

White Only

Some Saturday nights we used to go to the movies in our little town because in those days we didn't have television, we didn't even have electric lights. So going to the movies was a big thing. I remember my father and I went to see *Gone With the Wind*, but I think that was the first time and the last time we went to the movies together. He liked Clark Gable. But I mostly went with my friends. The reason we loved to go to the movies were the Westerns. We had Gene Autry,

Roy Rogers; they were heroes in those days.

If you did something wrong, my dad would say, “You won’t go to the movies if you don’t straighten up,” or something like that. I’d rather for him to take a leather strap to me than say I couldn’t go to the movies, because that’s where most of my friends would be. That was a big thing, going to the movies.

It was fifteen cents to get in the movie, and someone would bring around popcorn, soda, and candy bars, which cost five cents. We had to sit up in the balcony. The whites sat at the bottom in what looked like nice soft chairs, and sometimes we sat on Coca-Cola crates because they couldn’t fit that many chairs in the balcony. During intermission, we would jump up and run to the rear of the movie house, where there were some steps leading outside, and we’d sit on the steps until the lights went off again and the movie was going to start, because when the lights

were on, the white kids would throw stuff—popcorn and things like that—up into the balcony, and you didn't want to get hit. Sometimes the owner's son would stand down front, where there was a railing about waist-high, and if anyone threw stuff into the balcony, he would throw them out. But most of the time he wouldn't be there. When we got ready to leave, we used to go to the glass door in the front of the theater and stand there and watch and wait until the white kids left. Because if you went out there when they were out there, you would get jumped. It wasn't all of them, just some troublemakers having fun. They would hide behind the building and we'd come out and then they would chase us. Now, the colored part of town wasn't too far—it was right over the track; and if they chased you and caught you before you got to that track, they had these sticks they would beat you with.

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When I was about sixteen, I'd go out and make my own money by working around on the farms and at different places, and I went out and bought my own school clothes. You'd work half a day Saturday. Then the guy would pay you, and first thing you'd do is go buy a pair of pants or pair of shoes or something like that, but it wasn't no routine. There wasn't much money, but you could get a pair of pants for under two dollars.

We used to go into Raleigh to a big store. And as usual, we had to go in the back door, marked COLORED. If I saw a pair of pants I wanted, I walked up and stood there and looked at the pants, and as soon as somebody felt like coming to wait on me, I'd give them a little smile and say, "I'd like to buy these pants please, sir or ma'am." If I was standing there waiting for a salesperson and a white person walked up, I automatically stepped

back and stood there with a smile on my face. Now, that person would look through the clothes and I'd just wait there. So finally the person who worked in the store would come over to the white person and say to him, "Is he bothering you? Do you mind him standing here? Do you want me to put him out of the store?" If that person was nice, they would say, "No, he isn't bothering me, it's okay." But if the person said, "Yes, I don't want him here watching me," the salesperson would automatically tell you to get out of the store. That was the way it was. You couldn't try on the clothes you wanted. You'd mostly know your size. There was one place you could; it was a Jewish store near my house, and they would let you try on shoes and stuff like that, but that was the only place.

There was also a five-and-dime. They had twinkling things, like women's earrings and

stall like that, sets for them and people but they had a long counter that went from one end to the other end, and they would have places for the white people to sit and eat at the counter and then they had a long rope, and hanging from the rope were these little signs that said WHITE ONLY. Well, we couldn't understand why they would do that because no black person would try to sit on the stools, no way. But when it was hot out, I used to walk on the other side of the rope real slowly, and I would look for a young man about my age. And I would look at him and smile, and if he looked back at me and smiled, I would whisper, "Buy me a soda." He would get up and stand beside the rope and I handed him the money, and when he came back he gave me the soda and I thanked him and got out of the store as fast as I could, because if I got caught drinking that soda in the store I would be in trouble. My mother and them, they used to think we was crazy-like, you know, they

