

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Edith Veitch Farris Remembers



"No longer does a black man have to step into the gutter to walk past a white woman and her children. These gains make America a truly strong and great nation."

[Edith Farris is a retired schoolteacher living in Southern California. Growing up both in the North and the South gave Ms. Farris a multi-perspective look at Jim Crow in the 40s and 50s.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- Why does Ms. Farris' mother conclude that the man who stepped off the curb when they passed must be from the Deep South? What differences does it suggest about the way blacks in borderline southern states, such as Kentucky, were treated as opposed to the way they were treated in the Deep South? What can you hypothesize about the reasons for these differences?
- How does Ms. Farris' bus experience reveal the deep resentment of segregation by blacks?
- The teacher who mistakes Ms. Farris for a black girl changes her attitude quickly when she realizes her mistake. How common is this type of dual behavior today among adults toward young people? Do adults assume things about you because of your age, the way you dress, or, even, the way you wear your hair? How hard is it to change their preconception of you?

Reminiscences of a white child in Jim Crow America

For me, one of six white children living in rural eastern Kentucky in 1943, Jim Crow was not a part of my life. It was only when my family went shopping in the city that the inequality between Negro and white social standing became obvious in the form of separate toilets, separate water fountains, separate restaurants. Being a child, I accepted segregation as a way of life until one day when my mother took my younger brother and me into Covington, Kentucky, to buy school clothes. We were walking down the sidewalk, Mother holding tightly onto each of our hands, when I saw a Negro man in his late twenties or older walking toward us. I didn't see many black people, so, I watched him approach. To my surprise, just as he came within ten feet or so of us, he stepped into the gutter, walked about ten feet past us, stepped back onto the sidewalk, and continued on his way. I noticed he hadn't looked at us but had kept his eyes averted. Never having seen anyone act like that before, I asked my mother in my loud child's voice, "Why did that man do that?" Mother replied, "He must be from the Deep South. Our Negroes don't act like that." That was my first lesson in Jim Crow. **Read more about Race and Jim Crow Etiquette.**

In 1944, my father got a job in the Oakland, California, ship yards as a carpenter repairing war-damaged battle ships, so the family moved to Oakland. This was my first experience in an integrated school. Some of the Negro children became my friends, but when my parents learned that I had made friends with Negro children, I was told that the friendships were only to be on the

school grounds--I was not to go to their homes, nor were they to come to mine. "It just isn't done," was the explanation.



My family's next move was to Miami, Florida, in 1948. Like in Kentucky, the schools and all public facilities were segregated. One late afternoon after school, I decided to treat myself to a bus ride home instead of the usual long walk. I waited quite a while for the correct number bus to my neighborhood, and, finally, it arrived. I waved it down, and, once the doors opened allowing me to enter, I saw that the driver was a white man with a shocked look on his face. I couldn't imagine what was wrong for him to look at me in that way, so I ignored him, dropped my money in the fare box, and turned to find a seat.

Every passenger on the nearly full bus was black, and all were looking at me. I walked down the aisle looking for a seat until I got about a third of the way and saw an empty seat by the window. The lady sitting on the aisle by the empty seat smiled a huge, happy smile at me and said, "Here, Honey, you just squeeze right on into that seat by me." I did, and she started asking me about school and my life, and I chattered gaily to her until I came to my stop. During our conversation, I heard a man seated behind and across the aisle from us say, "Why don't she git on her own bus?" I looked back at him, puzzling over what he meant, and the lady said, "Don't you mind him, Honey. He don't know no better." When I got home, I told my mother about the nice Negro lady and what the Negro man had said. My mother said, "Florida isn't like California. Florida is a southern state, so it's segregated, and you got on a Negro bus."

In the winter of 1950, we were, once again, on the move--this time from Miami, Florida, to Kansas City, Missouri. By this time, I was in the ninth grade. On my first day of school, as the other girls in my P.E. class and I were walking out to the sports field, I heard a whistle being vigorously blown behind me and an adult female voice yelling, "Hey, you. What are you doing here?" I heard someone run up behind me. Wondering who was in trouble and for what, I started to turn around when a hand roughly clamped on my shoulder and forcibly spun me around. I found myself looking into the face of a woman whom I took to be the P.E. teacher. My face must have registered just as much shock and surprise as I saw on her face. She looked into my blue eyes and immediately removed her hand from my shoulder while demanding, "Who are you?" I gave her my name and explained that I was a new student. "Where are you from?" "Miami, Florida." Without another word, she walked ahead of us girls to the sports field. It was only then that I realized that the teacher thought I was a Negro who had gotten onto the campus of an all-white school. My deep Florida tan in the middle of a Missouri winter had fooled her.

My experiences in the 1940s and 1950s at the tail end of the Jim Crow era gave me insight into segregation. Yet, no longer does a black man have to step into the gutter to walk past a white woman and her children; no longer are blacks and whites separated on different buses on the same route; and no longer are children sent to designated schools based on their skin color. These gains, and many more, have been achieved by people of all colors. These gains make America a truly strong and great nation.