

Racial Segregation in the U.S.A., 1896-1954

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Bachelor thesis
2011



Tomas Bata University in Zlín
Faculty of Humanities

Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně
Fakulta humanitních studií
Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky
akademický rok: 2010/2011

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení: **Michaela HALAMÍČKOVÁ**
Osobní číslo: **H08292**
Studijní program: **B 7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**

Téma práce: **Rasová segregace v USA, 1896–1954**

Zásady pro vypracování:

Úvod
Historické pozadí
Plessy vs. Ferguson
Éra pokroku
Velká hospodářská krize
Brown vs. Board
Závěr

Rozsah bakalářské práce:

Rozsah příloh:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Seznam odborné literatury:

Foner, Eric. Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988.

Woodward, Vann C. The Strange Career of Jim Crow, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Frederickson, Geogre M. The Black Image in the White Mind, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.

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Harold, Christine, and Kevin Michael DeLuca. "Behold The Corpse: Violent Images and The Case of Emmett Till." Rhetoric & Public Affairs 8, no.2 (Summer 2005).

<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=909232031&Fmt=7&clientId=45148&RQT=309&VName=PQD> (accessed October 15, 2010).

Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

M. A. Gregory Jason Bell, MBA

Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání bakalářské práce:

1. února 2011

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce:

6. května 2011

Ve Zlíně dne 1. února 2011



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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce vysvětluje historické důvody pro zavedení rasové segregace ve Spojených státech na konci 19. století a poté načrtne vývoj segregace, který končí v roce 1954, kdy byla segregace ve školách prohlášena za neústavní Nejvyšším soudem. Nakonec se tato práce pokusí dokázat, že “oddělení ale rovnocení” byl neúspěšný koncept, který bylo nutné ukončit.

Klíčová slova: Rasová segragace, Jim Crow, oddělení ale rovnocení, lynčování, rasismus, černoši

ABSTRACT

This thesis explains the historical reasons for the implementation of racial segregation in the United States in the late nineteenth century and then charts the development of segregation over time, ending in 1954 when school segregation was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court. Ultimately, it will argue that “separate but equal” was a flawed concept that needed to be cast aside.

Keywords: Racial segregation, Jim Crow, separate but equal, lynching, racism, blacks

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All my gratefulness and thanks go to my family, especially to my parents who, as my best friends, supported me in everything I did and encouraged me in everything I hoped to achieve. I would also like to thank my very best friend, Andrea, who is not only my true soulmate but a person that always makes me want to do better. Thanks also go to my thesis advisor, Gregory Jason Bell, who truly was the most helpful person in the thesis formulation process. Without him, the realization of this thesis would be unthinkable. His professional feedback was the most valuable source of my work. Another special thanks goes to Profimedia.cz and CorbisImages for allowing me to use images and authentic photographs from their archives and databases for my work. Thank you to you all!

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INTRODUCTION

“This is not a lynching. This is straight out murder.”

-Hugh White, Governor of Mississippi, 1955¹



Image 1- Portrait of Emmett Louis Till (photo:Profimedia.CZ)

On 20 August 1955, a fourteen-year old black boy named Emmett left his home in Chicago (in the North) to visit his uncle's family in Money, Mississippi (in the deep South "Black Belt"). On the evening of 24 August an incident happened that did not only altered U.S. history but unfortunately ended Emmett's short life. The South at that time was governed by Jim Crow laws that limited interracial interaction. Emmett, often called Bobo, imbued with a sense of naïve bravado so typical of teenage boys, kept bragging to his cousins and their friends about a white girl back in Chicago who was supposedly his girlfriend. In response, the boys challenged him to go and talk to Carolyn Bryant, a white woman who worked in a local grocery store, and even ask her for a date, both of which were unthinkable actions at that time. Versions of what happened next differ. Some suggested that Emmett called the woman "baby", which was considered rather rude, while some thought that he simply whistled at her. Still others stated that the boy flirted with her and made an inappropriate proposal to her. Nevertheless, what followed was one of the most horrific examples of racial injustice and one of the cruelest acts of racial violence in the U.S. history books. The story of Emmett's daring yet ignorant behavior soon spread throughout the town of Money, which only had about sixty residents, and it therefore quickly reached Carolyn Bryant's husband, Roy Bryant. He and his half-brother J.W.

Milam decided to teach the boy a lesson. That same night these two men forced themselves into Emmett's uncle's home and kidnapped Emmett. That night was also the last night Emmett was seen alive. Three days later, in the Tallahatchie River, his body was found. It was severely mutilated, bloated after being in water for three days and already beginning to decompose. His tongue is believed to have been ripped out of his mouth, his right eyeball was hanging below his cheek and the left eye was gone completely. His nose was chopped off and mashed into pieces. After torturing him, one of the two kidnappers shot Emmett in the head, blowing his brains out. When all was done, a huge metal fan was fastened to the boy's neck in hope of sinking the body as deep as possible in the river. Soon afterwards, Bryant and Milam were accused of kidnapping and murder. When Mamie Till Bradley saw her son she could not believe it was really him. Despite the horrific appearance of Emmett's body, she decided to leave his coffin open to show the whole world the ugliness of the racial violence perpetrated by whites against blacks. And because many journalists attended Emmett's funeral, she succeeded in doing so. Pictures of the boy's body scattered across the world and raised attention to the blacks' sufferings and struggles. The only problem at that time was that in the South a white defendant had to be judged by a jury of his peers, and that included race. Would these white men be sentenced by an all-white jury for murder of a black boy? Hardly! Therefore, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam were found innocent in less than an hour and released, even though almost everybody knew they did it and even though there was sufficient evidence against them. They were so sure of themselves and their place in society that after the trial they confessed to one journalist that they did in fact commit the murder, and yet they remained free.²

This tragic event is proof of the fact that the "separate but equal" idea introduced by the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision in 1896, separating the races but promising equality for blacks, was not working. The fact that blacks were separate but not equal is the subject of this thesis. Most whites were strongly racist and remained racist long after the

¹ Chris Crowe, "The Lynching of Emmett Till," SodaHead, <http://www.sodahead.com/united-states/the-lynching-of-emmett-till/blog-20666/> (accessed January 23, 2011).

² William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look* 20, January 24, 1956, 46-50; Crowe, "The Lynching of Emmett Till"; Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 263-265, http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/rhetoric_and_public_affairs/v008/8.2harold.html (accessed January 23, 2011).

1954 Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision terminating “separate but equal”. And not only were they still racist, but they still controlled the money, a fact which made it easier to keep blacks in a subservient position. The extent to which white people were capable of hurting and humiliating, intimidating and humbling black people can be clearly observed in Emmett Till’s case. The mutilated and butchered body of Emmett portrays the hatred, fear and overall disdain of blacks that was shared by many whites.

1 BACKGROUND (1865-1896)

One of the most significant events in American history was the Civil War that, in 1865, for all intents and purposes ended slavery. The anti-slavery North won, defeating the pro-slavery South. The war also largely ended the dispute over states' rights. After the war, the Federal government of the Union ruled supreme. Officially, slavery was abolished by the Thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution in December 1865. Blacks were free. However the main question was what to do with the blacks? What would happen to those millions of freed slaves who had no money, owned no land, who were not educated and had no jobs? Abraham Lincoln had a plan, but he took it to the grave with him in April 1865. Under the Johnson Administration, the South was to be reconstructed and restored to the Union, but doing so would involve a crucial transformation of Southern life and of the position of black people in American society.

1.1 The Reconstruction Era

Interpretations of the Reconstruction Era vary greatly. Historian Eric Foner believes that the Reconstruction Era had several major features that were crucial in the process of change in Southern society and in the transformation and alteration of the place of black people in that society. According to Foner, blacks played an active role in the making of Reconstruction. Even during the Civil War, their activeness and willingness forced the nation towards emancipation. After the war, blacks yearned for autonomy and thus pretty much created Reconstruction's political and economic agenda. Although, after the war, they possessed no land, were not educated and earned no money, blacks tried to seize as much independence as possible, consolidate their families and community and above all gain full-fledged American citizenship. The end of the war made that thinkable for them. As Foner states, "the transformation of slaves into free laborers and equal citizens was the most dramatic example of the social and political changes unleashed by the Civil War and emancipation." After 1867, blacks actively participated in Southern society, and that is considered as one of the most radical and revolutionary developments during Reconstruction.³

³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), xxiv-xxv.

