

Eyewitness to Jim Crow Willie Wallace Remembers



"All of the people that graduated from Sadie V. Thompson, each year, gather here and talk about their time and how the oppression or the separation -- whatever it was meant to do, it didn't. Because we flourished."

[A native of Natchez, Mississippi, once the second-largest slave-trading center in the South, Willie Wallace worked for 21 years as an electrician before retiring. He is now engaged in the ministry.]

To the student:

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

- What are Mr. Wallace's positive recollections of growing up in Natchez? About his family?
- When Mr. Wallace remembers a few racially motivated incidents, what is going through your mind? What do you see/feel behind Mr. Wallace's words, "So it's things like that that come back to you, as a young man"?
- Why do you think that so many graduates left Natchez after high school?
- Mr. Wallace alludes to the fact that in the North, the races had to interact together in the same space, causing tension, but in the South, they were wholly separate communities, having little to do with one another. When reading his descriptions of life in Natchez, what flaws in the "separate but equal" philosophy come up again and again?
- What did his experience in the Army show Mr. Wallace about the world outside of Natchez?

I was born in Natchez, 1946, July 25th. And coming up it was kind of difficult, because there weren't a lot of beds. There were four brothers, and three of us had to sleep in one bed. And I had one sister living with us, so it was six of us in one house. My father worked at one of the plants. So coming up, I remember that were good because he had a pretty good job, so we were never hungry or anything. Thing that stands out more than anything was the joy that we had with my brothers and sisters, coming up in Mississippi.

So we weren't really poor, we had enough of everything. My father had a little garden and we would have corn and tomatoes and things like that. When we got off from school, we would come home and help him in the garden to do things like this. Pick pecans, and things like that that young people don't think about today. My mother worked at one of the homes here with a white lady. She was a maid.

I'm the oldest of the boys. So I had to kind of look after the other ones. I'd get up in the morning and put grits on, and my mother would make me stir it, and by the time the other ones got up, we all had food, something in the morning to eat. We had to walk to school. We were on the edge of town, so it was about five miles from my house to the school.

I went maybe three or four years at Holy Family. [Holy Family was a Catholic school for black students, run by white nuns.] The nuns were real disciplinarians! They would beat you on your knuckles if you did wrong. They were disciplinarians. So they would make you study. And so my

mother thought it was good that I would come up in the schools, to have a good basis of writing, reading, things like that. I think they [my parents] had to pay to go to the school, and then my father sent me to public school. I went to Broomfield which is on St. Catherine, until I was in the 7th grade, and then transferred to Sadie V. Thompson, which was a new school on the outskirts of town.

[They built the new school] after the integration ruling, to separate. To keep us in that neighborhood out there. All blacks went to black schools and whites went to white schools. That's the reason they built the school, because they feared the integration part of it. They built Sadie V. Thompson first, and then they built Anchorage over there in black neighborhoods. [But the books and supplies] were a transfer from some of the other schools. Old, old stuff. Old, dilapidated. The books were not new. But I think the teachers were special in Natchez. I'm trying to say that they made the school because they were caring teachers. They had the knowledge of things that were happening at the time. So they passed it on to us.

I guess out of my whole class, 70% left Natchez right after graduation. They either went into the service, left to go to Chicago, New York, California, whatever. All of the people that graduated from Sadie V. Thompson, each year, gather here and talk about their time and how the oppression or the separation -- whatever it was meant to do, it didn't. Because we flourished. If you would just talk to some of the students, where they are now; lawyers, doctors, I mean you wouldn't believe how some of the -- what do they call it, the generation we came out of, the baby boomers -- came out of Natchez and went to California and all over the country, really. Fulfilling their potential in a way. You can't stop a student that is ambitious and passionate, even though he was poor, when he gets out into the mainstream--Chicago, New York, whatever--he still prospered. That passion he took with him and he flourished.

I look back on some of the things that happened in Natchez in my childhood that were hurtful. I was a paperboy here. There were two papers; Natchez Times and the Natchez Democrat. I'd get off from school and sell papers for a nickel apiece. I'd get 20 papers and go all around, and I'd make a dollar. And I remember once, one of the white guys down there--we all get papers together--we would ride our bikes up and down the streets, trying to sell them in the evening. He was a little guy. He wore glasses. He looked like Clark Kent or something like that. He was a smart little kid. We would play together, and then we would sell papers. One day a policeman called the guy who was with me--his name was Freeman--he said, "Hey, Freeman, come here." So he stopped, and I just waited on my bike. The policeman began to talk to him, he began to scold him. So after that, [the white guy] took off, and he wouldn't even ever speak to me again. Those are some of the things that I remember about racism. If you weren't . . . doing something wrong, you never would encounter it much. But if the policeman had to stop you for something, then you would encounter racism because they were kind of mean.

