

## **From Jim Crow to Civil Rights**

by

William H. Chafe

In the 1990s, Charles Jones recalled delivering clothes and toys to sharecroppers at Christmastime in North Carolina some four decades earlier. It was at the height of the Jim Crow era. The Agifts@ had been sent by northern churches to be distributed by Jones= father, a minister, to those less fortunate than their northern brethren. In order to get access to the sharecroppers, Jones remembered, his father had to secure the permission of the white landlord to enter his plantation. He would shuffle and defer to the white landlord, Jones noted, but AI remember when we left, him looking at me and kind of winking [as if to say] >that=s the only way we can get back here=.@ The son later chose a different tack, joining civil rights demonstrators, becoming a leader in the world-wide youth movement; but he also understood the world his father inhabited, and how much his father had achieved Aby being wise enough to know what to say, how to say it, how to position your body in a submissive position so as not to [alienate the owner].@ Reflecting on this experience later, Jones developed a new appreciation for what his father had

accomplished. AI began to understand my father=s restraint, my father=s wisdom B because it was more important to accomplish a common object with dignity than to challenge at every stage everything. . . that white males were confronting us with. So we assumed the higher ground, took all the rhetoric that the Christian white church and the constitution had taught us, and beat the devil out of them with it.@

This vignette, taken from one of more than twelve hundred interviews compiled by the ABehind the Veil@ project at Duke University, speaks in myriad ways to the rich, complicated, heroic, and ultimately ambiguous texture of African American lives in the era of segregation. By dint of circumstance and necessity, there had to be role-playing B holding one=s hat, acting the part of servant to the white master; but there was, in addition, transcendence and purposefulness B defining a goal, reaching out to achieve it, using whatever means were available to secure the victory at hand. And there was also a community B churched people in the north ready to stand in solidarity and support, congregants in the south prepared to use the one institution they controlled and shaped, to deliver on a promise and keep intact a dream. The excerpted interviews that appear in this volume represent the rich diversity of those experiences.

The ABehind the Veil@ project began at the end of the 1980s. It grew out of the lessons that many of us learned as a result of

doing research on civil rights and labor history. There, we discovered that however much written sources such as newspapers, government documents, or manuscript collections of individual leaders might tell us, those sources most often reflected the perspective of powerful, rich, and primarily white male historical participants. Far less present in those written sources were the perspectives of black, working class, or women citizens. Yet civil rights and labor history can only be understood by listening to the voices of those who generated, shaped and carried forward those movements.

There was only one way to discover those voices: using oral history to reach out to the ordinary men and women who otherwise would not be represented. Clearly, one could not write the history of the Southern sit-in movement or the direct action student movement without talking to the individuals who brought those movements to life. Police reports or government documents represented only one side of the story. As a result, oral history became the pivotal research instrument for recovering and giving visibility to the historical actors who occupied center stage in the story being told.

Largely because oral history proved so indispensable to recent civil rights and labor history scholarship, the question inevitably arose of why we did not use this valuable tool to recover the historical experience of others whose voices have

long been muted or ignored. Nowhere was that need more clear than in seeking to understand the experience of African Americans who lived during the age of Jim Crow. And in no instance was there greater urgency to move forward immediately to recover that experience, lest death take from future historians the rich source base necessary to understand better this critical era.

This need was made all the more urgent by the relatively Aflat@ nature of existing historiography on the age of segregation. Virtually every student of American history understood, from Rayford Logan and others, that this was the Anadir@ period of African American history, a time of severe legal, economic, political and social oppression, all reinforced by the pervasive threat of extralegal violence, especially lynching. C. Vann Woodward had earlier traced for us the inauguration of this era with the infamous Compromise of 1877, when Republican politicians sold out the civil and political rights of black Americans by removing the federal troops who were stationed in the South to enforce Reconstruction in return for electors from southern states casting their votes for the Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, in the disputed Tilden/Hayes election. From that point forward, the Aequal protection@ supposedly guaranteed to black citizens under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment disappeared in practice, helping to usher in and legitimize the era of disenfranchisement that occurred in the 1890s, and the

reign of Jim Crow segregation statutes that were ultimately sanctioned by the Supreme Court in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case.