Foner also highlighted the fact that Southern society was remodeled in many ways especially changes in relations among white planters, merchants and farmers. Reconstruction brought a whole new structure of Southern society and new systems of organizing labor that were results of cooperation among blacks and whites who were trying to find their place within the new society.⁴

Another significant outcome of Reconstruction was an alteration of racial attitudes, race relations and the interconnection of class and race in the New South. Racism existed in America ever since the Amerindians first met Europeans. It formed a crucial obstacle and rather negative main feature of American history that defined America for centuries. It was, in the post-war era, an obstacle that had to be removed. And so during Reconstruction, some liberal whites began to interact with blacks. Race and class were interrelated, especially in the question of the land and labor. A Washington newspaper in 1868 stated, “It is impossible to separate the question of color from the question of labor, for the reason that the majority of laborers...throughout the Southern States are colored people, and nearly all the colored people are at present laborers.” The crux of the problem was simple – blacks desired political, social and economic independence, while white planters wanted to maintain control over their labor force.⁵

The Reconstruction Era brought changes to laws, constitutional changes and last but not least, the enfranchisement of blacks. The end of the Civil War did not only mean the end of slavery but also the end of the debate over states’ rights. The Federal government now ruled supreme, and thus the federal-state relations were altered too. The new rights of blacks can be considered as yet another significant development produced by Reconstruction.

Historians often argue over when the Reconstruction Era really started. Some say in 1861 while some, like Eric Foner, believe that Reconstruction started on 1 January 1863 with Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation”. On that day, Lincoln declared that all slaves in rebellious states or parts of states shall be “then, thenceforward, and forever free” and that “the executive government of the United States...will do no act...to repress such persons...in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.” What he actually had in mind was for blacks to fight for their freedom in the war, as soldiers of the Union

⁴ Ibid.,xxv.

army. However, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was by no means directed to solve the slavery issue. The slaves were declared free, however in terms of

immediate practical effect it has none; the slaves remaining in precisely the same condition as before. They still live on the plantations, tenant their accustomed hovels, obey the command of their master..., eating the food he furnishes and doing the work he requires precisely as though Mr. Lincoln had not declared them free. ...So long...as the present...status continues, the freedom declared by this proclamation is a dormant, not actual, freedom.

The Proclamation omitted the state of Tennessee and some parts of Virginia and Louisiana. Hence the Proclamation served as a mere war necessity.⁶

At first, the concept of Lincoln's Proclamation was rather vague for blacks, but they soon understood it. Once they knew that it promised freedom to all slaves and blacks who went behind the Union lines, leaving plantations, they hurried to the position of Union armies. This military emancipation meant a rush of thousands of slaves behind Union lines, it promoted abolition in some slave States and also ignited the spark of the final termination of slavery. As well, it caused problems between the United States and the Confederacy. Naturally it angered the South, as a majority of the Southern slaves or then ex-slaves started to join the Union army. Paradoxically, one would have thought that fighting for a nation, black soldiers would be considered as a part it. But it was not so! Jacob D. Cox, Republican Governor of Ohio, argued that "blacks make excellent troops when well officered and disciplined", and their units were officered and disciplined by white officers. Another reason for this, however, was also the fact that whites feared blacks with guns. They were against arming blacks. Finally, April brought the end of the Civil War and the President was occupied with his plans of reunion and peace. His plans for the Reconstruction, however, were not fulfilled as Lincoln was shot dead at Ford's Theatre on 14 April. His successor was Andrew Johnson, a Southern Republican, who was Lincoln's vice-president.⁷

The war had catastrophic consequences on the South; it was completely war-torn. The lands were destroyed, plantations devastated, banks, factories and insurance companies

⁵ Ibid., xxvi.

⁶ J. G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), 379-384.

bankrupt. The South suffered a severe lack of financial resources as well as adverse political conditions. Hence, the rebuilding of the South's facilities and infrastructure was of paramount importance, but the South had no money, as the Confederate dollar was now worthless. The North, however, came to the assistance, providing the necessary reconstruction funding, albeit on unfriendly financial terms. With funding in place, Southerners, whites and blacks, started to work on rebuilding the most severely affected areas. Railroads were reconstructed, manufacturing flourished, and the South began to recover. Agricultural still remained the center of the Southern economy. However, the outcomes of the economic and agricultural transformations of the South were relative and very poor in comparison to the rest of the country.⁸

The new president greatly differed from Lincoln. It is known that Lincoln's plans for the Reconstruction were never fixed but rather flexible and constantly changing. Johnson, being stubborn and rigid in this matter, veered off Lincoln's course of action, following Lincoln's Reconstruction policy only to a slight degree. To Johnson, the most essential factor was the restoration of states' rights. After reorganizing the Southern states and completing their civil governments, he also asked for their readmission to the Union. This meant accepting the senators and representatives from the reorganized states and re-establishing state and federal relations. According to Johnson, the Union and freedom were the two main objectives of the War. However, the South was never fully trusted and was rather under suspicion. According to Henry Ward Beecher in 1865, "its products are rotten....No timber grown in its cursed soil is fit for the ribs of our ship of state or for our household homes. The people are selfish...brittle, and whoever leans on them for support is pierced in his hands. Their honor is not honor, but a bastard quality...."⁹ Many Northerners feared that the Southerners, "rebels", would take over control and therefore wanted their readmission to the Union to be done most carefully. They feared treason. The result was a split within the Republican Party. Hence, a small but extremely influential part of the Republican Party, the Radicals, soon started to dominate and took control over the Reconstruction program. President Johnson was against radical Reconstruction as he aimed to restore the States and did not like slavery either. He met strong opposition, however, and

⁷ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 169; Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 387, 527.

⁸ Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 535-551.

every single proposition he made, such as the vote for black people, was rejected by the South that just did not want to accept defeat and insisted on preserving white supremacy. What was more, in the South, the new legislatures under the Johnson program promoted the Black Codes of 1865.¹⁰

1.2 The Black Codes

Black Codes promoted disfranchisement and racial segregation. Despite the fact that blacks were given the desired freedom, Southerners still found ways to keep them down. The Black Codes were laws, enacted state to state, designed to keep the blacks working and in their proper place, which was thought to be at the very bottom of the social scale. The issue of controlling labor was crucial. Former slaves, now freed, left plantations and did not have to obey their masters anymore. The Black Codes were to limit the economic and physical freedom of black people. The crux of the problem of the white Southerners was the fact that the abolition of slavery did not take the slaves, rather ex-slaves, away. Their problem, as illustrated by a quote in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in 1865, was that blacks remained: “slavery is dead, the Negro is not, there is the misfortune!”¹¹

According to Randall, “In these circumstances, Southern whites believed they faced a social and economic necessity in enacting new codes of legislation for the Negro. The domestic relations of the freedman, his position in court, his obligations to his employer, his relationship to labor contracts, his liability in case of vagrancy and pauperism – all such things had to be dealt with as matters of social legislation.” The Codes established different rules and laws for all states. For instance, in Mississippi and South Carolina, blacks were not allowed to rent land in urban areas, vagrancy and theft were punishable crimes, as were inappropriate gestures and language. In South Carolina, colored people could not become anything but farmers or servants and, as under slavery, could not leave the premises without the permission of their employer. Those blacks who neglected the labor contracts faced whipping, could be sold for involuntary labor or worse. On the contrary, whites in the same situation only faced threat of civil suit.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 567.

¹⁰ Ibid., 566-571.

¹¹ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 31.

¹² Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 572; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 198-201.

By 1866, most of the Southern states allowed blacks to testify on the same terms as whites. However, the final decisions almost always favored white people and discriminated against blacks. The Black Codes aimed to put blacks in an inferior position and restore the system of slavery, as it was a commonly held belief among whites that colored people would never work voluntarily. The Federal government, in the end, combated these Codes as they severely violated the free labor ideology, limited blacks from equal access to economic resources and aimed to place the black population into a subservient position, which was regarded as unconstitutional. As a result, the codes were short lived. But, they would soon be replaced by other equally coercive means.¹³

1.3 The Ku Klux Klan

During the restless days after the Civil War, when the social order was turned upside down, a secret organization, operating during lawless times in the South, was born. It was called the Invisible Empires of the hooded Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The aim of Klansmen was the restoration of the antebellum social order, which meant sending the negroes back to the plantations and putting the planters back in power.¹⁴

The Klan was originally set up as a club in December 1865, in Pulaski, Tennessee, near the Alabama border. The founders were six college students who were previously officers in the Confederate army. These founding fathers chose the name “kuklos” for their new organization, which is a Greek equivalent for the word circle. According to historian David Chalmers, “their problem was idleness, their purpose amusement.” They kept meeting in secret places and kept messing around town, mostly at night. Dressed as ghastly figures, all in white from head to toe, with a hood and a mask, their aim was to frighten. Violence was not an option, but that soon changed.¹⁵

In no time, the ghostly appearances started to have an unexpected effect. The Klan started to attract attention and kept spreading. Soon the purpose of this self-appointed law-and-order movement twisted into something different than just having fun. Intimidation soon turned into violence. The Klansmen saw themselves as the enforcers and not the breakers of the law. “The weak, innocent, defenseless, and oppressed, the Constitution of

¹³ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 199-209.

