

## Eyewitness to Jim Crow Fred Page Remembers



*Historic Parks.]*

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*[Fred Page is a son of sharecroppers from Louisiana. After spending his teenage years in the cotton fields, Mr. Page left Louisiana for Mississippi. He began working at the Melrose Plantation as a tour guide when he was 18 and still conducts tours of the plantation today, working for the National*

### **To the student:**

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

- What information about sharecropping does Mr. Page share that you normally wouldn't read in a textbook?
- How does Mr. Page's personal resourcefulness further his station?
- Because of the climate of the times, what personal compromises did he have to make in order to succeed?
- Mr. Page's pride in his work shines through his choice of recollections about working at Melrose Plantation and the people he has encountered. How does their treatment of Mr. Page make them stand out in his memory?

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I've been in Mississippi 52 years. Louisiana is where I was born, Madison Park, on a cotton farm. Louisiana is a state that had many different nations and cultures of people. You have all walks of life there. Louisiana is a farming state, so you had three outputs of crops in South Louisiana. They grew sugar cane, rice, and North Louisiana was cotton. And most of the people worked together, but everything was segregated. So if you were black, worked the farm, you probably got a little money, if you had a good year, made 30, 40 bales of cotton. You always stayed in your bracket of people. But as far as segregation ... when you went into the town, they would have all the supermarkets, drug stores ... they had what they call a horseshoe bar in the center of your drug stores. So you could sit face to face with any nation in the world. If you were white or black you went into the same business, but you had this partition in between there (a separate side of the counter). You go on one side, or the other ... the same person would serve both sides.

Now when you went in the bus stations and things like that, they had different sides. One side for the colored, and one side for the whites. In the center that's where you bought all your tickets and checked in all your luggage. But as you checked in your luggage, you could look at other people face to face.

When you got on the buses, they had this Jim Crow sign there. A black banner in between you, so you go to the back of the bus, and as the bus fills up with more people, you move into the front, and the banner moves up, always separating you from the whites. You let all the white people ride in the front. We all got off the same place but went through separate doors. I would

say, in certain ways, it would be a little difficult to deal with if you had never grew up from childhood with this different type of atmosphere. You had a lot of different things to think about.

I was born on a 3,000 acre cotton farm up in North Louisiana. They had it divided up into three or four sections. And they put an overseer over the plantation. They built these little shacks out there. Of course, we were lucky enough to get a great big house because I'm the youngest out of nine kids.

A **sharecropper** can go two ways. If you don't have any equipment to work your farm with, the agent of the place--the overseer--had to furnish the mules, the horses, the ploughs and all like that. Or, you furnish your mules, your ploughs, you pay for everything. That was my family. We had two double-teamed mules, two wagons, and we're riding horses, we had a little cowboy life. So we lucked out.

If you had a big family, they'll loan you a little money, go by the commissary and get a gift, get what you want and go home for Christmas. The next year you might do the same thing. But we kept up with everything. Raised a lot of hogs, cows, milk cows. Some plantations wouldn't allow you to have a milk cow or hog on the premises. We had all of that ... It was just one of the lucky things if we work hard, and my daddy's the man for a lot of stuff and worked for a lot of rich people. He worked for a lot of rich people. Everybody can't work for rich people, because there were few rich.

