly heroic efforts were made by impoverished black teachers to educate their pupils, usually in face of white resistance that often included violence. Whites were generally so opposed to black education that many states in the South refused to build black public high schools until the twentieth-century. Despite the repression, the literacy rate of blacks nearly doubled from 1880 to 1930, rising from less than 45 percent to 77 percent—an incredible climb from the less than 7 percent who were literate in 1865.

Additionally, southern blacks survived the demeaning character of Jim Crow by organizing self-help associations that functioned as parallel institutions to those in the white community, ranging from lodges and social clubs to life insurance programs and volunteer fire departments. By 1910, a wide range of segregated black institutions in southern communities served as refuges and safe harbors from white terror and violence; these social clubs and lodges enabled a small, middle-class of prosperous black participants to live in dignity and with self-respect.

For the vast majority of southern blacks, the terror of Jim Crow meant that they were forced to live "behind the veil," in the words of the black intellectual, **W.E.B. Du Bois**. In dealing with whites, most southern blacks were forced to adopt accommodationist and appeasement tactics that played out in complicated ways across the region. Scholars refer to these tactics as "dissembling," or a psychological ploy in which blacks assumed positions and the appearances of non-confrontation. Sometimes it meant shuffling and feigning irresponsibility, and sometimes it meant turning the other cheek and walking away. Almost always these appeasement stances meant adhering to a demeaning racial etiquette.

Black customers were almost never served first in stores when white customers were present, seldom allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, and typically forced to wait patiently to be spoken to by white store clerks rather than to dare address them directly. Nor were adult African Americans afforded terms of respect, such as "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." Instead, they endured words such as "boy," "girl," "uncle," "auntie," and often "nigger."

When among themselves, African Americans resisted these insults by mocking whites in song, jokes, and stories. They would even sing these songs of mockery as they worked when whites were present. This reflected a long history of "putting on the man," or playing Sambo, in order to manipulate white masters and better control the otherwise powerless situation of their lives in slavery. Tragically, many southern whites came to expect this type of docile behavior from all blacks, demanding it during and after slavery under the threat of violence. This Sambo character (an innately barbaric, passive, cheerful, childish, lazy, and submissive black) was commonly

accepted as reality in both the southern and northern states.

Over time, this Sambo-type image was immortalized in literature and film of the period, usually in the character of Uncle Tom, Uncle Remus, **Jim Crow** and "Old Black Joe." D.W. Griffith's classic silent film "**The Birth of a Nation**," released in 1915, depicts elected black congressmen during Reconstruction as ape-like characters, eating bananas on the floor of Congress. This image was further repeated in white-produced movies with black film actors often cast as a lazy, submissive, and innately docile character who spoke in the same manner as did black slaves when in the presence of their masters or in the company of whites. That is, taking a posture of docility, holding their head down, and smiling all the time with their hat in their hands when talking to whites. In short, African Americans were forced to assume a multitude of personalities in order to cope with Jim Crow.