¹⁴ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1968), 1-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

the United States, and all constitutional laws were to be upheld.” That is how they justified their actions.¹⁶

Once their most powerful means was violence, the Klan started raiding solitary cabins and invading towns. They intimidated, shot, hung, mutilated, stabbed, murdered, burnt alive or lynched. The victims were usually Negroes who were not respectful, joined military or political organization, committed crime, possessed land and prospered, refused to work for a white person, associated with lower white women or talked about equality. The Klan was active in such parts of the South where the percentage of the Negro population was low, such as Tennessee, Carolinas, Mississippi, Arkansas or Texas. The Klan hardly ever reached large cities.¹⁷

The Klan’s membership, discipline and methods, which varied state to state, locality to locality, cannot be properly perceived without acknowledging two facts: newly freed Negroes often formed the majority of the population, and what the Southerners feared the most was, naturally, after years of keeping Negroes in involuntary labor, black insurrection, black domination and black violence. The South was, after the immediate postwar years, characterized by social disorder and insecurity. The Klan’s mission was to restore the social order and deprive Negroes of any political and economic power. The actions of the Klan may well be viewed as an attack against the Southern Reconstruction. The new position of blacks became a threat to Southern white civilization. White Southerners believed that the color of the South was and had to remain white.¹⁸

By 1869, the Klan was outwardly successful yet internally torn-apart. It was composed of numerous autonomous units that became uncontrollable. Its membership began to weaken. The Klan was formally disbanded in January 1869 and came to an end by 1871.¹⁹

1.4 Redemption

The aftermath of the Civil War brought many extraordinary changes into black people’s lives. The antebellum South kept the black population in involuntary servitude and controlled their lives. After the war, things changed. The acquisition of independence

¹⁶ Ibid.,8-10.

¹⁷ Ibid.,10-16.

¹⁸ Ibid.,17-21.

¹⁹ Ibid.,2, 19.

meant that blacks could build their own churches, families were not separated anymore but reunited, black children had a chance to be educated and thus laid a basis for the black community, deeply rooted in slavery but reflecting values and desires resulting from emancipation.²⁰

One of the first major changes in blacks' lives was the Thirteenth amendment of 1865 which set them free from slavery. In 1868 the Fourteenth amendment was ratified, guaranteeing full-fledged citizenship for black people, both men and women. Freed slaves could now carry a gun or have a dog. They did not need to work on the plantations and obey their masters anymore. Therefore, the majority of former slaves left the plantations and migrated to towns in order to find better jobs with higher wages. Colored people could join the Union military, and a white culprit could well be taken by a black soldier. With freedom also came the right to move and travel, and so it applied to picnics, holidays, churches or school celebrations. One of the most beautiful outcomes of the war was the willingness and eagerness of black men and women to find their long lost relatives and the rest of their families that had been sold to a different master. The family reunion was crucial to them as well as a reason to live. That also leads to the year of 1870 when the Fifteenth amendment was ratified, giving black men the right to vote.²¹

The Federal government forced all these changes very fast, too fast for most whites. The white population still perceived the black people as inferior, as those who are supposed to work for them. They wanted to control every aspect of their lives and make them obey. What was more, whites feared that blacks would take over control. And so as prior to the Civil War, they made black people suffer, undergo severe injustice and often treated them cruelly. The sudden changes forced upon the South by the federal government led to a backlash. Southern states rebelled and redeemed themselves. Redemption is commonly known as the restoration of the old democratic Southern white rule. States started redeeming themselves one at a time. The presidential election of 1876 was a complicated battle that set the future course of Reconstruction, and the place of the colored population was yet again at stake. The outcome of these elections was the Compromise of 1877, during which the Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes assumed the presidency and power was returned to the Southern Democrats in almost all former Confederate

²⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 78.

States. The Federal government gave up trying to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments in the South. Blacks were stripped of their rights, Northerners gave in and the overall racist nature of whites won out. The conquering of the West as well as the industrialization of the North were also some of the reasons why the North stopped paying attention to the South. Northerners were tired of the South and the problems it posed, and their attention wandered.²²

Reconstruction as a program terminated in 1877 and failed to secure the rights of black people as American citizens. After twelve years of reconstruction the South ended in almost the same political and social position in which it had begun before the Civil War, and it was back in the Union, casting the final result of the war into doubt. Militarily it was the North that won the war, but in many other aspects and especially in all issues concerning blacks, the ultimate winner was the South. Also, it was the North that heavily invested into the reconstruction of the South. The white racists took over control, being at the top of the social hierarchy, whereas blacks were at the very bottom again. According to historian John Hope Franklin, “Within the states themselves, the Redeemers, the self-styled saviors of the South, in order to secure their position, resorted to ruse, conspiracy, and violations of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. These practices further dulled whatever sense of political integrity remained.”²³ Black people still could vote and hold office after 1877, but step by step, they begun to lose all the essential rights that were closely connected to freedom. After Hayes became president, the Federal government did little to protect black people. Blacks had neither active political party support nor officials willing to enforce constitutional amendments. Even schools then were segregated. The result, according to Franklin, was that “in education, religion, social welfare, and the like, the Negro had to build institutions completely separate from those of the whites. The response to the existence of a white world to which the Negro was denied entrance, these institutions contributed to the emergence of a Negro world with all the trappings of an entirely separate community.”²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 77-88.

²² John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction Era After the Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 209-217.

²³ Ibid., 218.

²⁴ Ibid., 224.

1.5 Black Self-Segregation

In the black community, there were two major features - family and church. In the antebellum years many black families were separated, but the end of the war enabled their reunion. As to churches, after the war, black people could work on their independent black religious life and establish independent black churches and thus segregate themselves from white influence. Black people did not wish to be a part of the white congregations; they wanted to erect their own churches. Furthermore, they wanted land. Originally, some government officials intended to provide the freedmen with a parcel of their old masters' land, but that never happened. Naturally, the blacks desired to buy land and establish their own farms, but most did not have the money to do so.

Another black objective was to get educated. They preferred their own schools and sought out colored teachers. The reason for yearning for education so badly was deeply rooted in the fact that antebellum whites almost always deprived blacks of the possibility to educate themselves. They wanted to learn how to read, in order to read the Bible on their own instead of having others tell them what it said. In addition, whites strongly believed that blacks were not capable of learning. The endeavor of whites to prevent blacks learning to read and write only proved just how much blacks actually wanted to learn. Whites figured that having uneducated blacks working on plantations, plowing, was much easier than having educated ones. Furthermore, they kept blacks isolated from the outside world and thus from ideas and information that could make them reluctant to work or rebellious. Unlike the North, where the public education system started developing in 1830s, the South was dormant in this matter. Southern whites intended to preserve as much of the antebellum social order as possible. Being uneducated in the North meant illiterate and culturally distinct, whereas in the South, being educated meant having to face whippings and having their fingers cut off for it. Plus, developing public schooling in the South would severely weaken the racial justification for servitude. Blacks thus could prove themselves capable of learning on their own and that they do not need to be tamed and civilized.²⁵

Churches served as schoolhouses and played an important role in black education. Churches also addressed and understood blacks' issues and responded to them. Moreover, they helped define blacks culturally and promoted their goal of independence and self-

reliance. Educated clergymen, their wives or congregation members functioned as teachers. Funds raised by the congregations paid the teachers' salaries, or textbooks were bought. School programs reflected community values, had black teachers and most of all, were free of white control. Another essential feature of newly acquired freedom was equal citizenship, all together with equal rights, i.e. voting, serving on juries, holding public office or giving testimony in court. Blacks wanted to be recognized as equal American citizens. They wanted to think for themselves and act for themselves. They sought economic and political control over their lives as well as self-reliance. Separatism was a way that blacks fought for their emancipation, independence from whites and promotion of black nationalism.²⁶

Another way of self-segregating involved the emigration of black people to Arkansas, Indian Territory or Kansas. Others chose to emigrate back home – to Africa. The reason for that was simple. Blacks were tired of constantly having to fight for their lives and freedom and were determined to live somewhere where these obstacles would not await them. The conditions in the South did not persuade them to stay. And, those who stayed behind only did so as they did not have the means to leave. The black back-to-home movement posed a problem for whites because with blacks emigrating they were losing their necessary labor force upon which they depended so greatly.²⁷

As historian William Montgomery states, “One wonders why the nationalism of the late nineteenth century never matured into a massive and powerful civil rights movement. Why did the sorrow and the bitterness of southern black folk not merge with the outrage of articulate nationalists to create a broad-based and unified campaign for freedom and autonomy?” Even though answers to these questions may vary, an interesting suggestion was made by Edwin S. Redkey: “If black nationalism was not...the predominant black reaction to white nationalism, the reason must be sought in the basic optimism of black Americans.”²⁸

²⁵ William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 142-147.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-190.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 190-252.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.

