

Eyewitness to Jim Crow R. C. Hickman Remembers



"You see, we were [viewed as] second-class citizens and we had to prove that we were not."

[R. C. Hickman is an African-American photographer who has worked for Jet Magazine, The Dallas Star-Post, and the NAACP. His news photography, though commercially motivated, was a conscious contribution to social change generally and black empowerment specifically. He currently resides in Texas.]

To the student:

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

- Do you notice the many times that Mr. Hickman capitalizes on an opportunity to learn more, to expand his skill base and increase his marketability?
- What was the danger of Mr. Hickman photographing the white city hall in Italy, Texas?
- How does Mr. Hickman take Mr. Franklin's lesson to him to heart in his own life?
- How are his photographs a "document" of history?

R. C. Hickman first began taking photographs during World War II, while he was serving in the Army on the Island of Saipan:

I just watched some white photographers on Saipan. Doing photographic work, like developing a negative. I learned in a foxhole, you know. I finally got interested in that and I said, "I want to do that." I put in for a permit to allow me to shoot pictures while in the Army. So I didn't know a lot.

When he returned to civilian life, he took a job with a photographer in Dallas:

I got out of the Army in 1945. I got a job in a downtown studio. My discharge stated that I did photography work in the Army, so I left my discharge on the table of the manager, and I told him I wanted a job. And after he read it, he said, "Would you like to be a darkroom technician?" I said, "Oh, yes." I worked there several months. I began to understand that I didn't know too much about portraits, because my Army work was mostly just shooting terrain, guns, and planes. So I said, "Huh. I better go to school." I wanted to learn some more about this good stuff, you know? And that's when I quit that job and enrolled in school. [I went to the] Southwest School of Photography and Southwest School of Mortuary Science; it was two schools in one. This was on Commerce Street in Dallas under the G.I. Bill.

By then, Mr. Hickman was making installment payments on a 4x5 Speed Graphic (see above photo), a camera he would use throughout his career:

My first job after finishing Photography School in 1948 was as staff photographer for *The Dallas Express*. [One of the country's oldest African-American newspapers, founded in 1892.] It was really a Houston paper, but it said "Dallas" on the copies it sold in Dallas, you know? Carter

Wesley, the editor of that paper, said, "I can't hire you, Mr. Hickman, but I'll teach you how to sell ads. We will use you when we need you, and we will pay you for the pictures that we will be using in our paper, but it won't be very many, so you won't be making very much money." I said, "I appreciate you giving me a chance." I worked there until I was offered the job as sales agent for *The Kansas City Call*. It was nothing but selling the paper really. So, I said, "Oh, maybe I will do that," because I was brought up selling papers, too, you know. I sold magazines, *The Courier Magazine*, *Woman's Home Companion*, all of them.

So, when I sold 800 papers for *The Kansas City Call*, which was five or six times more than anybody else had done in Dallas, C.A. Franklin, who was the editor and the owner, called [my boss] one day and said, "That young man R.C. Hickman, who is selling all these papers for us, I want him to come to Kansas City. I want to talk with him. I am going to pay all the expenses." So I went to Kansas City. Mr. C.A. Franklin was halfway an invalid at that time. You know, he suffered from some kind of illness, and sometimes he couldn't get up. We were sitting and talking like you and I are now, and his wife called us to dinner. So he started to get up. When he did that I saw he couldn't get up just immediately.

I ran over to help him. He said, "Hold it young man. Hold it." And, I held it, and he said, "I'll try it again." He didn't make it. He tried three times. Then he said, "Come on over and help me." He said, "Remember one thing. Whatever you need to do, I want you to always try to do it yourself." That's what he said and then we went on to dinner. Later, he said, "Young man the reason I wanted you to come here, I wanted to know how you managed to sell 800 papers in one week. No one else in Dallas has ever done that." I said, "If I tell you that, you won't need me."

So, he set an office up for me in Dallas. I'm selling the papers and selling ads, too. And taking pictures. One of the main spots in Dallas at that time was **Dicky Foster's record store**, and I told Dicky Foster, "I want you to write a column for *The Kansas City Call*." He said, "Oh, boy I don't know nothing about writing a column." I said, "Yeah, but I'll teach you." I don't know anything about teaching anybody any journalism you know, but I said, "I'll teach you how to do it. I want you to name it Chatter Platter. Those records you are selling are platters, and chatter is just talking. Where you want to, just go ahead and use people's names. You put their names in the papers, and they'll buy the papers."