Despite the excellent work of historians in documenting the emergence of this citadel of oppression, however, little was written about the actual experience of black Americans during the age of segregation. One learned about the crusade of W.E.B. DuBois to fight Jim Crow, about the great migration of the World War One period and the terrorizing race riots that followed the Armistice, about the Harlem Renaissance and the achievements of black writers and artists. But there was no larger sense of what occurred in the everyday lives of blacks from the 1890s through the onset of World War Two. Instead of being understood as a time of complexity and struggle, the Jim Crow era appeared as a barren wasteland of oppression. It was almost as though the Stanley Elkins model of a Aclosed system,@ with no outlets, that had once been applied to slavery, now had become the prism through which we understood the era of Jim Crow.

This was all the more anomalous given the degree to which slavery and reconstruction historiography had undergone a sea change in the 70s and 80s, with a new focus on black agency and institutional development. From Eugene Genovese=s **ROLL JORDAN ROLL**, to Herbert Gutman=s **THE BLACK FAMILY IN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM**, a generation of historians had dismantled simple

stereotypes about black life on the plantation and as freedmen. Variety, not uniformity, became the watchwords to describe the multiple ways African Americans dealt with family, religion, making a living, and finding means of preserving pride and maintaining some forms of self-determination, even in the face of pervasive structures of oppression. The new historiography privileged the traditions African Americans had preserved from their own histories, as well as their creativity in adapting the rules and regulations they were forced to live with to develop their own instruments of resistance and self-affirmation. What had once been a stark portrait in black and white became, as a result of this scholarship, a tapestry woven of multiple colors, with diverse themes and sub-themes, all highlighting the multiple dimensions of the African American experience.

A similar richness of scholarly endeavor emerged in the scholarly rendering of the civil rights era. Initially, historians focused on the heroic national struggle that culminated in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) repudiation of *Plessy*, and the charismatic leadership of individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. But soon there developed a new appreciation of the insurgencies that shaped the civil rights movement on a local level, with a focus on the Aorganizing tradition@ in Mississippi, the precedents for resistance that blossomed into activism in Greensboro, St. Augustine, Tuskegee,

and Jackson, and the pivotal B and previously unsung B role of women in shaping movement events, from Ella Baker to Hazel Palmer to Septima Clarke.

Above all, what came out of this scholarship was a new appreciation for the importance of understanding the roots of the civil rights era. As one group of graduate students at Duke discovered when they started to study the civil rights movement in North Carolina using the tools of oral history, the beginning date of the movement kept changing. One group came back from a series of interviews with local citizens saying it was 1954 and 1955, with *Brown* and *Montgomery*; but soon other groups came back talking about the Freedom Rides of 1947, the emergence of student protest at an all black high school in the early 50s, or the founding of the local NAACP branch at a Baptist church in the 1930s. Suddenly the age-old historiographical question of continuity versus change assumed a new and powerful relevance, only this time not regarding such perennial questions as whether the New Deal was a departure or a continuation of Progressivism; now, the question was whether the sit-in movement represented a revolutionary departure from black acquiescence and passivity, or simply a new way of expressing an ongoing tradition of resistance.

This set of inquiries provided a point of entry into re-interrogating the era of Jim Crow. Why not Aunpack@ the ordinary

lived experiences of African Americans in that period in the same way historians had developed new insights into the diversity of life on the plantation, or the complicated origins of civil rights protests.

The ABehind the Veil@ project thus began with two frames of reference: first, the belief that, as with the civil rights era, recovering the voices of average citizens provided the best means of exploring the multiple strains of the black experience during the Jim Crow period; and second, the conviction that behind the two-dimensional story of oppression and submission there existed a richer, deeper, and more compelling experience which an investigation of the institutions, family patterns, spiritual life, and daily living patterns of black Americans in diverse Southern communities would reveal. Based on these departure points, the ABehind the Veil@ project succeeded in raising funds from foundations and from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct up to 1200 interviews with African Americans who lived during the era of Jim Crow. Selecting communities based on different economic, social and cultural lifestyles (urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, Piedmont/Delta, rice/cotton), the project chose to do in depth research in 25 communities in 10 different states.