2 PLESSY V. FERGUSON

What followed after the Reconstruction years was a period called the Gilded Age, a term coined by the famous American author Mark Twain. Gilded means covered in a very thin layer of gold, which precisely described the society – things were nice and shiny on the outside but rotten and twisted from the inside. It was also an age of industrialization. Lots of factories were churning out products which were being made by poor people, such as blacks and immigrants, who were working in poor conditions.

The North was changing dramatically. New inventions emerged, such as the telephone, electric light, automobile, airplane or refrigerated railroad cars. A major transformation came in the form of mechanization, which transformed labor. Craftsmanship was replaced by unskilled work forces and assembly lines. Women worked too, and because there were no labor laws, so did children. Injuries and death in factories were common, and few whites cared. Racism kept blacks out of all skilled positions. Manufacturing moved from rural areas to the cities. So did people, in order to look for jobs. Cities became overpopulated, leading to inadequate sanitation, sewage in the streets and the spread of diseases. The life of immigrants was often extremely poor. They lived in so-called tenements which were one room dwellings, accommodating six to seven people.

On the other hand, the South was comparatively stagnant. Whites were owning houses and plantations, and blacks were forced to work on these plantations for very little or no money. They were discriminated against, disfranchised, oppressed and treated as inferiors. Thus, the rights of blacks were jeopardized. What was more, in 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson, a United States Supreme Court decision, legalized racial segregation in all public places in the South.

2.1 The introduction of the “separate but equal” doctrine

According to a Louisiana law from 1890, it was forbidden for blacks and whites to travel in railway carriages together. They thus had to ride in separate sections of a bus or a street car. Homer Plessy, a black man, violated this law and sat in a seat in a coach assigned to white passengers. He was therefore required by the conductor to sit in the part of the train assigned to colored people only, for no other reason than that he was of colored skin. But, he was of mixed descent, more Caucasian than black. Plessy refused to move to the colored section. As a result he was arrested and sent to court, where a judge convicted him for criminally violating the above law. Plessy insisted on the fact that he was not black.

The case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which was to evaluate its constitutionality. Plessy's guilt was upheld.²⁹

There emerged two interesting approaches to this decision, interpreted by Justice Henry Brown and Justice John Marshall Harlan. Brown believed that the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed the equality of both blacks and whites. However, distinctions based upon the skin color could not be abolished and that the social equality, greatly varying from the political one, could not be enforced. However, he stated that the actual segregation did not imply an inferiority of blacks to whites what-so-ever or would not deprive blacks of property. Therefore, he concluded that separation in public places was reasonable.³⁰

Justice Harlan disagreed with this decision. He stated that segregation forces both races to travel separately, and thus it regulates the usage of public transportation merely on the basis of race. He questioned whether it was in agreement with the United States Constitution. According to Harlan, the Constitution is supposed to be color-blind and he believed that all citizens are equal before the law. According to Harlan's beliefs, there should be no superior race in society, no caste in society. Since the law guarantees the equality of all citizens, Harlan highlighted that people, in general, should not be judged by their surroundings or their skin color. Therefore, he found this decision to be a regulation of blacks' rights merely on the basis of race. "Separate but equal" collided with the amendments passed to the United States Constitution that made blacks equal American citizens and guaranteed equal rights to them. This court decision thus deprived blacks of these rights. What Harlan also suggested was that the sixty million whites had no need to fear eight million blacks. Above all, the lives of both races were interrelated and therefore, as Harlan believed, the government should not allow the growth of race hate in the society. Harlan argued that legalizing racial segregation would undoubtedly promote race hate between the two races. Separating citizens, on the basis of race, to Harlan, was a proof of servitude utterly contradicting freedom and equality established by the Constitution.³¹

²⁹ U.S. Supreme Court, "Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)," FindLaw: For Legal Professionals, <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=163&invol=537> (accessed February 24, 2011).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, this court decision promoted the segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, and thus all the public conveyances, i.e. restaurants, schools, theatres, as well as entrances to a restaurant or a bar, waiting rooms, railroad passenger coaches, buses, toilets and basins and others, were to be equal to both races but separated. The “separate but equal” doctrine was born, which was a legal justification of segregation. Not only was it apparent that the facilities for blacks were inferior to those of whites but it was also evident that by separating colored people in this way, whites were trying to place them into a subservient position. Blacks resented this “separate but equal” idea. In some locations, recreational facilities, such as swimming pools, were segregated. It was similar with schools. White kids went to new schools and had new books. Blacks, on the other hand, went to old schools and used second hand books and were cramped into poorly furnished, poorly lighted and non-air-conditioned school buildings. According to the courts, the segregation was acceptable. The only thing the court could not govern was equality. Racial segregation was most apparent in towns and cities, where both blacks and whites lived closely together.

2.2 The Jim Crow laws

The Jim Crow laws or segregation statutes existed from 1876 until 1964 and made racial segregation legal throughout America and mandated in all public places. According to noted historian C. Vann Woodward, racial segregation had its ideological roots in slavery times. Servitude was one of the ways whites tried to keep the Negro in a subordinate position. Racial segregation went hand in hand with slavery, as it was just another name for white supremacy and black inferiority. In slavery, however, racial segregation would have been an obstacle to the Southern system because the contact between the two races was common. Maintenance of order, supervision, and regular medical check-ups all required contact among blacks and whites, unpleasant for both but necessary. Moreover in the antebellum South, there was no need for segregation as the Negroes knew their position established by slavery. However, as Richard C. Wade proved, segregation existed in some of the large antebellum cities. Negroes were denied access to hotels and restaurants. In jails, hospitals and even in cemeteries blacks were separated. In Charleston, Richmond and Savannah, blacks were not allowed to enter certain public

grounds and gardens or were limited to certain hours. Segregation was not complete and never existed in uniform patterns but it appeared and developed along with slavery.³²

The strangest thing about Jim Crow ideology was that it originated in the North and matured before moving to the South. Northern blacks had obvious advantages over the Southern blacks but were constantly aware of the fact that they lived in a society that promoted white supremacy and black subordination. Northerners held a common belief in the incapability of blacks to integrate politically, economically and socially with the white society and assured the Negro of his unimportance. One way of doing so was segregation. As historian Leon Litwack notes, blacks in the North found themselves separated from the whites most of the time. Excluded from railway cars, boats or coaches altogether or required to sit in colored sections and assigned areas in theatres, forbidden to enter restaurants, hotels or resorts, segregated in prisons, hospitals and cemeteries, disfranchised - these were common aspects of their lives. Alexis de Tocqueville, author of *Democracy in America*, wrote about an unbelievable racial bias present in the North: "The prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists; and nowhere is it so intolerant as in those states where servitude has never been known."³³ Thus the North, racist to some extent, was not in the best position to instruct the South in what eventually became the main objective of the war – racial equality.³⁴

The South, defeated in the war, underwent a series of changes that to some extent meant a separation of the two races. Newly freed blacks often left their old masters and wanted to start lives on their own and establish their own black religious institutions. The contact that used to be present between the two races during slavery stopped being an everyday necessity. But the separation was not always voluntary, as whites constantly tried to preserve the old Southern system and social order. Furthermore, the fall of the Southern regime and the start of Reconstruction meant a possibility of black insurrections, riots, and a yearning for revenge that whites feared extremely. One of the responses to this fear was the short-lived Black Codes. Promptly after the end of the war, segregation of the public schools began and prevailed until the first half of the twentieth century. Racial segregation developed in the Reconstruction years and it is believed that the Jim Crow system was born

³² Vann C. Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 11-17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

with the end of slavery. It was not, however, so rigid and complete and it therefore cannot be compared to the Jim Crow laws that started coming into effect in 1876, i.e. before the end of Reconstruction. As Joel Williamson writes in his study of the Negro in South Carolina, “well before the end of Reconstruction, separation had crystalized into a comprehensive pattern which, in its essence, remained unaltered until the middle of the twentieth century.”³⁵ Separation of the two races was a constant white reminder of the black inferiority. The Jim Crow codes very much resembled the Black Codes which were harsh in nature. Rigidity, however, was a typical feature of the segregation codes, applying to schools, houses, restaurants, jobs, hospitals, recreation centers, sports, funeral homes or cemeteries.³⁶

Segregation only flourished and grew into a more universal system after redemption. It continued in schools, hospitals and public places as it had before, sometimes enforced by law, sometimes not. Segregation and discrimination were commonly practiced before they became law. It is true that redemption established the “white rule” and threw blacks back to where they were before the war. They were discriminated against, intimidated, segregated, disfranchised too. But it is wrongly believed that blacks stopped voting completely. On the contrary, although their situation was extremely complicated, they continued voting in some parts of the South for more than two decades after Reconstruction. Whites did not accept that cheerfully but could never ignore it. As long as blacks kept voting, they could be intimidated and hated, but they could never be ignored. Segregation was not a monolithic experience in the South and its strict measures varied from state to state. It is also believed that segregation was not as harsh and rigid in the early years as later.³⁷

Growing tensions between the two races only made the separation stronger and led to adoption of a great number of Jim Crow laws. Before 1900 the majority of Southern states applied segregation to passenger trains. With increasing popularity, the laws started to be adopted to new areas, such as waiting rooms in railway stations and, street cars (adopted by North Carolina and Virginia in 1901, Louisiana in 1902, Arkansas, South Carolina and Tennessee in 1903, Mississippi and Maryland in 1904, Florida in 1905 and Oklahoma in

³⁴ Ibid., 17-21.

