

Odd Jobs

Whenever I could, I worked odd jobs trying to make some extra money. That's the way we did it. If a friend of mine was working somewhere, he would say, "Hey, they're paying a quarter over here . . . fifteen cents more here . . ." In other words, it was survival. You just worked wherever you could work to get some more money so you could buy some pants or something. My mother did what she could do, but we had to pitch in. That was all that mattered. We knew what to do with our little change, even just eat it up.

Once I was working at the tobacco market. I worked there after school and at night helping to unload the trucks and work around the warehouse in general.

I was standing in the aisle and two guys and a little boy came up behind me. I didn't see them. The little boy touched me on my leg and said, "Pardon me, I want to get past." I stepped over to one side. The father stopped the little boy right there in his tracks and said, "What did you say to him?" And the little boy just looked at him. He didn't know what was going on, and the father said, "I said, what did you say to him?" And the little boy said, "I said pardon me?" And his father slapped him in the face and told him, "You never do that. You never in your life tell a nigger pardon. You kick him if he is in your way." He told the little boy to kick me. And the little boy kicked me right on the shinbone. In fact he kicked me twice. He started walking off and looked

back at me with his blue eyes and he had a sad look on his face as though he was sorry. I'll never forget the look on that kid's face as long as I live.

They had two water fountains at the market. One had a sign on it for whites and one for coloreds, the same thing as the bathrooms. There was this older black man who couldn't read. He must have gotten the fountains mixed up. Anyway, he drank some water from the white fountain and a white guy saw him. The white guy jumped off his truck with a tobacco stick—that was a wooden pole that was about six feet long and about one inch in diameter, and that's what we would hang our tobacco on—and he went over there and he hit that old man—and that old man was still drinking water—and he hit that old man across the head and he broke that tobacco stick over that man's head. By that time there were about three or four more white guys

jumping in, and they beat and kicked that poor man until they almost beat him to death. All because he took a drink out of the white fountain.

Another time I worked at a restaurant there in Fuquay, and I couldn't use the front door. We used to wait in the parking lot, and when the guy opened the door for us to come in and start work we had to go around to the back door, while the white employees used the front door. We couldn't work out front or anything like that. We had to work in the kitchen and in the rear. And even though we cleaned the bathrooms before the customers came, we still better not get caught using one of those bathrooms or we were in trouble. If, after they'd closed and everybody had left, you needed to take the trash out the front, you could run out the front door—but as far as coming to work, no, you couldn't do that.

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One job I had was on the outskirts of Raleigh, and I had to catch the bus to get there. In those days when you caught the bus, you had to get on twice. You would get on the bus and pay, but you could not walk through the white section. You had to get off the bus and come around and get on through the side door. Now, the bus had a white line in the center of it, and you could not cross that line. I don't care how many people was in the rear of the bus, if it wasn't but one white person sitting across that line, you still couldn't cross that line. When the white section filled up, the white people would get on the bus and come back across the line and you could not sit down. Before they sat down, some of the white people would take out their handkerchiefs and spread them out on the seat and sit down on them. If a lot of white people kept getting on, and they filled up the back of the

bus, the driver would stop and put you off the bus. They wouldn't give you your money back or nothing. They would just say, "Okay, off you go. You, you, you, and you, get off." And you would have to get off the bus, and sometimes you'd have to start running because you didn't want to be late for work.

I worked for a white man who drank a lot of beer. This was a guy who hauled pulpwood and needed help sawing and loading his truck. One Saturday afternoon we pulled up at this beer tavern, and he parked under a shady tree right along the road. I couldn't go in with him, so I sat in the pickup truck waiting for him. I was sitting there for a while when all of a sudden I looked up and saw men and women coming out of the tavern. I was wondering what was going on, and then I saw that they were coming toward the pickup, and I knew something was wrong and that I was going to be the victim. So I sat there for a

minute and I didn't know what to do, and then I saw this guy coming around the building with two huge dogs.

I still didn't know what to do, and I figured this was the end of my life now, because I knew they were going to sic those dogs on me. I locked the truck door. When they got to the truck, the guy that I was working for said to me, "Open that truck door, unlock it." But I wouldn't unlock the door. So he took his keys out and unlocked the door. I jumped out of the truck and jumped up on top of it. The man that had the dogs said to me, "All right, boy, run for your life. If you make it to that tree and climb the tree, I'll call the dogs off of you." I could see people pulling their money out, making bets on whether I would make it or not. Well, I didn't know what to do. I figured this was the end of my life now. What a horrible way to go. And they kept saying, "Run, run, I said run."

The man turned both dogs loose. The dogs

came and were jumping up, and one grabbed me by my heel and was trying to pull me off the truck. I was kicking at it. I will never forget it. I was holding on to the truck for dear mercy, screaming and hollering and pleading to the man to call his dogs off. I was hollering and crying and pleading to the man that I worked for to help me, help me please.

By that time, by the help of God—I have to believe it was a miracle that happened—two white guys came along, and they jammed on the brakes to their car. They jumped out, and one of them had a shotgun and he said to the guy with the dogs, “If you don’t call the dogs off, I’m going to kill them.” And the man called the dogs off. In the meantime, he told me to run. He said, “Take off—run.” I took off and started running with my leg bleeding and everything, and I ran down the road and I didn’t know which way to go, and I kept looking back because I didn’t know whether they

were going to catch me or chase me or what. There was a big drainpipe that ran underneath the road. I ran up in that drainpipe and lay down frightened to death. I stayed in that pipe for the rest of the afternoon, and I waited until it got dark before I came out because I was afraid and I didn't know if they were still looking for me. That was the life you had to live in those days. But I never worked for that man again.