My daddy took care a lot of hunting in the Delta. When you talk about the **Delta**, a lot of people don't know what you mean. That was swampland back in the 1700s, 1800s. The Mississippi Delta was cleared up with 100 mule teams and slaves. The richest land in the world. And the slaves in the Delta, when they went to Mississippi Delta, they would commit suicide because there wasn't a way out. They cut every tree, drained every lake. So in the history of the Delta, the slaves would get to working, and they would be so depressed, building levies, cutting trees, and irrigating everything. And when they cleared it up, it was one million acres of the richest land in the world. When you get to Cleveland, Mississippi, you are in the center of a million acres, nothing but cotton. And that's where your cotton is in Mississippi. And Delta [hunting] camps and stuff like that for the very rich. So in the fall of the year, we made a little money out of it. After we'd gather the crop, we'd go do hunting. We'd camp out. We always made a living. So we weren't people just setting around, we worked all the time. We worked for a big fella, he's a rich fella- he's a lawyer and had the hunting camp. And we'd go to hunting camp for him in the summer, and then in the fall when it's deer season and it's turkey season in the spring. See, we'd go out there and we know where every wild turkey, where everything was. So we made our living like that. Fellas come in there and stay two or three days, four days, and when they leave, they gave us tips. We found their game, the fish. We did it all year.

But the regular hired workers made a living picking cotton. What I did when I was about 12 years old or 13, I could pick a couple hundred pounds of cotton by two o'clock, no problem. So I did that. Cotton is hard, it's tough on your hands. Then when you ginned cotton, you carried it to the gin and the gin was downtown. You get a seed check. And we always would pick out two bales of cotton and put about 1,500 pounds of seed in there to 1,600. Sometimes we'd put 1,800 in there because that would make the check be bigger for your seeds.

You see, you wouldn't see white people at all, hardly, unless the overseer was white. But when it's ginning time, you see all the great white men with suits and ties and all just watching everything. They go up there to make your seed checks out and tell you you're doing good. Then you picked all your cotton. Then when you get through with that, the ones with the necktie and white shirts disappear until next year. But if you want little loans like food and stuff, you go to the agent at the commissary.

I came to (Melrose Plantation) at 18 years old as the overseer. Mrs. Kelly, the owner, had 14 people working for her. She told me, "Well, Fred, I'll tell you. If you work for me, you have to learn my ways and the very rich culture ways. So I'm going to have to teach you." She said, "I don't want to say this, but you have to do it just like indentured service coming into New York in the old days." She said, "I'd like for you to sign in for five years" to learn all the trade and what, this and that and the other. And I talked to her, and when I got through talking to her, she said, "Well, he looks like a pretty good boy." I didn't make my mind up then, but later on I came and started working for her. I worked for her 30 years, starting off at \$20 a week.

I worked two weeks, and I said this isn't going to work. So she raised me to \$25 and then she raised me to \$30. But let me say this: we're talking about Jim Crow. You know when you're talking to them (white people), **you pull off your hat**. You talk to her, you still got to get that hat off because she asks what's wrong; you pull that hat off, you know, just put it right there like this (hat in front of him), and you listen. When I started working in the State of Mississippi, blacks weren't even allowed to stand at the commissary with whites in the state. I wasn't quite used to that, and everyone you talked to is "yas 'em" and "no 'em" and "yas 'em" giving that high honor, you know. And I started saying, "yes" and "no", but I soon got out of that. In a couple of weeks I blended back down to "Yas" and "no's'm," that sort of thing.

The first day I started touring here, coming through the front door, I took 80-some guests through the first level. Everybody said, "Oh, where did you get him?", "Oh, wonderful tour, wonderful tour." She (Mrs. Kelly) would go out the front, go out the back. Sometimes she'd be smiling and sort of sit on the back porch, and when they'd come out, she'd listen. "Oh, you have a wonderful boy." That's what the whites would say. "You have a wonderful boy. Oh, he was so nice." Then you could see the smile on her face.