Another incident that happened was, my father bought me an old car. And I remember one night a [white] lady was coming around the corner, ran into me. She was drunk. And a policeman came, and told her, "You go on home, I'll take care of this." Of course I got the bulk of it, because they were saying that we both hit each other, when I never did anything. But that's the way policeman wrote it up, to protect this lady. So it's things like that that come back to you, as a young man. Some of the kids would go and caddy at the golf course, and make a few bucks. But you could never play on the golf course. You could never go into some of the restaurants and eat in them. But we had restaurants in the black neighborhoods. So who wanted to go into white neighborhoods to eat?

It's not like the city, where the whites ate on one side, and the blacks [on the other]. In the cities . . . that's where all the tension was, because you could look over and see the whites eating. [In Natchez], though... you could never see that. You had a door. You went to the back door and you got what you wanted, if you went to a white restaurant. But mostly, we wouldn't go. There was always this fear of retaliation of whites.

My father was . . . he would meet some white guy when we'd go downtown. And I guess one of the things I would hate was, he would always say, "Yes sir! No sir!" You know what I mean. I was wondering why he was **addressing him as "sir."** He would always address them that way, my father would, he'd be "yes sir, no sir," and smile and things like that. [And] my father was just as old as [the white man] was. But ... my parents never did teach us any kind of hate, or anything like that. So I never grew up with any kind of bitterness.

I guess if there was any bitterness, it came when I went out into the world and got **drafted in the army**. In Georgia, some of the sergeants were pretty rough. And they weren't all white, there were some black sergeants, [too]. But in the army they always ask you where you're from--and if you said Mississippi, it was always a joke. "You ought to be glad, man, you're away from Mississippi, no matter where you're at!" Sometimes you didn't even want to tell them you were from Mississippi because they made a joke about it. Even in Martin Luther King's speech, when he mentioned the name Mississippi, it's associated with hatred, racism and stuff like this.

But Natchez in itself, it was ... I went to school with other blacks. So I didn't have any reason to hate [whites], because I never come in contact with them. They stayed on their side of town, we stayed on ours. And you never . . . if you didn't have anything to do with them, they didn't have anything to do with you. There were a couple times we might have got into scuffles or fights. The other thing was the rebel flag. We always hated that thing, really what it represented, Jim Crow and the whole thing. We'd pull a few rebel flags off cars or something out of hatred. You know, they'd all be in church and they'd all have rebel flags all over their cars, and we'd go through and pull the whole thing off. That's all. There were policemen here who were bad. Drove motorcycles, and we always had their names, "Don't ever get caught by this guy." Stuff like that. But if you never broke the law, if you never ventured over into a white neighborhood where you shouldn't have been, then you never encountered any of it.

The big thing on Saturday mornings was the Ritz Theater up here, they had movies with cowboys. They were packed, whites and blacks. Every Saturday morning there was a matinee at these movies, and we would pay 15 cents, and you'd have popcorn and hot dogs. But like I said, we were separated. We went upstairs, the white kids went downstairs. And there was a lot of them downstairs. They were just as packed as we were, on Saturday mornings. I don't remember any other time where you would have blacks and whites in the same building. Now if the movie was something about the North and the South, the rebels and the union soldiers, then when you finished your soda pop, something would be happening, you'd just tip it downstairs. All of a sudden, whap! You'd see it come back upstairs. We'd throw a few cups, they'd throw a few cups back and that was it.

It was the movies, the only place I remember where whites and blacks came together. We didn't play baseball together. We didn't play football together. We'd play black schools in Mississippi. White schools played white schools. There's no other time I remember [when we'd be together], unless we were meeting on the street or something, or shopping at a place downtown. You weren't supposed to be in their neighborhoods. If they caught you, you were going to jail. They would question you and they would beat you. I heard people tell, what are you doing there, you stealing something? So you ain't got no business being in their neighborhood. You knew not to go over there because there's nothing over there for you. It was total separation. I had no idea coming up how we were being treated badly [and] the whites were being treated better because I never went to see a white neighborhood to see how badly we were being treated.