

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Susan Huetteman Remembers



"The images in my memory are vividly engraved, like pictures in an album. I think that happens when a child is uprooted constantly. For me, there was never enough time to fully comprehend my experiences or learn the consequences of my reactions. Yet, I came away with a universal truth: everyone and every living thing deserves respect and kindness."

[Susan Huetteman was born in 1934 in a town of 200 on the Illinois-Kentucky-Indiana border by the Little Wabash River. She changed schools ten times between kindergarten and the 12th grade, and before she completed graduate school, she had moved 19 times and lived in ten U.S. states. For two decades, Sue was the director of the Performing Arts Division at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the original coordinator of the Jazz in July Workshops with Jazzmobile of Harlem. She and her husband are retired teachers living in Rhode Island.]

To the student:

As you read this first person account of a white child growing up in the shadow of Jim Crow, remember your own childhood and how those experiences influence you today. Think about how important it is for you to understand that you can and do make a difference:

- Young children mirror what they see and hear every day. Sample a day in your own life through the eyes of a child. How does the unexplained emphasis in messages, glances, innuendoes, and casual slurs influence young children, and you, today?
- Can one person make a difference? How can you begin to make a positive change? What is an effective method for ensuring human rights? What do you think about using these: 1. External: letters, petitions, or protests; 2. Internal: service in a group or system; or 3. Personal interaction in daily life?
- Often, people detour positive change because of traditions, politics, economics, and priorities necessitated by catastrophic events. How have economic depression, war, and terrorism affected our progress on human rights? Are there important issues you put aside because of personal, civic, environmental, or unforeseen complications?

Southern Illinois, 1937-1938 The earliest memory

It was summer, and I walked with an adult on the storefront walkway past men seated on benches. They were relaxed as they talked and stretched out their legs while leaning back on the bench. There were people walking toward us. I could see there was not going to be room enough for all of us on the walkway. I stepped down into the street to make way for the people.

"You don't get off for them. They get off for you." I remember the cautioning tone of the adult's voice.

"Why?" I asked. I was a preschool child and in my generation children had no priority. I thought I was being polite.

"Because they are coloreds." I returned to the walkway and craned my neck to see the people as they stepped onto the street. "Don't stare at those dirty people." I felt afraid because, when things are dirty, people get sick with Polio or, even worse, have to vomit in the commode in the middle of the night. I spit. "Don't spit." But, I breathed their air into my mouth! I didn't want to be sick. I'd hold my breath the next time I walked past a colored.

Why can't I talk to them?

The work gang was in the roadway by the corner of my grandmother's house. Not many strangers came into town. I liked watching the men work. I was curious and wanted a closer look, but my grandmother said not to bother them. I didn't understand. She let me sit with the hobos who came down the railroad embankment to her back porch in search of food. I talked to the hobos, and they said I was no bother at all. But, my Grandmother said, "Stay on the porch. The work gang has to keep working, because coloreds have to be out of town by sundown."

The L&N RR to Grandmother's

As my mother and I waited for our train, I saw a water fountain and ran toward it. "Stop!" she called. "You can't drink from that fountain: it is for coloreds." I didn't understand why I couldn't drink from the fountain since it was closer, but I was a child, and in our family it was an adult world with rules for children. I looked at the sign and memorized the new rule on the sign: Coloreds.

How accurate are childhood memories?

Over the years, I've carried these images into my adult life. They are like snap shots pasted together to form a collage of a time long ago.

While most of the country was attempting to recover from the Great Depression, my grandparents' rural town had not yet encountered the modern era. My grandfather hunted and fished for our food. My grandmother kept a large garden, and we canned the harvest. While we had electricity and a party-line telephone, we drew drinking water in a bucket from a deep well and washed our hair in cistern water after it rained. Our four-room school was heated by burning corncobs in a potbellied stove, and an old outhouse sat at the back of the lot. With the exception of a few traveling salesmen and an occasional caravan of gypsies, life was undisturbed.

Illinois was originally Indian Territory until the French began to shape its history, holding both African and Native Indian slaves. When the British became prominent, northern Illinois was settled by a migration from northern and New England states, while southern Illinois was settled by chain migration¹ of family and friends from Virginia, Kentucky and other southern states. Thus, in Civil War, history northern Illinois was pro-abolition and aligned with the Union, and southern Illinois, while Union, had strong Confederate ties.