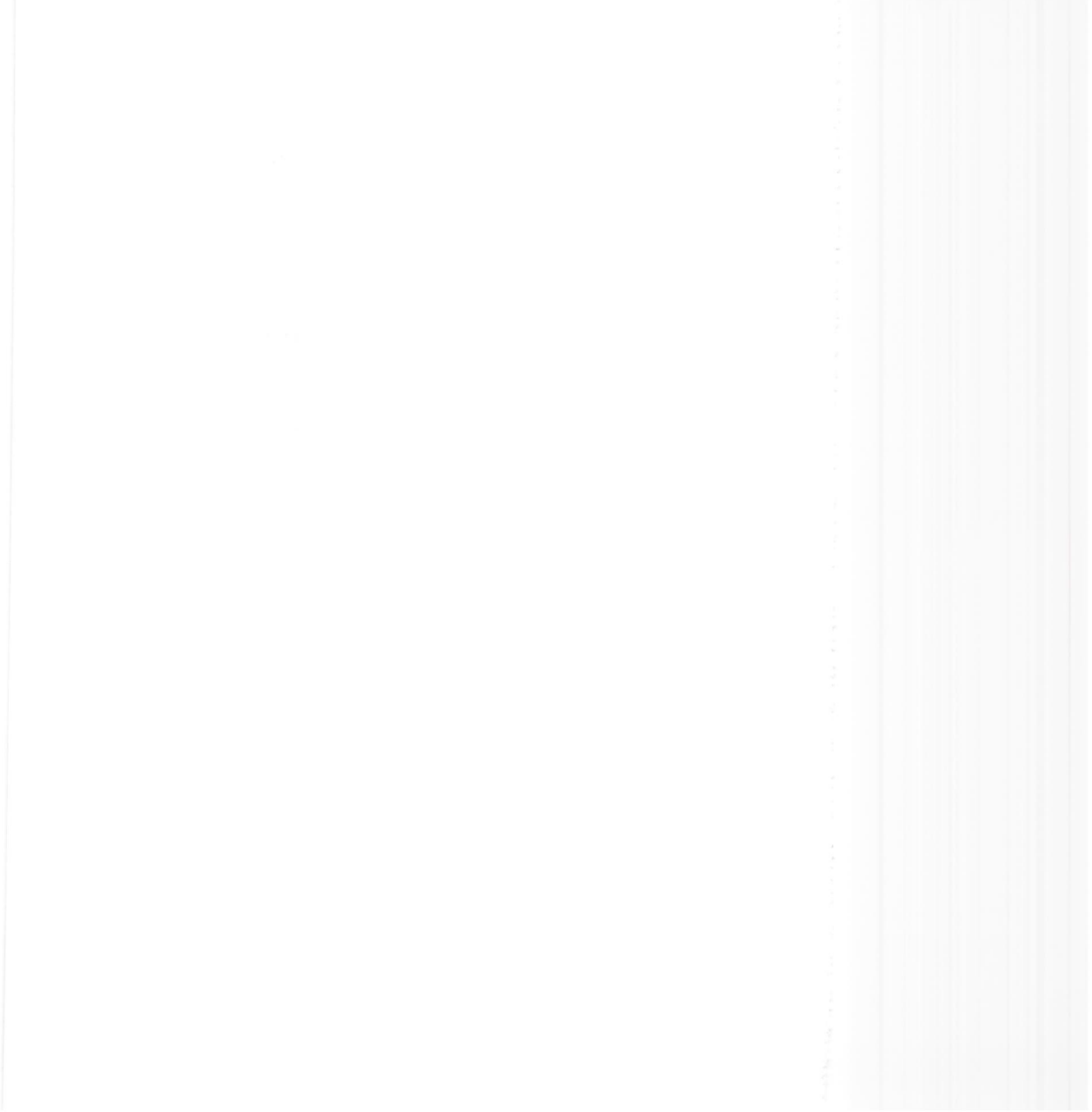
didn't understand why we would try to buck the system. They stayed in their place, and that's why they got along good. But for us it was bucking the system, it was a dare. I mean, you could buy soda anywhere; out on the streets they had pushcarts, but it wasn't like the soda that you could get from where you weren't supposed to get it. The soda didn't taste no different from any other soda, it was just where you got it from.

In those days they had what they called Tastee-Freez alongside the roads our way, and you would walk up and they would have WHITE ONLY and then they had COLORED with an arrow pointing to the rear of the building. You would go in back of the building and they had a window they would open up. Now, when you went back there, you just stood there and waited. You didn't go back there and tap on the window; you didn't go back there and yell at the guy to come and wait on

you or anything like that. You just stood there. The guy would see you. He may not be doing anything, he might be reading the paper or whatever. But you stood there if you wanted to get waited on until he got ready and felt like coming back there. When he did wait on me, the first thing he would say is “What do you want?” and if I had a hat on I would take it off and with a big beautiful smile I would say, “Give me a hot dog, please, sir.” And he would go get the hot dog, but not before I’d put money down on the windowsill so I didn’t touch him when I handed him the money. Then he would pick the money up and go get the hot dog if he felt like it. If he didn’t feel like it, he didn’t. That was the way it was, and you just left.

I remember that you would go to the bus station to catch the bus and they would have a sign there for coloreds pointing to the rear.

You'd go around to the back of the bus station, and that's where you would go in and you would sit down. Sometimes soldier boys would come in, the white soldiers, and if they were rowdy they'd put them out of the white station, and they'd come around to the black side and drink their beer and carry on and jump up on the chairs and act like idiots. And there was nothing nobody could do about it. Most of the black people, like the older ones, would get up and go on the outside, but nobody would bother with the soldiers, nobody would say anything to them.



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