Each summer for five years, 10 graduate students from history programs throughout the country came to Durham for

training, then journeyed to three or four different communities where they took up residence for two weeks. Using research lists previously compiled by project coordinators - lists cultivated through churches, senior citizen homes, and various black voluntary associations the graduate students immersed themselves in the histories of their selected communities, using the initial lists of sources to generate more names, digging into personal papers, photographic files, and local archives to flesh out information about critical events and people in a community's history. By the end of each local visit, the researchers had gained some sense of the dynamics of a local community, had ranked the quality of the interviews for transcribing purposes, and developed a set of insights and scholarly queries that would facilitate the larger, overall team coming to grips with the rich array of sources that had been developed.

Simultaneous with this process, a new generation of historians were producing scholarly studies of the Jim Crow era that paralleled those earlier done for the eras of slavery and civil rights. Books by Leon Litwack, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Glenda Gilmore, John Dittmer, Neil Macmillan, Earl Lewis and Tera Hunter created a richer framework within which to understand the interview data that the ABehind the Veil@ project had accumulated. Indeed, the oral history materials developed by the ABehind the Veil@ project ideally complemented and deepened the

findings of this new scholarship. What remains most exciting, however, is the way that the voices of these ordinary people illuminate, as if viewing something afresh and for the first time, the compelling story of accommodation and resistance, love and fear, pride and humiliation that constituted the everyday working lives of black Americans who lived during this era.

What are the lessons that these stories teach us? They are as multiple as the colors of a rainbow perceived at different angles in the sunlight after a storm.

First, and important never to forget, is a foundational understanding of the dailiness of the terror blacks experienced at the hands of capricious whites B the man who told of his brother being killed in the middle of the night because he had not sufficiently deferred in the presence of a white man, another story of a black being dragged to his death behind a horse-drawn wagon, or a pregnant wife having her womb slit, with both mother and child killed, because her husband allegedly had offended a white woman. From lynching to being denied the right to be called AMr.@ or AMrs.,@ to having cars or school buses intentionally hit puddles of water to splash black people walking, there was neither escape from, nor redress for the ubiquitous, arbitrary, and cruel reality of senseless white power.

What makes the stories in this book so revelatory, however, is not the constant reminder of white terror, but the

extraordinary resilience of black citizens, who individually and collectively, found ways to endure, fight back, and occasionally define their own destinies.

The second lesson, therefore, is the capacity of the black community to come to each other's aid and invent means of sustaining the collective will to survive, and perhaps even inch forward. As Booker Frederick told one of our interviewers, "We had much more a [a sense of community] then than we do now. [If] you had fifteen acres and you wasn't quite through, we'd just take our hoe and go over there without any questions." Sometimes community self-help came in pooling resources to build a new office for a health worker or farm agent; at other times in enforcing standards of community behavior when a teacher or principal acted in ways that were harmful. But always, there was the sense that no matter how badly off people might be in their own right, they would come together to help others, as Reverend Jones did on behalf of his own congregation and their northern partners, in the vignette that opened this introduction.

The third lesson is the enduring capacity of families to sustain and nurture each other, and especially the children, in the face of a system so dangerous and capricious that there were no rules one could count on for protection. One of the Behind the Veil informants recalled how his father taught him to watch out for whites. "He told us what to expect, how to act, how to stay

away from them. . . So we. . . kind of knew what we were supposed to do.@ But even as parents sought to protect their children, they also conveyed a sense of right and wrong, strength and assurance. AWhen some things really got out of hand,@ another woman told us, A[my parents] would sit down and talk to you and tell you, >Now this is wrong. But the situation is that your father can=t do anything about this [right now].@ At the same time, parents instilled pride. Notwithstanding Jim Crow rules, one woman recalled, her mother Aalways told us . . . that we were as good as anybody else@ while another man=s parents insisted on the importance of Astand[ing] up for what you believe. Don=t try to take advantage of anybody, but don=t let anybody take advantage of you.@ There was always a tightrope to be walked B cautions that would create hypersensitivity to situations of potential danger, but also a sense of being somebody. As one person=s mother told him, Ayou are my children. You look like you do because of your father and me, and you can do anything you want to do. . . Don=t ever be ashamed of how you look because of your color.@