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

³⁶ Ibid., 3-10,11-29.

³⁷ Ibid., 31-65.

1907). In 1906, Montgomery, Alabama required a completely separate street car. During these years, segregation was also extended to steamboats.³⁸



Image 2 – Couple sitting in the colored section of ferry (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

The Jim Crow laws were administrated by city ordinances or by local regulations and rules enforced without the formality of laws. The streets and avenues began to fill with signs: “Colored only” or “Whites only.” Sometimes the restrictions went far over the top, limiting blacks to certain inches in a room and in one case to a color of paint. Very often public facilities and their entrances and exits, theatres and boarding houses, toilets and water fountains, waiting rooms and ticket windows were separated.³⁹



Image 3 – Men drinking from segregated water fountains (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

³⁸ Ibid., 97.

³⁹ Ibid., 98.

Furthermore Jim Crow laws became very concerned with the segregation of employees and their working conditions. “In most instances segregation in employment was established without the aid of statute. And in many crafts and trades the written and unwritten policies of Jim Crow unionism made segregation superfluous by excluding Negroes from employment.” For instance, the South Carolina code of 1915 prohibited textile factories from allowing workers of different races working together in the same rooms, using the same entrances or stairs, exits, toilets, basins, cups or glasses. Only firemen, floor scrubbers and repairmen were an exception.⁴⁰



Image 4 – Man drinking at segregated drinking fountains (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

Segregation applied to sports and recreation centers, amusement parks or public parks. An example of separated public parks is the Separate Park Law of Georgia adopted in 1905. A Louisiana law from 1914 extended the separation to circuses and tent shows, assigning the Negro to separate entrances, pay windows and exits. In Birmingham, the separation applied to “any room, hall, theatre, picture house, auditorium, yard, court, ball park, or other indoor or outdoor place” and required that the races had to be “distinctly separated...by well defined physical barriers.” Residential separation of the two races was another type of segregation and developed in several forms. A law that originated in Baltimore in 1910 created white and black blocks in areas inhabited by both races. In Virginia, state law legalized the division of territories into segregated districts and forbade the races from cohabitating.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁴¹ Ibid., 100.



Image 5 – Colored restaurant sign (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

North Carolina and Florida required the separation of textbooks, in hand, on shelves and in cabinets. There were Jim Crow Bibles for black witnesses and elevators for blacks in Atlanta. What was more, there were no laws for separated elevators and Bibles. “It may be confidently assumed – and it could be verified by present observation – that there is more Jim Crowism practiced in the South than there are Jim Crow laws on the books.” Very often laws were not a base to what extent segregation and discriminatory practices prevailed and were practiced. Sometimes these practices followed the laws and sometimes they exceeded them.⁴²

The Southern white opinion also kept changing. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Negroes still voted in large numbers and white Southerners claimed that it was inevitable and desirable for them to vote. However, after severe disfranchisement measures around 1900, blacks stopped voting and white Southerners began to claim that it was unthinkable for them to vote. What did not change was the fact that segregation continued and prevailed until the first half of the twentieth century. “Separate but equal” was not a bad idea as long as the equality of both races was maintained, as long as blacks would be guaranteed the same fundamental rights as whites and would be considered equal American citizens. But this doctrine separated the two races and constantly reminded the Negro of his inferiority and of his place in the society – the very bottom of the social ladder. Therefore “separate but equal” could never work.⁴³

⁴² Ibid., 102

⁴³ Ibid., 105-106.



Image 6 – Store with racist sign in Sumter, South Carolina (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

3 THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

The Progressive Era was a period in American history extending from the 1890s until 1920s. This era was defined by an impulse to try to spread authority and wealth around. Americans wanted equality, and they wanted to improve their lives by improving the welfare of society as whole, not just its certain segments. “The heart of progressivism was the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.”⁴⁴ Two main centers of progressive reforms were big cities in the East and Midwest and also some parts of the South. Mainly people in the cities started to look anew at the society around them. Later changes came in the form of additional electric trolleys, more modern factories, stronger trade unions and denser tenement districts.⁴⁵

Progressivism was a response born in fear as people were scared and they tried to restore order and stability of such an out-of-control society in order to bring opportunity, order, progress and changes to the American political system. However progress does not always necessarily mean good; it more or less connotes a change. Some movements in this era were positive but some were not, propagating possible racist ideas.

The first progressive impulse of the 1890s was Populism, a movement led by farmers and lower class people in the South and West. Black people were involved as well, and it was the first time blacks and whites came together and cooperated in order to cause a change. Populists wanted to return to simpler times when America was focused on farming, not industrialization. Populists therefore held Thomas Jefferson in high esteem, as he wanted a nation of small land owning farmers. They desired a small piece of land, to grow crops and have a fair price for their produce on the market. Hence they organized and started a political party called the People’s Party. This political party, however, was never successful as its members could never unite. They could not agree on a course of action, and more importantly the People’s Party was comprised of both blacks and whites. Race inevitably drove a wedge between them. Instead, whites embraced Herrenvolk Democracy, the idea that equality was based not on class but on skin color.

Another progressive impulse focused on charity. Prior to progressivism, in the 1880s, social Darwinists viewed charity in a rather negative way. Their theory was simple; it was useless to help the weak and the poor as it was a waste of time. The best thing to do was to

⁴⁴ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 166.

let the weak and the poor die and end their ordeal. This approach changed, and some white women started to reach out to blacks, immigrants and poor to help them. The attitudes and minds of Americans began to alter as well; things should not be so laissez-faire, i.e. letting matters resolve themselves.

In 1915, the Progressive Era came to a sudden and temporary hold thanks to World War I. President Wilson declared war on Germany, which sank passenger ship Lusitania, with around hundred of Americans on the board. Immediately Americans got angry and war was fought in racial terms. Germans were considered non-whites, and racist propaganda was used during the war. At the end of the war, which America won, the progressive impulse returned. This impulse was directed against a new political and threatening ideology – communism. Americans were scared to death and saw communism as a horrible threat. This fear ultimately led to the rise of nativism, anti-immigrant approach to protect the pure American nation which feared foreigners. As a result another progressive impulse emerged, The Red Scare, which mainly trying to regain order and protect America from communism.

3.1 The N.A.A.C.P.

During the progressive years there was yet another progressive impulse that mainly supported and fought for black people. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was a black organization started in 1909 by a group of black intellectuals. They began pushing for equality and their main goal was to secure the basic rights for black people, which were supposed to be guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment. It was fascinating that then, in times of extreme racism and also racist approaches of some of the progressive leaders like Roosevelt himself, an organization like the N.A.A.C.P. was born. As an organization it was flexible in its tactics and strategies, capable of adjusting to changing economic and political environment. The N.A.A.C.P. was devoted to the struggle of black people and believed in the importance of laws and the state as a guarantor of social order and its deep faith in the assimilability of minority groups. The N.A.A.C.P. tried to change the American race system and race relations by involving itself in court cases concerning segregation and disfranchisement. For instance the association

⁴⁵ Ibid., 164-168.

started public protests against Jim Crow and was against showing an extremely racist D.W. Griffith's movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915.⁴⁶

Most importantly the association is well-known for its efforts to protect the basic rights and freedom of black people threatened especially by criminal injustice and mistreatment as well as by lynchings. The N.A.A.C.P. thus developed campaign that was to bring lynching to national awareness.