You see, we were [viewed as] second-class citizens, and we had to prove that we were not. We just weren't visible in the white papers. In fact, blacks didn't get in the paper, period. According to the white newspaper, we didn't get married, because our pictures did not appear in their paper, and very little news about us appeared in their paper.

So, then my pastor, Reverend E.C. Estell, said to me one day, "Mr. Hickman I want you to get with *The Dallas Star-Post*. You're a very energetic man. We need your services for your own hometown newspaper instead of *The Kansas City Call*." He wanted me to take over the circulation department, because I was very well known selling papers. He said, "You are going to be the staff photographer, and we are going to pay you by the picture. We just want you over at *The Star-Post*, and we are going to make it worth your while. I gave it a little thought. A couple of weeks later, I was over to *The Star-Post*."

Mr. Hickman's work with The Star-Post attracted the attention of the national African-American media, such as Jet Magazine:

Jet would tell me, "Billy Eckstine will be at the Longhorn Ranch House on Monday night." They would need photographs of the band and **Billy Eckstine** singing--just complete coverage, about ten pictures. Then, when *Jet* or *Ebony* would use my material, they would select maybe two pictures, sometimes even one.

Or, they said once, "Mr. Hickman, we want you to go to Italy, Texas and take [photographs of] the only colored city hall in the world. Take the installation of the officers of the **Colored City Hall** in Italy, Texas." It just so happened, I arrived in the daytime, because I had never been to Italy before, and I didn't know really where I was going. And, this colored city hall was out in a field in the black community. No paved streets, just out in a field.

So, I arrived in the daytime, and I thought to myself, "Now, it's about 2:30 or 3:00. And this installation of officers is not going to take place until 8:00. So, I have a lot of time on my hands." So I shot a picture of the city hall just by itself. I went on the way to Waco, because Waco was only 40 miles away, and I could get some refreshments there and get back in time for the affair. So, I did just what they told me to do. I shot about ten or twelve, maybe more, photographs of the installation. I sent those to Chicago.

The very next day I got another telegram that said, "Go back to Italy, Texas, Mr. Hickman, and take a picture of the white city hall." Now, I surely didn't go in the paper's car, like I did at first. I went in my own private car. Certainly with no names on it like *The Star-Post* newspaper. I said, "This is going to be a little dangerous, if I'm not careful." So, I took my camera, and I shot a picture one time. I was a one-time man. I put that camera back into my car and got out of town. The next week in *Jet*, this is what appeared: the picture of the white city hall and the picture of the colored city hall. That's all.

Eventually, Mr. Hickman became an official photographer for the local NAACP, taking photos to be used in a number of desegregation cases.

W.G. Derms was one of the attorneys of **NAACP**. He had stock in the *Dallas Star-Post* newspaper along with other guys. So, it was quite easy for W.G. Derms to use me for all the NAACP work and the *Dallas Star-Post*. So, for example, I would go to Booker T. Washington High School, which was for blacks, and take pictures of classrooms--especially like the science department or biology, where you had to have certain kinds of equipment to teach kids. I would photograph what they had in that classroom. Then, I would go to Woodrow Wilson, which is a good example of the same type of high school for whites, and photograph what they had to teach the kids. And, those pictures helped the NAACP win those cases, without a doubt. In another school, they mashed one of my holders. [*The holders were flat plates that contained the large negatives from Mr. Hickman's camera, one photo to a holder.*] I was always holding four or five. When one of the NAACP lawyers was presenting a paper to the principal, I shot that picture, and one of those angry white guys there snatched my camera away from me. The principal didn't want to be recorded in any way.

All right, all holders look just alike. They are all black, you know, but a photographer knows when one of those sides has been used. When he snatched my camera. I thought, well, he's going to attempt to get that holder. That's what he really wants. He has that much sense. I grabbed back the holder. By that time, the black lawyers were coming to my rescue. I said, "Give me my camera back. I'll give you the picture." But, instead of giving him the holder with the picture that I shot, I just gave him another one. It was blank.

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