The fourth lesson from these interviews is the way that same tightrope pervaded the world of work. On the one hand, a job could be a source of pride, whether it consisted of planting and harvesting a crop on shares, teaching in a Jim Crow school, laying bricks, being a domestic servant, a seamstress, or on rare

occasions, working in a mine or a mill where there was a union. On the other hand, the same job often carried with it daily reminders of the humiliating power that whites held over their black employees. Sharecroppers annually confronted the stinginess of many white landlords. AThose people were watching. . . [to] make sure [we] didn=t get no top price for that cotton,@ Booker Frederick noted. Teachers held the highest status jobs in the black community, but that did not prevent them from experiencing the cruelty of whites, such as that which occurred when a woman teacher tried to have a prescription filled, only to have the pharmacist slap her because she had not said Asir@ when she thanked him. Women who worked in the homes of whites ran the constant threat of sexual harassment from men in the house, and even skilled bricklayers confronted the desire of some whites to belittle or undermine their achievements. Thus the workplace was a perennially contested ground, potentially a source of pride and accomplishment, but just as often, a site of threat, danger, and unpredictable cruelty.

In such a world, where did African Americans look for hope and a sense of possibility? Education B the fifth lesson from these interviews B offered one answer. If local planters insisted that schools remain open only four to five months so that youngsters could work in the fields, blacks in the community pooled resources, and contributed meat, vegetables and eggs so

that the work of a teacher could continue for an extra month. Teachers, in turn, encouraged students to have higher aspirations. AWe were leading the children to be the best persons they could be,@ one North Carolina teacher declared, while a Mississippi instructor sought to inspire her students by saying that one of them might be president of the United States within a hundred years. In a world where there seemed no safe and predictable outlet for progress, education held out a glimmer of hope that a better day might emerge.

Sustaining that hope were a series of black institutions that provided pivotal support and affirmation within the African American community. The powerful role of these black institutions or Asanctuaries@ represents the sixth lesson from the Behind the Veil interviews. The church stood at the center of the community, the place where people shared their pain, their hope, the news of the community, and the life of the spirit. After Charles Jones=father distributed the clothes and toys he had brought to North Carolina sharecroppers, they gathered together in their church to sing, and, Jones noted, Aafter the songs, and the spirit and the holding of hands, and the hugging,@ people had such hope in their faces. Not only did the church provide a place of worship; it also served as a shelter where political discussions could freely occur, and where a local NAACP might even be organized.

Other institutions also nourished a sense of pride. In a

city like Durham, companies like the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company or the Mechanics and Farmers Bank suggested the achievements possible for black Americans once they were given a chance to succeed. Black schools and colleges did the same, even in the face of poor governmental financing. Women=s and men=s voluntary associations provided the networks for developing social welfare activities, and sharing political information. The black Masonic hall in Birmingham, for example, served as the foundation for a unionization effort in that city in the 30's, while a pinochle club in Tallahassee provided an organizing base for black political campaigns in that city. Creatively, and with ingenious methods of communication and mobilization, the multiple Asanctuaries@ of Jim Crow America served as the home bases from which efforts were launched to undermine and eventually topple the structures of segregation.

Which, in turn, leads to the final lesson of these interviews B the extraordinary and multiple ways in which resistance to Jim Crow occurred and was nourished even in the face of brutal, arbitrary, and systemic discrimination. Much of this resistance necessarily took the form of pushing back within the constraints of existing mores. African Americans daily faced the challenge of adapting the rules and regulations of Jim Crow to their own purposes, sustaining a delicate balance between appearing to comply with prescribed norms, on the one hand, and

finding ways to subvert those norms on the other.

Nothing better illustrates that dynamic than the story told by Henry Hooten of Tuskegee, Alabama, about an annual fishing trip that he and his neighbors took to the Gulf near Mobile. The group had purchased an old bus for the yearly foray, which of course posed the dilemma of where to stop for food and fuel. One year Hooten went to a place where he hoped to get both needs met. AWe were always taught never to talk back to the white man, but to tell him what he would like to hear,@ Hooten remarked, so as he was in the midst of filling the huge gas tank on the bus, Hooten politely asked the station owner if all the hungry children he had with him could get fed at the station restaurant. AThe white man thought you knew less about psychology [than him]. He didn=t think you had enough sense to [get your way].@ But Hooten also understood economic realities. And so when the station owner said that feeding the children was not allowed, Hooten politely demurred, responding that, in the circumstances, he would have to stop filling his tank and move on. ASuddenly, Hooten said, Ahe=s ready to feed the kids. And put the white customers to work feeding the kids@ B an arrangement that continued every year thereafter.