Image 7 – Stop lynching button (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

Mistreatment took place in both the South and the North and it was against lynchings to which the association devoted most of its energy and money. These undying efforts ultimately led to an Antilynching bill. In 1933 the association drafted the bill for a presentation to the Senate. Its main objectives were to bring mob murders and lynchings to halt and turn them into punishable crimes. Victims of lynchings were mainly blacks. The Association in its vigorous anti-lynching campaign tried to get the public support and was also issuing a monthly publication, *The Crisis*, which was devoted to various issues concerning blacks. For instance it outlined the development of the bill or in 1934 it wrote about a horrific story of the lynching of Claude Neal, a young Negro arrested for a murder and ultimately seized by mobs and hung. By these, the N.A.A.C.P. stressed pressing issues and inability and reluctance of local and state officials to proceed to any actions to protect Neal whatsoever. It requested the Justice Department in Washington to intervene, but with no federal act against lynching the government chose not to intervene. In 1935, public approval of the anti-lynching bill grew. Although the bill never became law it surely had an impact on the race relations scene. It brought a widespread interest in lynching and significantly attracted public attention. During the first half of 1934 it was reported that no

⁴⁶ August Meier and John H. Bracey, Jr., „The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: „To Reach the Conscience of America,“ *The Journal of Southern History* 59, no. 1 (February 1993), 3-10.

lynchings occurred. And thanks to the discussion over the federal legislation against lynchings there was a significant decline in mob violence and even the lynchings decreased remarkably. The N.A.A.C.P. considerably helped in the fight for black people's rights and its involvement in the anti-lynching campaign was extremely contributory.⁴⁷

During and following World War I. there was a major migration of black people to the North in order to better their lives and find a job. The association started to hire black staff, which meant that the popularity of the association grew among black people and by 1920 it was mostly sponsored by membership fees.⁴⁸

In the 1930s the association was still devoted to its main objectives: equal citizenship rights and decreasing racial discrimination. The association initiated the Garland Fund, fighting against educational discrimination in the South and thus attacking exclusion of black people from professional and graduate schools and aiming to stop segregation. It was calling for equal salaries, equally long duration of school terms and equal facilities in schools. This plan was later adopted by the border states, the upper South and finally the deep South as well.⁴⁹

The Great Depression and economic collapse affected the association's activities and programmes. The association began to apply pressing economic issues to its agenda. Within the New Deal programs blacks faced inequities such as unequal salaries or exclusion from certain professions. The N.A.A.C.P. spotted these kinds of discrimination and fought against them. For instance it established contacts with the New Deal leaders such as Eleanor Roosevelt, who, unlike her husband, was extremely supportive of the association.⁵⁰

When World War II broke out, the association became yet more considered with the economic matters. The economy for war created jobs which mainly whites benefited from and blacks found themselves still struggling with depression. Although racial tension and even rioting was still present in America attitudes began to change. White public opinion

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2210346> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁴⁷ Robert L. Zangrando, „The NAACP and the Antilynching Bill, 1934-1940,“ *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no. 2 (April 1965), 106-117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2715996> (accessed April 2, 2011).

⁴⁸ August Meier and John H. Bracey, Jr., „The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: „To Reach the Conscience of America,“ 10-11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

on racial inequality changed and set a different public climate, which encouraged the association to press for rights and equality even more forcefully.⁵¹

One of the association's big concerns was its campaign aimed against Jim Crow. In 1954 the Supreme Court accepted the N.A.A.C.P.'s argument in the *Brown v. Board* case that separate schools were unequal and thus it contributed to its ultimate victory. Ever since then the association never stopped believing in and kept supporting blacks in their fight for equality. It also successfully lobbied the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And it was the N.A.A.C.P.'s executive secretary that incorporated a strong employment antidiscrimination clause which became part of the 1964 Act. Although its membership and leadership role has declined, its involvement and support of black issues was undoubtedly contributory.⁵²

3.2 World War I. – The Great Migration (1916-1930)

During and immediately after World War I., the mass movement of black southerners to northern cities started. For many black southerners the North became a land of hope and they envisioned it as a land of opportunity. They believed that their future laid in the North. When the war broke out there was naturally a need for soldiers and therefore many white Northerners were leaving to fight in the war. Most black people were not allowed to fight in the war, nor could they carry a gun. But, somebody had to work in factories which ultimately led to jobs available in the North. Black people took the opportunity to move to the North in a search for better lives. Some blacks decided to move to the West but most colored people left for the North. One of the destinations that attracted most black southerners was Chicago.

Many black people were coming to Chicago with no prospects and only a vague dream of achieving something. They experienced a series of shocks and surprises to what they were used to in the South. Richard Robert Wright, coming from Georgia, on his way to Chicago, remembered how he entered the "white people's coach." At the first empty seat, Wright took a significant step away from the southern way of life he had known during his twenty-one years: he sat down... "Here I was sitting beside a white man, and he said

⁵¹ Ibid., 20-22.

⁵² Ibid., 24-29.

nothing. He did not try to make me get up or in any way embarrass me.”⁵³ It seemed to him that the North, unlike the South, did not have the traditional prescribed racial roles and was taken aback. Noticing a work crew along the railroad tracks, he took note of their color:

I had seen hundreds and hundreds of gangs of black men working on railroads, but I had never seen such a gang of white men. I had seen white bosses but not white laborers. My eyes and mouth were wide open as I stared at this unusual spectacle, white laborers were acting like Negro-Americans, except that Negro-Americans sometimes sang as they worked...I felt that there must be a mistake.⁵⁴

Another young southerner Richard Wright, coming from Mississippi, also encountered one of many surprises. He realized that the white sitting next to him seemed unconscious of his blackness. What was more, “black people and white people moved about, each seemingly intent upon his private mission. There was no racial fear. Indeed, each person acted as though no one existed but himself.”⁵⁵ The two Wrights were not famous and well-known like the prominent Georgia educator and bishop, Robert Richard Wright, or the author of *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, Richard Wright. But as many other participants of the Great Migration, they ventured to the North to better their condition. Although they soon realized that Chicago had its own racial patterns, written and unwritten laws, types of discrimination, only the most low paying jobs were available and that it would require their adjustment to these patterns, to them, it also promised hope and opportunity start their lives anew.⁵⁶

The Great Migration attracted the attention of thousands of black southerners to the northern industrial world. Northern employers first refused to recruit blacks as long as there were white immigrants available, but only until the war stopped the immigration. After that, white employers suffered a serious wartime labor shortage. Therefore during 1916-1919, half a million of black people decided to seek a better future in the North, followed by another million of blacks in the 1920's. New York's, Detroit's and especially Chicago's black population increased especially thanks to new employment opportunities.⁵⁷

⁵³ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

During the Great Migration black southerners had to adjust to the northern industrial cities and also change their perception of this new environment. The Great Migration was also significant for the changing wartime labor market and also for the development of northern urban black communities. Entering the industrial economy, the Afro-American working class began to shape. Not only did black people have the opportunity to work in factories and earn money, but they could also send their kids to good schools, had the right to vote and thus participate in the affairs, share public conveyances with other Americans and most importantly to live a life free from racial fears and injustices so typical for the South. Coming from such a society, they too could enjoy this liberating experience; American freedom and prosperity.⁵⁸

However, earning regular wage, going to a school or entering a voting booth did not lead to a full participation in the economic, social and political life. Even though black southerners gained certain social position and black communities were to some extent united with white Chicagoans, black could never be accepted as equal fellow citizens. What black people sought was freedom, but they soon realized that it would take more than the Great Migration to gain it.⁵⁹

Another problem came with the end of the war. When white soldiers returned, black people did not leave. They stayed. Blacks holding positions, which whites believed they had the right to, ultimately angered whites. That led to yet another, rather negative, progressive response; the rise of the 2nd Ku-Klux-Klan.

3.3 The 2nd Ku-Klux-Klan

In 1915, D.W. Griffith released the now infamous *Birth of a Nation*, a movie, which to some was shocking and inflammatory and to others, like President Wilson, seemed fair and true. In the first part of the movie, Griffith, using innovative and creative techniques, depicted “the arrival of the first bondsmen, how the New England slavers profited from the trade, and how the Negro lived a not unhappy life on the Southern plantations.”⁶⁰ Then the Civil War came with its consequences, putting brother against brother and son against son. On the contrary, Griffith told a love story and portrayed the humiliated and defeated South.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4-9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 259-265.

⁶⁰ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 25.

The special score, written for a thirty-piece pit orchestra, wove in Negro spirituals with passages from the classics....It was full of memorable scenes of battle and of the returning soldier, of Mae Marsh as the little sister who threw herself over the cliff to die rather than yield her honor, and of Lillian Gish as Stoneman's daughter besieged in the cabin by the lust-crazed freedman....A bugle blast from the pit brought the audience shouting to its feet as the hooded horsemen rode to the rescue....The scene shifted back and forth between the approaching Klansmen and the pale heroin in the cabin surrounded by frenzied blacks.⁶¹

Undoubtedly, the movie became a thriller. Its original title was to be *The Clansmen* but suggested by Reverend Dixon, the title then was changed to *The Birth of a Nation*. This picture indeed was shocking, protested and almost banned in many cities such as New York, Boston or Massachusetts. Despite the censorship, people loved the movie and the cinemas were full. The movie ultimately attracted around nine million viewers, making it the most successful film to date. Ultimately an idea arose; with this movie being such a success, why not to revive the Klan itself?⁶²

The stories of how was the 2nd KKK reborn vary. Some connected it to the Griffith's movie, like William J. Simmons – the 2nd KKK's founder. Being confined to a bed after a serious car crash, he carefully conspired all the details, he gathered new members, including two members of the original klan, and the right time to act was with *The Birth of a Nation's* opening. On the day the movie opened, an advertisement of "The World's Greatest Secret, Social, Patriotic, Fraternal, Beneficiary Order" appeared right next to Griffith's movie advertisement. In no time, Simmons attracted more than ninety followers. At the beginning, the klan was not devoted to night rides but stressed pure Americanism and the supremacy of the white race. When America entered the war, the klan found its real purpose and goal; fighting for the race and nation. They feared the foreign influence and racial impurity and anyone who would challenge traditional American values. They were active and violent and terrorized not just blacks but Jews, Catholics and foreigners in general. In 1924 The National Origins Act was passed, cutting immigration and banning immigrants from Asia completely. Americans believed that a large amount of foreigners

⁶¹ Ibid., 26.