When I started touring the all-white students I said, "Ms. Kelly, we can handle all the school children." I said, "We can handle it. I can keep them together." And when they came, the teachers looked down and said, "Why, I don't want him talking to my children." No, they told her. I'd be standing right there. She'd say, "Well, that's my boy. He works for me. And you just listen to him. And if you don't like it, the children might like it. So just forget about yourself, let the children talk to him." And boy then, I'd just turn loose on the children. I'd tell them all the things about the family and everything and the house. Tell them all about the rich and everything, and then I had little funny things to tell them, and I'd get them laughing, you know. Out in the hall we had a wonderful table that was here during the war between the States and it was a round table. When the soldiers moved into town and occupied Choktaw, which was the other family home, they had a table there with 12 birds and the eyes were jewels and the soldiers dug the eyes out of the bird. So I got the students around that, and I tell them that story, you know, and let them rub the little places where they dug the eyes out. And all the kids were feeling and looking, you know, and I said, "What if we had all those diamonds? We'd put all them in our pockets, you know like this, you know." They would smile. And then a couple of teachers would say, "Well, he did a good job this time."

She would keep me posted on everything they'd say. That went on for a couple years, and after three years, I never heard it-- after two years really. They would ask for me. There's one thing that surprised me since I started here. I carried a school tour in 1953. Now this young white man he was from Arkansas. Do you know he showed up here about four years ago at the park? He said from day one when I gave him his tour, and he left here, "You stayed in my mind," he said. He said, "I never had a man to talk to me like you talked to me." And he said, "I've been wanting to talk to you ever since 1953." He came back here and found me. He said, "I really enjoyed your tour." He had married and had five grown children, and he and his wife came back. We took pictures together. He stayed out here a couple of hours. He said, "You're still giving good tours." He said, "I really enjoyed it." That was a young, white man, a student that was just finishing high school. They used to go down to Florida to the beach, and then come up to New Orleans. And then Natchez would be their last stop before they get home. He said I gave him the best talk and

the best lecture that he ever ... on his trip. So he remembered me. So that was 40-some years from 1953 to about four years ago.

I'm going to tell you something else about rich white people. Black people know more about rich people in the South than the poor white. White man always want to call his own color--excuse me I don't use this word because I was raised not to do it--always want to call this race white trash, you see. My daddy and all them didn't ever look at it like that. So rich people will warn you against real poor white people. I had Ms. Kelly tell me when she would see me talking to some white working or something, "Oh, don't do that. They'll do anything to you. Don't associate with them." "No, no, no, don't talk to him. You're above that." She would tell me that. So you got white against white people. You got colored against colored, so the best thing that any nation in the world does, is to put this thing together like everybody's human.

Segregation isn't over. We got a long way to go yet. And sometimes, people judge you by your color. But sometimes they don't. There was a young lady. She was graduating from school, Miss Smith's daughter, a very rich person who teaches school. She came out here, asked me to serve her graduation party. They (sometimes) look for me to do security for them. I told her, "Yeah, you especially come out here to talk to me and want me to be over your party. I'm pretty sure I'm busy, but I'm pretty sure I can work it out." Then her daddy came out here. And he says, "Has my daughter been out here wanting you?" I said, "Yeah, she came out here asking me to serve her party." She had 1,000 people up to Stanton Hall. I thought she wanted me to work, but instead she wanted me in the receiving line up there. And I stood in the receiving line. But you know, you wonder how those things happen. I don't know how it happened. But you know, it's just that respect. I respect all nationalities of people. As my daddy said, there's some good in all people.

My father always taught us, "There's good people in all races of people. And there's bad people in all races. You got bad people in colored races, white race and all. Don't judge a man by his color. As long as he treats you halfway right."

You respect humans as you want them to respect you. Respect your fellow students. Respect everyone in the classroom and love your teacher. Love your teacher to death. So that's the one that's going to teach you and give you your knowledge. Now you take the teachers, the nurses, they don't get overpaid. But that's where you get your knowledge. So you're going to respect them. So you be kind. Don't throw your spitballs, don't punch other kids in the back, pluck them on the head, bend their fingers, and upset the class. You respect your teacher and be humble, and kind to her and love her. Then that gives her a chance to use her knowledge. She doesn't have to worry about all these little bad things you're getting into. Might have to wake some of them up once in a while in class, that's common. Some kids just want to sleep. They're not supposed to. So I would say to all young people just put your arms around the leaders and be kind.