

How a Southerner Licked Intolerance



by ERNEST CONINE



THREE YEARS ago I angrily left a crowded Army theater because a Negro soldier had

taken a seat beside me.

Last week I was one of 20 guests in a minister's home. Eight were Negroes. I had no feeling of discomfort, no awareness of difference in color. We were just American citizens discussing common problems. And this gathering took place not in the North, but in Dallas, Texas, deep in the land of Jim Crow.

How did a Southern white, reared in the common tradition, escape the shackles of intolerance? My initiation into human decency came after passing through two stages: first, acquisition of the *desire* to learn the truth about Negroes; and second, finding an *opportunity* to do so. It is my opinion that the so-called "Negro problem" would cease to exist if every Southern white experienced these steps in development.

I say this because I consider my-

self a normal Southerner, not one set aside as "different." Too often those who criticize us tend to forget that ideas absorbed from the cradle onward are not easily laid aside.

As a child, and later as an adolescent, my life was the usual one of church every Sunday, school during the week and a movie Saturday afternoon. Until I entered the Army, there was no "race problem" for me because I had simply never thought about it.

To me, Negroes were people unfortunate enough to have been born black. They mowed lawns, "took in washing," shined shoes, did all the menial jobs. Perhaps I felt sorry for them, but I didn't dream of questioning the social order. After all, hadn't God made men black and white?

I entered the Army Air Forces in 1944, and for the first few months I encountered nothing to change my views. All my buddies were Texans and the training camps at which I was stationed practiced racial segregation.

Only one observation haunted

Here is the frank confession of a normal Southerner whose lifelong ideas about Negroes were shattered during the war

my mind. While I was stationed at Ellensburg, Washington, I noticed that, although a Negro family in this town of 6,000 was not considered inferior, any Chinese who happened to pass through received a cold welcome.

This attitude was the opposite of that in Texas, where one of my close friends in high school was a Chinese. Though indignant, I still failed to perceive the historic and economic factors underlying these different attitudes.

The first real shock came when I was sent to radio communications school at Scott Field, 30 miles from St. Louis. With a friend from Birmingham, I entered the mess hall. No sooner were we seated than a big, grinning Negro soldier sat down across from us.

Promptly we moved to another table. But it did no good, since we discovered that not only must we eat with Negroes but that 100 of them would be our classmates in radio school. Segregation was observed only in sleeping quarters.

It didn't take long to become accustomed to eating with Negroes and sitting beside them in classroom, lecture hall and movie theater, but we Southerners (and most of those from the North) refrained from personal conversations.

Then something strange happened. When our class was graduated, the honor student was Howard Wilcox, a quiet Negro boy from Brooklyn.

I found this hard to swallow. As I had been an honor student in Dallas, I failed to understand how a Negro boy could have solved the complexities of radio better than I. Obviously, something was wrong.

Ideas instilled in me early in life were being challenged.

Thus I cleared the first hurdle: I determined to learn the truth about Negroes. Was Howard Wilcox an exception among his race, as had been Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, or was I wrong in my lifelong belief that Negroes were just naturally "dumb" and lazy?

Through inquiry, I discovered that the Negro students were almost entirely from the North and East. Most, including Wilcox, were high-school graduates and a few had attended college. But I wasn't ready to yield to logic. I told myself that, although perhaps a Negro *could* learn as much as a white man, the fact that so few take the trouble to become educated proves the shiftlessness of the race.

Nevertheless, I conceded in my mind that Negroes should have better schools in Texas. Secretly I was ashamed that these colored soldiers from the North were so much more intelligent than any I had met in my native state. But I wanted these improvements *within* Jim Crow. I wasn't yet prepared to part with Southern tradition.

FOR SOME TIME AFTER leaving Scott Field I had no occasion to think more about the race question. Then, in November 1945, I reported to the separation center at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, near Chicago, where as an occupational counselor, I interviewed hundreds of men about to re-enter civilian life. There were white men, colored men, yellow men, red men. I talked to illiterates and I talked to Ph.D's.

Some were nervous combat vet-

crans whose records read like headlines — Salerno, Kwajalein, Iwo, Normandy. Others had seen nothing more perilous than KP duty in a state-side mess hall. It was more than a parade of human behavior—it was a parade of America.

This marked my second step toward tolerance—the opportunity to meet and understand the Negro. I learned a lot, but the most important single fact was that all men are basically alike, with common aspirations, fears and problems.

As I shook hands with intelligent young Negro veterans, men eagerly looking forward to the “opportunities” of civilian life, I began wondering what kind of life they could carve for themselves in an America in which colored college graduates work as porters, street sweepers and floor polishers. -

A few weeks later I was on a train, bound for Dallas and a furlough. When the train crossed into Arkansas, the conductor asked a well-dressed Negro and his wife and son to move to the Jim Crow car. As I watched the look of humiliation on the faces of this small family, I realized that I had permanently discarded my Southern heritage.

I was discharged from the Army in 1946 and have since been at-

tending Southern Methodist University. Perhaps common experiences breed common views, but I have found that many veterans—native Southerners—share my belief that Jim Crow laws are a violation of human dignity. We also believe that the South is jeopardizing its welfare by maintaining a caste system that brings economic and social ills to the entire population, whites included.

Recently, my discussion group had several Negroes as guests. As an experiment, I took along a friend who champions white supremacy. For the first time in his life he met educated Negroes. And for the first time in his life, he addressed Negroes as Mr. and Mrs.

That friend of mine is still a supporter of the Jim Crow system, but a doubt has been planted in his mind. Now he is thinking. When he becomes convinced that there is something wrong in the setup, he will be well on his way to tolerance in race relations. And then he will tell others.

In this process of telling others what he has learned, and finally convincing them, lies the secret of abandoning intolerance for a profound belief in the human decency of all our fellow men.



The Radio Influence

GROUCHO MARX WAS dining in a Hollywood restaurant when the bus boy, carrying a huge tray of glasses, stubbed his toe. He went down in a deafening crash and splinter of glass. The restaurant was, for a

moment, stunned to silence. Then Groucho rose to the occasion.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “that was Johnny you just heard—stepping out of thousands of store windows all over the country.” —HARRIET VAN HORNE