⁶² Ibid., 22-27.

were a direct threat to America. That was a paradox as America was supposed to be the land of the free but instead America passed laws to restrict immigrants.⁶³



Image 8 – Four klansmen about to take off for a leaflet raid (photo: Profimedia.CZ)

The terror and violence went too far. As David M. Chalmers, the author of *Hooded Americanism*, suggested:

Probably if the Klan had grown more slowly and more carefully, free from excessive exploitation and misdirection from on top, it might have found an enduring place in the world of American in-group fraternalism. All of the necessary resources had been there. The failure of the Ku Klux Klan to anchor itself as a successful feature in American life was due to its own ineptness than any other cause or combination of factors. The decline of the Klan as a mass movement in America was its own fault, nobody else's.⁶⁴

By 1919 the klan had several thousands members and by 1924 around four million members. As the klan's membership increased so did the violence, and something had to be done about it. A bill that proposed a death penalty for a hooded assault was dropped, but a strong anti-mask law was passed. Gradually the klan began to lose its members and its power declined.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 28-48.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 28-48.

4 THE GREAT DEPRESSION

In 1929, the U.S. Stock Market crashed, which inevitably led to a period in American history known as The Great Depression. One of the major causes of the crash was margin trading, i.e. buying stocks on margin, which can be very lucrative as long as the stock market goes up. However, when the market went down, investors began receiving margin calls they could not cover. As a result, their positions were liquidated, causing the market to go down even further. The Republican administration took a laissez-faire response to depression, believing that the government should not intervene but should let matters sort themselves out with the understanding that there would be casualties. The American people, many of whom were suffering greatly, did not agree with this approach and in 1930 elected a Democratic president.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt promised A New Deal to America that would return it to the economic prosperity of the 20s. To do so, he kept people busy through a series of “alphabet soup” programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Roosevelt also appeased the populace through weekly fireside chats, in which he was ensuring Americans that everything would be alright. However, not everything was alright. The middle white class was competing with the lower black class over jobs, which angered whites and resulted in increased sufferings among black people. Whites often turned to violence against blacks, lynching them or burning them to death.



Image 9 – Farmers around hung black man, Royston, Georgia (photo: Profimedia.CZ)



Image 10 – Men displaying body of a lynched victim, St. Joseph, Missouri
(photo:Profimedia.CZ)



Image 11 – Two black men are lynched in the public square in Marion, Indiana
(photo:Profimedia.CZ)

Incredible cruelty, violence and racial segregation, which still strongly ruled the days, not only separated the two races but also supported whites in their belief that blacks were not even worth respect. Not only did it deprive blacks of their fundamental rights but it also created an unbelievable racial bias with which whites treated blacks. It was supposed to be separate but equal but it was rather separate and unequal. As a doctrine it could never work in the society.

Harvard Sitkoff in his book, *A New Deal for Blacks*, argues that the New Deal years were a turning point in history of America's race relations as they constituted a "watershed of developments whose outgrowth was a broad-based social movement aimed at bringing

about a fuller participation of blacks in American society”,⁶⁶ and thus he believes that it was during the Great Depression years when the civil rights movement began. Despite the fact that the new deal years were a turning point in race relation trends, the author argues that the early new deal years brought a little improvements as most of the national leaders, particularly Roosevelt himself, were reluctant to the racial issue. But he emphasizes that after 1935 blacks received a better treatment from the Roosevelt administration, especially thanks to Eleanor Roosevelt, under whose influence President Roosevelt decried lynching, publicized the plight of blacks and defied Jim Crow laws in public meeting places. Sitkoff focuses also on the institutions and individuals, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, that changed the minds and attitudes of whites and gave blacks hopes for the future. Separate chapters of Sitkoff’s book, treating blacks’ involvement in politics and labor movement, show that as a result, blacks became involved in government and labor unions and voted in large numbers. There is a reason that it was during the Roosevelt administration that the Democratic Party became the party of black people. Blacks, although still facing segregation and being considered second-class citizens, started realizing the benefits and joined the Roosevelt coalition. They saw the possibility of change and believed that a new turn in American history was to come. And although the society remained segregated at the beginning of the World War II., dramatic changes in government, constitutional law and concept of race itself took place and crucial steps were taken to cast the racial injustice and bias, present in the great depression era, aside. Thus black were not alone in their fight for equality and rights and became more confident, stronger and determined. Therefore Sitkoff also concludes that in the 1930s something utterly essential happened that rose blacks’ expectations, decreased black powerlessness and white hostile approach began to diminish. By 1940 racial attitudes of white Americans altered considerably and the doctrine of black inferiority was rejected. According to author, the Great Depression Era was a period of a major transformation and emerging forces which built a vital foundation for more promising environment for black rights and aspirations. Thus the seeds of racial progress were sowed.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Dan T. Carter, review of *A New Deal For Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade*, by Harvard Sitkoff, *The American Historical Review* 84, no. 5 (December 1979), 1495. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1861697> (accessed March 26, 2011).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1494-1495; Charles H. Martin, review of *A New Deal For Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade*, by Harvard Sitkoff, *The Journal of American*

The New Deal did not work, however, and Roosevelt's economic policies did not pull the USA out of depression. The only thing that put America out of depression was the World War II.

4.1 World War II. – Blacks at War

World War II led to wartime economic productivity that ultimately ended depression. However, the 1930s were a time of great upheaval, not just in the USA but around the world. When the Japanese suddenly attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, America was pushed into the war and consequently declared war on both Japan and Germany. The need for soldiers was enormous, and because the soldiers were needed so desperately, black soldiers went to war too.

However, what blacks experienced in Europe was shocking to many of them. They were treated nicely by Europeans. They were allowed to sit in cafes with them, talk to them, eat and drink with them; there were no laws against being black, no racial segregation. Public facilities were not taboo anymore and blacks started to realize that striking difference. Equality and liberty was common in Europe, and it was what they were deprived of in America, where they were discriminated against, segregated and lynched. What they experienced in Europe awakened their sense of entitlement, i.e. they were entitled to liberty and to be equal as well. Blacks fought hard in the war and died fighting for democracy. Naturally they felt like they deserved some democracy and rights too.

At the end of the war black soldiers had to return back to discrimination, hatred and public humiliation. Once blacks returned they were treated cruelly. It was those black men who fought in the war, altogether with whites, and died there fighting for the same reason, that were now treated like that; without respect. That ultimately led to the fact that blacks were finished with such unfair treatment and began pressuring for their rights. Roosevelt also made sympathetic Supreme Court appointments that laid groundwork for overturning the earlier Plessy v. Ferguson court decision and thus paved the way for Brown v. Board.

That was a spark that ignited the civil rights' hope and the seeds for the Civil Rights Movement were sown.

5 BROWN V. BOARD

Oliver Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, overturned, in 1954, the 1896 court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It made segregation in public schools illegal. It was not “separate but equal” anymore but “together and equal.” And also the beginning of the end of the Jim Crow career was thus marked. As the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court stated,

We cannot turn the clock back to 1896 when *Plessy v. Ferguson* was written. We must consider public education in the light of its full development and its present place in American life. Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children, generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. We conclude that in the field of public doctrine “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.⁶⁸

A very extraordinary experiment was carried out, by Doctor Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie, called the Clark Doll Test. In this test black children were given a choice between a black and white doll. Both dolls were the same except for their skin color. Black children tended to choose the white doll as they believed it was nicer. And they chose the black doll as the bad one. Doctor Clark also found out that black children who attended segregated schools and were thus separated by race were more likely to choose the white doll as they perceived it as a nicer one. This test showed that black children were affected by segregation and that “separate but equal” did not maintain the promised equality. The Clark Doll Test helped to prove that the “separate but equal” was immoral and against the law and ultimately, in 1954, helped to persuade the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board* case to end such unjust treatment against blacks. That was the beginning of the declining years of Jim Crow.⁶⁹

Southern whites adjusted to these changes gradually. According to an editorial in a Tennessee newspaper, the *Brown v. Board* decision “is not going to bring overnight revolution but the South is and has been for years a land of change. Its people - of both

⁶⁸ Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 147.