My grandfather's family came from Virginia in the early 1800s to farm the rich river bottom of southern Illinois--an area of predominately free black farmers. My grandfather was a white student in a black school; his older brother later became the school's teacher. Many white southern families migrated into the fertile farming country, gradually buying out the native farmers.²

My grandmother's ancestors came to the Illinois Territory from Ohio where they operated a Quaker Underground Railroad. Her grandfather was a Methodist circuit preacher who rode on horseback from home to home. Old timers say her father rode into town on horseback one day fresh out of an eclectic Indiana medical school. He became the town doctor and married the circuit preacher's daughter. The dichotomy of the northern and southern origins made for an

interesting clash of philosophical and political attitudes in my grandparent's house that required creative management by my grandmother--a skill that I added to my collage of memories.

1941 Northern Illinois

Before their divorce, my parents moved to the north shore of Lake Michigan. It was a modern city settled by northerners. I attended integrated schools with many nationalities of whites and blacks. Yet, our childhood was styled by a separation of coloreds and whites. Society did not question separate bathrooms or drinking fountains, because that's the way it was.



That year, several of my second grade classmates and I became very ill and were hospitalized. It was World War II and our town was home to a military base. Sabotage of the water supply was suspected. My hospital stay was extensive and followed by a long recuperation.

When I finally returned to school, I was heartbroken to find that I was gone so long none of my classmates remembered me. I'll never forget standing alone and frightened on the sidewalk outside my school, when a girl skipped up to me. She told me how happy she was to see me back in school and how much she had missed me. That was the day I learned to form my own opinions. The girl was black. She was my friend.

That's the way it was

Did we play together after that? I remember we talked at recess, but after school I played with no one. I returned to our inner city apartment where I was alone until my mother returned from work. My mother was a single mother with only basic high school business skills to see us through the post-Depression years. When the war started and the men were overseas, she was able to find a job, despite the discrimination against a divorced woman. When she remarried and her military husband was transferred, they couldn't find housing that would accept children. Time and again, I left school in the middle of a semester to live with my grandparents, leaving the progressive bustle of the urban North to return to a quiet southern town that was stopped in time.

My childhood experiences taught me rejection was complex and exempted no one. Exclusion had many labels--intolerable, insensitive jibes. While I could not change my whole world, I was responsible for my own beliefs and actions. Because of my experiences, I could help others. Quietly, a teacher was born.

1998 Friends remembering

At the University, I was responsible for a community service organization where I was so privileged to have adult students and friends from wonderfully diverse cultures and races. We often talked about family, education, and how much society had changed over the years ... or had it? We recalled how we were told in school that it was a scientific fact that Caucasian skulls were superior to all other races. We remembered bussing and riots and how decent people suddenly turned fearful and did horrible things.

We talked about how our children reacted the first time they became aware of skin color. How the brown-skinned lady in the grocery line in Indiana said, "It is okay. Let him touch me. He is learning." To scold him would make him fear the difference. I recalled my anguish when my friend

said she was moving her family back to Atlanta. I blurted out, "How could a black family return to southern attitudes after living in the integrated North?" My friend's answer: "At least in Atlanta, we can be middle class blacks and not have to live in substandard housing on an unpaved street like this northern town." The year was 1963.

Vivid in my mind was a white faculty member who pretended her black husband was her chauffeur when they traveled from Ohio to Alabama to see her parents, arriving at night and hiding in her parent's attic so the neighbors wouldn't know. The year was 1972.

I especially enjoyed the candor of the conversations with one of my older African-American students. We shared so many of the same interests and qualities that she told me she felt we must have been friends throughout the centuries of time. Suddenly overwhelmed with compassion to share my deep feeling, I confessed, "I don't know why, but I feel so safe when I am with you ... with the black community."

"Don' you know, chile?" she smiled knowingly. "We raised you." What goes around, comes around.

2002

The fabric of my family has changed over the years. Our Native American heritage, hidden for generations, and European American genealogy are now enriched with Latino, Mexican, African-American, and Native American Blackfeet, Cherokee and Apache cultures. The fabric of humanity is held together in the weaving of our differences. It is the beauty of its colors that enriches our lives.

End notes:

¹ James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 515 pages with index and notes. The history of territorial Illinois, coining the term chain migration, page 83.

² Robert Smith, *The Salt Creek Colony of Egypt*. (Carmi, IL: Carmi Times Print, 1955.) The history of the Little Wabash Valley with handwritten indications specifically for this eyewitness essay by Aunt Vona Brown (2002); and *Centennial History of Crossville & Phillips Township* compiled by the Crossville Centennial History Committee, Janet Armstrong, Bernard Coleman, Vergene Kallenback, Barbara Maier, and Charlene Shields, 1995, 184 pages includes the author's family history.

Resources to enhance your understanding of the history of Illinois:

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Undaunted Courage, Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, 511 pages with index, chapter notes, and maps.

Leyburn, James G. *The Scotch Irish; A Social History*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1962, 377 pages with index, chapter notes, and maps.