

Resisting Jim Crow

By Ronald L. F. Davis, Ph. D.



Dallas, 1955
Protesting
segregation of the
Texas state fair –
R.C. Hickman
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For most southern blacks, Jim Crow was not an easy or acceptable condition for them to tolerate, nor was it always possible for them to avoid whites. For thousands and indeed tens of thousands of African Americans, Jim Crow was met with resistance and determination to win back the civil rights that had been stolen from them after 1876. Often this resistance took the form of individual acts of defiance, and often it took the form of organized challenges. It is impossible to know, for example, how many of the nearly 4,000 (recorded) African Americans lynched (mutilated and burned alive) from 1882 to 1968, were men and women who had challenged Jim Crow by some overt act of defiance. Studies by **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, the great anti-lynching crusader in the early twentieth-century, suggest that most of the lynch victims were random subjects of white rage. Clearly this was the case in the bloody urban riots in which mobs of whites swooped down on black neighborhoods, burning and killing any blacks who crossed their enraged paths. Numerous victims were lynched on trumped up charges, such as the case depicted in Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

It seems quite likely, however, that many of the black victims of mob violence had affronted whites by some form of unacceptable behavior that possibly included acts of defiance. One such case involved Ida B. Wells-Barnett's murdered friends in Memphis, whose only crime was that of owning a prosperous grocery store. Almost all blacks knew that to stand out in anyway as anything but a shuffling "darkey" amounted to an attack on white supremacy. That is why even some prosperous blacks in some communities lived in unpainted houses, owned run-down and unpainted stores and businesses, and avoided new carriages and automobiles. More than a few black newspapers editors, church leaders, and civil rights' advocates narrowly escaped the lynch mobs, whose members wanted them dead because of their outspoken defiance of Jim Crow. Ida B. Wells-Barnett had to flee Memphis, for example, because she dared to speak out in condemnation of the murders. How many others of the lynched were men and women like Wells-Barnett will probably never be known.

By 1905, the issue of how to most effectively deal with Jim Crow came to a head in the debate between the followers of **Booker T. Washington** and **W.E.B. Du Bois**. Washington, who was born in slavery, believed that accepting segregation for the time being and working hard at farming and in community-based support groups would best enable southern blacks to avoid the violence and terror all around them. He supported and helped found schools and colleges (**Tuskegee Institute**), often funded by white philanthropists, which educated blacks in agriculture and trained black vocational teachers. Such tactics, Washington argued, would in time bring a measure of economic security and eventually a middle-class basis for challenging disfranchisement and the terror of Jim Crow.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, on the other hand, a Harvard-educated, New England-born intellectual, found Washington's appeasement strategy of dealing with whites unacceptable. Although he clearly understood that blacks were powerless to end segregation immediately, he strongly believed that African Americans should insist upon all their Constitutional rights as American citizens. He advocated efforts, among other things, to educate a talented elite of black Americans to lead the masses in political and economic resistance to Jim Crow.

Du Bois broke openly with Washington in 1903, with the publication of his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which included an essay highly critical of Washington. The split became nearly irreparable when he founded, along with **William Monroe Trotter** (a long-time and vehement

critic of Washington) the **Niagara Movement**, which advocated vigilant protest and activism in place of Washington's gradualism and appeasement. Although the Niagara movement floundered within a few years, it helped set the state for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (**NAACP**), an interracial organization that emerged in 1909/1910, and became the principal voice advocating legal resistance to segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching in the nation. In the 1920s, it conducted scores of lawsuits at the local level in defense of black civil liberties and civil rights, and it also lobbied Congress to pass a federal anti-lynching bill. Although it never achieved a federal anti-lynching law, its constant vigilance and exposure of lynching helped to greatly reduce the number of incidents by 1940.

In the 1930s, the NAACP, under its leader **Walter White** and the head of its legal department, Charles Hamilton Houston, began to focus more of its attention on a campaign to challenge segregation and disfranchisement in the United States Supreme Court. Ultimately, the Association's constant agitation, unstinting legal investigations, and numerous court litigations at all levels of the legal system resulted in the overthrowing of segregation in public schools in 1954 by the Supreme Court in the landmark case of *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*. This decision not only reversed the Court's support for the "separate but equal" doctrine, it also opened the floodgates through which a sea of civil rights litigation and legislation flowed over the nation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Joining with the NAACP in contesting Jim Crow in the 1920s and 1930s were an array of political organizations like the **National Urban League**, the National Negro Congress, and more radical groups such as the Communist Party. In the latter case, the Communist Party gained significant support in the black community for its energetic defense in the 1930s of the **Scottsboro Boys** by the party's League of Struggle for Negro Rights. This case, which involved the trumped up convictions of nine black youths falsely accused of assaulting two white women, attracted many unemployed workers to the party in the 1930s. Some rural African Americans also joined the socialist backed **Southern Tenant Farmers' Union** in the 1930s in defense of their economic rights in the plantation districts of the South.

In addition to the organized, political, and personal resistance to Jim Crow, African Americans attacked white supremacy in non-political but defiant cultural expressions. The new musical forms of **ragtime** and **jazz**, presented an in-your-face side of black culture that had grown up largely in the shadow of segregation and Jim Crow. The distinctive richness of jazz syncopation and its adaptation of African and plantation-based rhythms to European harmony defied white expectations and the stereotypes presented in the so-called "coon songs" of the Jim Crow minstrel shows. Both musical forms expressed the joyful exuberance of a complex and sophisticated black culture based in the urban centers, especially New Orleans, of the American South.

The rural-based blues music of the Yazoo and Texas deltas spoke more of coping with misery and the "low-down and dirty" side of living as penniless sharecroppers and field hands in the Jim Crow South. The message presented by blues singers in hundreds of southern "juke joints" was one of desperation, anguish, and perseverance--of a "lowdown achin' heart disease, like consumption, killin' by degrees." They sang of a pervasive sadness that was always present: "I've got the blues before sunrise, with the tears standing in my eyes, ..." At the same time, the blues also celebrated the human joys of the black community, including love, sexual desire, and heroic actions in the midst of hard times.

Along side the blues and jazz, a tradition of black protest literature also shouted loudly in defiance of white supremacy. This literary movement of resistance had begun in the previous century but reached its fullest expression in the **Harlem Renaissance** of the 1920s. Based in Harlem, New York, which was the "New World" (along with Chicago) for thousands of black migrants from the South, the Renaissance featured a "New Negro" poetry and literature that emphasized self-respect and defiance. Its greatest artists explicitly expressed the deepest feelings of African Americans about racism, segregation, and discrimination. The essays, poems, and novels of the

Harlem Renaissance rejected sentimentality, romanticism, and escapism to focus directly on the root causes of the crippling plight of black America: white racism.