

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Nobuo Honda Remembers



"For change to happen, for people to treat each other fairly, it's got to come from the top."

[Nobuo Honda, a third generation Japanese American, was born and raised in Hawaii. He served three years in the United States Army in the early 1950s. Mr. Honda taught middle school for 32 years for the Los Angeles Unified School District. He is now enjoying his retirement and his grandsons in California.]

To the student:

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

- Why wouldn't Mr. Honda know about the Jim Crow laws and how they applied to riding the bus?
- Why did the bus driver make him move to the front half way into the trip?
- How was the type of discrimination Mr. Honda experienced as a boy on Lanai the same or different than southern Jim Crow discrimination?

The year was 1951 and I was on my way to Fort Benning Georgia to attend the U.S. Army Infantry School. I had just arrived in Atlanta from Fort Ord, California, where I had completed an eight week non-commissioned officer's school. I was 24 years old and not only was this my first time in the South, it was my first real experience on the American mainland.

From Los Angeles I traveled on a train to Chicago, and from Chicago, I continued my journey to Atlanta. I got on a Greyhound bus in Atlanta, heading for Fort Benning, Georgia. Growing up in Hawaii, when my friends and I used to ride the bus, we liked to be in the back. We'd fool around and have a lot of fun back there, and the bus driver would leave us alone. So, when I got on the bus in Atlanta, I naturally headed to my spot in the back of the bus. The bus was quite empty when we started, but as we traveled through the rural roads toward Fort Benning, we began to pick up many African Americans. At one point, the bus driver noticed that the bus was filling up, and he stopped the bus along the side of the road. He looked to the back of the bus where he saw me sitting in the last row.

All of a sudden he stood up and waved, motioning to me, signifying to sit in the front of the bus. He said, "Soldier, come here." I had no idea what he wanted. When I reached him, he pointed to a seat up toward the front and said, "Soldier, you sit here." Being new to the United States, I did not want to argue with the bus driver so even though I didn't know the reason, I acquiesced to his order. After a few minutes sitting up front, I began to realize what was happening--that I was in the American South where they have different rules and regulations where Blacks all sit in the back of the bus. Not wanting to cause any disturbances, I just obeyed the customs and the rules of the American South. When I got off the bus in Fort Benning, I had to choose between the black and white bathrooms. Not being black or white, I nevertheless made the conscious choice to go to the white bathroom. After having been scolded by the bus driver, I didn't want to get into any more trouble. That was my first introduction to Jim Crow in the South, but not to discrimination.

Growing up on the island of Lanai, Hawaii in the 1920s and 30s, I lived in a highly discriminatory society where the people were all divided into racial groups. The Japanese, Philipinos, Chinese, Portugese, and other immigrant groups were segregated into different living camps, or neighborhood blocks. The whites lived separate from all of us, on the hilltop. The theatre (there was only one on the island) was segregated so that the whites sat with the cushioned seats in one area, and the rest of us sat on hard-backed seats in the other area. Also, only whites were allowed the supervisory work and the non-whites were confined to manual labor on the Dole plantation. It didn't matter how well an ordinary laborer could do his work, he could never achieve a position higher than any of the whites on the island, which we always thought was very unfair.

Social intermixing between the whites and the common laborers was heavily frowned upon. Sometimes you might have a white male friend, but there was never any interracial dating or even association with a white female. They made us feel inferior, but we accepted our lives as they were, not thinking we could change anything on our small island. When you're caught in that kind of climate, you can't escape it unless you leave it altogether, and then you find it in other forms.

For change to happen, for people to treat each other fairly, it's got to come from the top. In Lanai, the change was gradual, but it did come from the top plantation bosses, who saw the wrong, and gradually tried to make things right.