

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Joseph Holloway Remembers



"This is not Los Angeles, this is the South and that's just the way things are here."--Uncle Gus, to his nephew, Joseph Holloway, in 1961.

[Dr. Joseph Holloway is a professor of Pan-African Studies at California State University at Northridge. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Dr. Holloway recalls his first trip to the South and the horror of witnessing a lynching in Texas.]

To the student:

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

- Based on the discussion between Joe and Uncle Gus, what can you infer about being black living in Los Angeles in 1961? How is Los Angeles different from Texas in regard to how blacks are treated?
- Why did the owner of the gas station warn the family to leave town? How is this behavior contradictory to his excluding them from the bathroom and the diner?
- What is the lesson learned by Mr. Holloway's uncle that night?
- What are the lessons learned by Mr. Holloway?

I was nine years old and the year was 1961. It was summer and time to start our journey from Los Angeles to Louisiana. My great grandmother, Cornelia Hadnot, was 106 and dying from cancer. My Los Angeles family wanted to see her one more time. It was also time to introduce us youngsters (me, and my cousins Robert, Gus Jr., and Grundy) to our relatives back home. Though we were born and raised in Los Angeles, Louisiana was the birthplace of our parents. My mother had already taken a train, and we were supposed to meet her in Colfax. My uncle Gus brought a new Chrysler for this trip. There were no interstate highways in those days, only Route 66. In his new Chrysler we were packed like sardines. In the front seat were my Uncle Gus and Aunt Leola. I had to share the back seat with my cousins. To say the least, it was crowded and I could not wait that first day on the road until we would finally stop to sleep at a Holiday Inn.

"Uncle Gus?" I finally said, after driving most of the day and night. We must have been somewhere in western Texas.

"Yes Joe," he answered, looking at me in his rear-view mirror.

"When are we going to stop to sleep at the Holiday Inn?"

He laughed. But then remembering, I guess, that I was not born and raised in the South, he replied in a serious tone, "Negroes cannot stay at the Holiday Inn."

"Then let's go to another hotel," I said.

"We cannot stay there either."

"Why?"

"No white hotels rent to Negroes."

"Where will we sleep then?"

"Right where you are."

"In the back of a car seat?"

"That's it. Right in the back seat."

"What about food when we get hungry?"

"Don't worry, your Aunty Leola packed everything we need in the trunk until we arrive in Louisiana. Sometimes the stores in the South will not sell us food because we're black. Other times, we have to go to the back of the store, so that white customers won't see us."

"Why is that?"

"Many white owners think that if white customers see us they won't buy the food."

"Don't you pay with money like them?"

"Yes."

"So why do we have to go in by the back way?"

"Well, Joe, that's the way things is in the South. This is not Los Angeles, this is the South and that's just the way things are here. I don't much like them, but there is nothing we can do. Nothing!"

We drove on without stopping. Even when we finally stopped for gas, uncle Gus kept the engine running. He was afraid the white gasoline station people would not sell us gas. I remember several gas stations refused to sell us gas because they did not "sell gas to niggers."

I remember that we stopped somewhere in central Texas at a Texaco gas station that also sold food and other items. For some reason, I don't recall now why, we all walked into the station's diner and took a seat to eat. The manager immediately came over and said, "Sir, excuse me."

My uncle answered, "Yes sir."

"We don't serve your kind."

"You mean you don't want our business?"

"No, I mean we don't serve or sell to niggers here at the table. You all have to go around the side of the station and we serve niggers there." And the more he talked, the more agitated he became with us. "This is Texas. I see your Yankee license plate is from California. You know we kill niggers in this town. Do you know where you are boys? This is the South. Now you all just move your collective ass to the back entrance before I call the police."

"Is it okay for us to buy gas?" my uncle asked.

"Yea, I'll take your money. It's green ain't it?"

"Uh um."

"Then I'm open for business."

As we were walking around the side of the building toward the rear entrance, we stopped to use the restroom. It was a large, clean, fully-equipped bathroom. The owner suddenly ran out of the store and blocked the entrance to the restroom. "Nigger, can't you read the sign? It says 'Whites Only.'"

My uncle asked politely, "Where is the restroom for coloreds?"

"It's there in the middle of the field. See right there, that's the one for niggers."

He had pointed to a cow patch in the middle of the wilderness. I walked to the spot, which was quite a distance from the road, and I kept hearing my Uncle Gus yell for me to watch out for snakes. The "colored" restroom was an old outhouse. The door was hanging off and there were holes throughout. Anyone passing could see everything. It stank and looked horrible.

As we were about to leave after getting our gas, the owner walked over to the car. He looked serious but not so mean now. He said to my uncle in a voice kind of under his breath but clear, "Boy I'm goin' give you some friendly advice. You niggers be out this town by nightfall. I would not like to see something happen to your family. I can't tell you much, but by nightfall y'all better be gone from here." It was nearly dark and we just wanted to get back on the road.

We jumped into the car and took off, bone tired but also plenty scared. My Uncle Gus had been driving more than two days and nights without sleep or rest. More than a couple of times we got lost a little because he could not read the road signs; he depended on his instincts, our help, and familiar landmarks and sign posts along. The latest road signs said that we were in or near Waco, Texas. The gas station had been a few miles outside of town, I guess. It was there that we almost became the innocent victims of a lynching.

Uncle Gus had made a wrong turn by accident, and then he had to turn back and retrace our steps. Somehow we ended up in the middle of town, possibly Waco itself, but I'm not sure. Up ahead was a crowd of white people. We didn't know what was going on. Maybe a circus or something. There must have been 500 people, men and women and children. We slowed the car. It was then that we heard them shouting, "Kill the nigger." We could see a person on fire but still alive and screaming in the middle of the street tied to a big wheel. We could smell the stench of his burning human flesh.

Uncle Gus slammed on his brakes and turned full circle in the middle of the road, which now focused the attention of the mob on us. I remember hearing someone shout, "There's some more niggers, let's get them."

We could see people from our back window running for their cars and trucks. By then my uncle had turned the corner, as he put the pedal to the metal and we went as fast as his big Chrysler car could go. He turned off the car headlights and we drove for five minutes in darkness before he careened the car off the road into a four-foot wide wagon ditch or pathway in the woods. We made it just in time. What seemed like a caravan of cars passed our hiding place, followed by police cars with sirens blaring. We were all extremely quiet. No one spoke a word in fear that a

whisper would be heard and betray our hiding place. We remained in our hiding place for about four hours, which seemed like eternity.

This was the first time I had seen my uncle afraid of anything. Finally, my uncle spoke. "We will stay off the main road until we get through this town."

I don't know how he found it, but we took an old dirt road just at daylight, and we emerged on the other side of town. I don't know. He just drove slowly with his lights off. Once on the other side of town, we drove fast away. My uncle finally said, "I'm going to have to learn how to read, you can sometime find yourself at the wrong place."

My aunty, still in a state shock and very angry, said to him, "You almost got us killed because you don't know where you going."

He answered her, "You don't know either, because if you could read you could've told me I was turning onto the wrong road. Enough--we were saved by the grace of God. That's all. Now we are back on the road to Alexandria, which will take us to Colfax."

As soon as we returned to Los Angeles my aunt started night school and she learned how to read and write. I've never been back to that place that may have been Waco, Texas, except in my nightmares.