⁶⁹ Abagond, “The Clark Doll Experiment,” Abagond, <http://abagond.wordpress.com/2009/05/29/the-clark-doll-experiment/> (accessed March 26, 2011).

racess - have learned to live with change. They can live with this one. Given a reasonable amount of time and understanding, they will.”⁷⁰ Jim Crow still existed but its foundations were shaken. Blacks, knowing the law and the courts were on their side, they were ready to assert their rights for passionately than ever. Fears and insurrection spread within the South. Whites tried to preserve segregation. There were several attacks against the N.A.A.C.P. members and adoption of pro-segregation measures and bills in 1956 by five Southern states – Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia – that intended to ignore the Supreme Court’s decision. These were obstacles to the process of desegregation. Two and a half years that followed the decision were rather underwhelming and in some states the rule of segregation remained unbroken. In some states like Tennessee, Texas, Kentucky and West Virginia there were series of violent attacks against black pupils in public schools which were to be segregated.⁷¹

The federal government initially did nothing to enforce the law. Similarly, both the Democratic and the Republican national conventions that debated desegregation in rather vacuous way and also to President Eisenhower who himself thought that “you cannot change people’s hearts merely by law.”⁷² Some schools were closed to prevent integration. And even the president himself believed that integration should proceed slowly. Desegregation in the South became dormant and stagnant, and resistance in the South against the desegregation rule stiffened. The South showed no signs of compliance and even boasted of its civil disobedience.⁷³

5.1 Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement really started in 1954 with the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board*. However, whites did not like it one bit. Just because the law was passed it did not mean that they would abide it. Black people thus had to fight for their equality and rights. First person to do so was Rosa Parks, a black woman who was riding a city bus in Alabama and refused to give up her seat to a white person as the law was on her side. Shockingly, she was arrested. Black people therefore responded by boycotting the

⁷⁰ Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 150.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 150-162.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 163-168.

Montgomery buses. Their message was simple – if the federal law is not obeyed then they will not ride the buses for the next year. And so black walked or rode bikes as they knew the federal law was on their side. It was hard on them but they understood the pure American character. If a social change was to be promoted then it would not be done through violence but through economics. Blacks did not fight for their rights by using physical power but by using economic pressure. Montgomery bus boycott lasted a year and was completely successful. This was a point of the great awakening for the Southern blacks who were now becoming braver.

The so called “sit-ins” were another way of non-violence protests which originated in North Carolina, where four black college boys politely asked for a coffee but were refused to be served. They thus sat in silently to protest. This way of protesting soon became extremely popular and effective and in a month it spread to seven other Southern states. “Negroes were in charge of their own movement now, and youth was in the vanguard.”⁷⁴ Black people became stronger, surer and braver. Segregation foundation began to fall apart as the sit-ins spread to fight segregation in hotels, theatres, public parks, swimming pools, churches, libraries and beaches with minimal violence. Minimal violence was the philosophy of the most conspicuous Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr. Known as the father of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was a middle class, well-educated black Christian from the South who believed that the best way to achieve equality was through non-violence, i.e. sit-ins, boycotts or marches. “We will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer and in winning our freedom we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process.”⁷⁵ Another significant persona of the Civil Rights Movement was Malcolm X. Malcolm X came from a lower class family, from a Northern ghetto and had a difficult childhood. Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm believed that violence should be fought with violence, even if it meant killing whites and supported the well-known “an eye for an eye” theory. Despite the fact that the two men had totally different approach to the black issue, the Civil Rights Movement would not have been successful if it had not been for both men.

However whites immediately responded to the non-violence protests with violence against blacks as they tried to preserve as much of the segregation as possible and thus they

⁷⁴ Ibid., 170.

strongly resisted the *Brown v. Board* decision. They began to join the KKK which in 1950's counted around four million members. Therefore as a result, lynchings, beatings, threats and also bombings, usually targeted at the Negro movement headquarters or its leaders, increased. For whites, especially in the South, black people were lesser life forms, good only for hard work and servitude. The best example of increased violence against black people is Emmett Till's case. A black boy, who was kidnapped, murdered and whose body was found severely mutilated. Emmett's mother did an extraordinary thing, however, when she decided to leave Emmett's casket open during his funeral so that everybody could see his butchered body and what whites did to him. And since journalists attended the funeral, pictures of Emmett soon flew around the world depicting cruelty whites were capable of. This really boosted the Civil Rights Movement and gave it strength. Eisenhower and his Conservatives did little to help blacks but that was to change.

In 1960 the American character, defined by conservatism, began to change when both major national parties' conventions supported anti-segregation and approved of the peaceful sit-in demonstrations. John F. Kennedy became president, determined to support the Negro movement and help black people to fight for their rights. He pronounced the *Brown* decision both "legally and morally right" and was devoted to enforce federal courts orders for desegregation in public schools.⁷⁵ He could not, however, fulfill his promise as he was shot by a lone gunman in 1963. Fighting for blacks thus started to be a seriously dangerous business. Kennedy's successor was Lyndon B. Johnson who pushed the Movement forward, and on 2 July 1964 the Civil Rights Act was passed, giving blacks, along with women and other minorities, legal equality and banning Jim Crow discrimination in hotels, restaurants, theaters and all public accommodations. Immediately this became Johnson's most powerful and monumental step towards civil rights. Another major progressive change, giving the Civil Rights Movement strength, was signed by the president on 6 August 1965 – the Voting Rights Act, guaranteeing the right to vote for all American citizens of the age of eighteen, regardless of sex, race or belief. That was the end of Jim Crow. That was the end of segregation. The law was on black people's side. They could put their fears, frustrations and bitterness of the Jim Crow ordeal behind them and

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

look forward to the future with new hopes and confidence. Discrimination and segregation still flourished but there were legal means to deal with it.⁷⁷

New hopes were connected to certain assumptions. First was that the legal end of the discrimination led to the end of abuse which was outlawed. The second one was that the flawed Jim Crow system was responsible for all the troubles of its victims. These assumptions, however, were completely misguided. Just because the laws were passed it did not mean that the minds of whites changed. On contrary, they strongly resisted. What followed signing the Voting Rights Act is known as the worst outbreak of racial violence in American history. A series of race riots occurred across the USA. The worst of them all broke out in LA in 1965, then in Chicago in 1966 and in Detroit in 1967. Not just the South but the whole America thus became a violent place in the sixties and from 1965 to 1968 flaming cities and smoking ruins regularly appeared in newspapers and television.. In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated and the same destiny awaited Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. Robert Kennedy, J.F.K.'s brother, who ran for president in 1968, was a supporter of black rights as well. He was shot dead in California. Riots mainly took place within Negro districts, and blacks did not attack whites but the symbols of white authority, i.e. white property, firemen or police whose behavior was often abusive, discriminatory and made blacks feeling powerless. The main aim of blacks was to punish white offenders against the black community. Black people refused to tolerate the old injustices anymore. Their expectations were higher and their patience lower. And what was more, there was a significant psychological shift in black people's minds. They were braver and stronger and determined to gain what they deserved. Soon there were both political and economic gains and blacks were moving from segregation to integration. Even though their journey to freedom and equality was thorny, it was successful in the end.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid., 180-188.

CONCLUSION

In 1955, the severely mutilated body of Emmett Till was found. His kidnappers and murderers, despite them being guilty, were found innocent. Both murderers even confessed, yet still walked free:

Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers - in their place - I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was a few people got put on notice. As long as I live I can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we've got some rights. I stood there in the shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. "Chicago boy," I said, "I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you - just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."⁷⁹

In 2004, fifty years after the official end of racial segregation, Emmett's case was reopened by the United States Department of Justice, and his murderers were found guilty. Unfortunately both culprits were dead for some time and thus were never punished for what is believed to be the worst example of racial violence which ultimately defined America. However, as M.M. Russell suggests in his article about the reopening of Emmett's case, the reopening can serve another purpose; reminding communities that certain past events, previously treated unjustly, deserve to be reviewed and corrected. Even though the reopening of Emmett's case might not have any lasting effect, it did deserve, as a moral issue, the search for justice.⁸⁰

The reopening of Emmett's case, and the conclusions drawn, clearly prove that the "separate but equal" approach never worked. It was supposed to guarantee separation but equality and the same rights for both blacks and whites, which did not happen. Blacks were deprived of their fundamental rights for years, treated unjustly, discriminated, lynched and killed. Emmett Till is an unfortunate example of such racial injustice. If the idea had

⁷⁸ Ibid., 189-220.

⁷⁹ M. M. Russell, "Reopening the Emmett Till Case: Lessons and Challenges for Critical Race Practice," *Fordham Law Review* 73, no.5 (2005), 2103, <http://law2.fordham.edu/publications/articles/500flspub10843.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2011).

worked as it should have, Emmett's killers would have been punished right away. Or even better, Emmett would have been still alive.

Special thanks to Profimedia.cz and CorbisPictures for allowing me to use their authentic, copyrighted photographs.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2130-2132.

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