Often there existed an economic dimension to the ability of blacks to push back. When a young female student was treated rudely by a postmaster when she went to pick up the mail for

Boggs Academy in Keysville Georgia, the headmaster indicated that he would take his business elsewhere until the postal official mended his ways. An apology was forthcoming. Similarly, when a white insurance man came into the house of Ralph Thompson=s mother to collect a monthly payment and called her Auntie,@ she exploded, declaring I=m not you auntie,@ and telling him if he wanted her business, he could call her AMrs. Thompson.@"

There were no clashes more volatile or emotion packed than those involving sexual harassment. One person interviewed by the Behind the Veil project proudly recounted how his mother, ironing clothes in the house of her employer, pressed her burning iron into the back of a white salesman when he grabbed her in a sexual advance. Another person remembered an episode when her mother=s employer approached her sexually. In response, her mother declared, AIf a black man done that to a white woman, you=d be the first to . . . find a limb to hang him to. So if you would hang the black man about doing it, you think I=m going to let you do it to me?@" B a retort that evidently deterred similar advances from that point forward.

Occasionally, the protest also took a physical form, or was expressed in terms of forceful retaliation. When one sharecropper was threatened with a whipping by his white employer while working in the fields, he replied, Ano sir, somebody=ll die. . . and it=s got to be more than me.@" On another job site, a black

bricklayer struck a white co-worker when the white man knocked off a brick he had just put in place, and simultaneously insulted the black man=s wife. In Tuskegee, a local minister who also worked in a barbershop serving whites used his position to gather and convey intelligence about the local Klan to his neighbors. When the Klan found out, they descended on the man=s home garbed in their white sheets and called him out. The minister responded by taking out his long gun, shooting out the porch light, and sending the Klan members scurrying to their cars.

Oftentimes, of course, such responses created dire peril for the individuals involved, evoking the community solidarity that provided the ongoing foundation for black resistance and protest. The sharecropper who said Amore than one=s going to die@ was sheltered by friends until he could escape by dad of night. In Georgia, a black man who struck back when a white assaulted him for allegedly insulting the man=s wife was harbored at the all black Boggs Academy and taken out of the country under armed guard later on. Such episodes became legendary. AWe had a few black men [here],@ Booker Frederick noted about his experience in rural Alabama, Aknown as the men that didn=t take anything [from whites]. The white folks would put on like they wasn=t afraid of them, but they were.@"

Naturally, with these interviews as with those collected from former slaves during the 1930s WPA project, exaggeration and

selective memory may occur. Veterans of the Jim Crow experience understandably point to instances where they or their friends engaged in heroic resistance. Tales of deception and of hoodwinking whites logically shape the narrative of how African Americans dealt with their oppressors. And humor abounds, as in the episode, proudly described by a mother, of how her young children would play Adrink and run@ when they were in a department store, and using the Awhite@ fountain rather than the Ablack.@ Such stories punctuate the lore of Jim Crow, like variations on a theme, highlighting and dramatizing, with vivid detail, the larger saga being transmitted.

Still, these stories convey a compelling body of evidence that fleshes out, in colorful specificity, the ultimate product of the ABehind the Veil@ adventure: the incredible variety, richness, and ingenuity of black Americans= responses to one of the cruelest, least yielding social and economic system ever created. With these 1200 interviews available to future scholars B more than one quarter of them transcribed B no longer will it be possible for historians to see the Jim Crow era as only a Anadir@ of African American history. The Aflatness@ of a previous historical landscape has given way to hills and valleys full of countless scenes, some of them a tragic confirmation of how little power and space black Americans had during the age of segregation, but others a riveting reminder that blacks still

sought control of their destiny, retained agency in their own lives, and helped build inch by inch the foundation for a final assault on the fortress of Jim Crow.

Charles Jones learned from his father the importance of keeping one's eye on the prize, and doing what was necessary to carry on to another day. Charles Jones and his father embody the continuity of the struggle that links the era of Jim Crow with the era of the Freedom Movement. That is why Charles Jones and his father together were the first blacks to integrate the Rexall Drugstore in downtown Charlotte in 1960, and why these stories, in this book, will help future American students to understand how one generation makes possible the hopes of the next generation.