

## “My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience,” Negro Digest 3.7 (May 1945): 33-34

It happened in Cleveland years ago when I was in high school, and the Great Migration of Negroes from the South during World War I was at its height. Jim Crow, new to Cleveland in most public places, was beginning to raise its ugly head.

Our high school French class had gone to see a matinee performance of the late great Sara Bernhardt, with her wooden leg, in Cleopatra's death scene, where the asp stings her bosom. The magic of Sarah's famous golden voice still rings in my ears.

But of that afternoon, there is an even more vivid memory. Following the performance, with one of my white classmates, a Polish-American boy, I went across the street from the theatre into one of Cleveland's large cafeterias. Its self-service and low prices appealed to our schoolboy pocketbooks. Its long cases and counters and steam-tables loaded with appetizing food whetted our appetites. We took our trays and got in line. My white school-mate was just in front of me.

We passed around in front of the colorful green salads, the sweet, good looking desserts, the white and pink chocolate frosted cakes, the long steam table with its soups and vegetables and meats. Each of us selected our foods, and stopped with our trays before the cashier's desk. She rang up my friend's bill, he paid her, and passed on to see a table.

But when the white woman looked at me and then down at my tray, I thought she would never stop striking the keys on the cash register. It rang and rang and rang. The amount it registered on black and white tabs behind its glass strip became larger and larger. Finally the cashier pulled out a check and flung it on my tray. It was *Eight Dollars and Sixty-Five Cents!*

My friend's check had been only about forty-five or fifty cents. I had selected about the same amount of food. I looked in amazement at the cashier.

"Why is mine so much?" I asked.

"That is just what you will pay if you eat in here," said the cashier.

"But I don't have that much food," I said.

"That is what you will pay to eat it," said the cashier, her face growing more and more belligerent, her skin turning red and her eyes narrowing. I could see hatred in her face.

"But it doesn't cost that much," I said.

"Pay your check - or else put your tray down and leave it," she shouted. "You are holding up the line. That's what it costs if you want to eat!"

I put my tray down and left it there in front of her. I had not run into anything like that before in Cleveland, but I knew it was because I was colored. I went up to the table where my white classmate was eating and said, "Come on, let's get out of here. They won't let me eat in this place."

He was astonished, and it took a long time to explain it to him, because he did not know that such things went on in this democratic land that his parents had travelled way across the sea to find. But neither one of us made any protest. We were only fifteen or sixteen, and we did not know what to say. He and I both were embarrassed.

Some years later a large group of Communists picketed that same restaurant and others like it in Cleveland. Negro and white workers together went in and insisted on service for all. In that way they broke down the color line and ended that kind of un-American Jim Crow in the downtown cafeterias in Cleveland. I do not believe such an incident would happen to a high school boy there today. At least, I hope not. Such things are harder to take when one is young.