

What Was Jim Crow?

Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-Black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-Black racism. Many Christian ministers and theologians taught that Whites were the Chosen people, Blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists, at every educational level, buttressed the belief that Blacks were innately intellectually and culturally inferior to Whites. Pro-segregation politicians gave eloquent speeches on the great danger of integration: the "mongrelization" of the White race. Newspaper and magazine writers routinely referred to Blacks in derogatory terms (the n-word and similar), and their articles reinforced anti-Black stereotypes. Even children's games portrayed Blacks as inferior beings (see ["From Hostility to Reverence: 100 Years of African-American Imagery in Games"](#)). All major societal



institutions reflected and supported the oppression of Blacks.

The Jim Crow system was undergirded by the following beliefs or rationalizations: Whites were superior to Blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior; sexual relations between Blacks and Whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America; treating Blacks as equals would encourage interracial sexual unions; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial sexual relations; if necessary, violence must be used to keep Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. The following Jim Crow etiquette norms show how inclusive and pervasive these norms were:

1. A Black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a White male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a Black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a White woman, because he risked being accused of rape.
2. Blacks and Whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, Whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.

3. Under no circumstance was a Black male to offer to light the cigarette of a White female -- that gesture implied intimacy.
4. Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended Whites.
5. Jim Crow etiquette prescribed that Blacks were introduced to Whites, never Whites to Blacks.
For example: "Mr. Peters (the White person), this is Charlie (the Black person), that I spoke to you about."
6. Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to Blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, Blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to Whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.
7. If a Black person rode in a car driven by a White person, the Black person sat in the back seat, or the back of a truck.
8. White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.



Stetson Kennedy, the author of *Jim Crow Guide*, offered these simple rules that Blacks were supposed to observe in conversing with Whites:



1. Never assert or even intimate that a White person is lying.
2. Never impute dishonorable intentions to a White person.
3. Never suggest that a White person is from an inferior class.
4. Never lay claim to, or overly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.
5. Never curse a White person.
6. Never laugh derisively at a White person.
7. Never comment upon the appearance of a White female.¹

Jim Crow etiquette operated in conjunction with Jim Crow laws (black codes). When most people think of Jim Crow they think of laws (not the Jim Crow etiquette) which excluded Blacks from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and

neighborhoods. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had granted Blacks the same legal protections as Whites. However, after 1877, and the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, southern and border states began restricting the liberties of Blacks. Unfortunately for Blacks, the Supreme Court helped undermine the Constitutional protections of Blacks with the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) case, which legitimized



Jim Crow laws and the Jim Crow way of life.

In 1890, Louisiana passed the "Separate Car Law," which purported to aid passenger comfort by creating "equal but separate" cars for Blacks and

Whites. This was a ruse. No public accommodations, including railway travel, provided Blacks with equal facilities. The Louisiana law made it illegal for Blacks to sit in coach seats reserved for Whites, and Whites could not sit in seats reserved for Blacks. In 1891, a group of Blacks decided to test the Jim Crow law. They had Homer A. Plessy, who was seven-eighths White and one-eighth Black (therefore, Black), sit in the White-only railroad coach. He was arrested. Plessy's lawyer argued that Louisiana did not have the right to label one citizen as White and another Black for the purposes of restricting their rights and privileges. In Plessy, the Supreme Court stated that so long as state governments provided legal process and legal freedoms for Blacks, equal to those of Whites, they could maintain separate institutions to facilitate these rights. The Court, by a 7-2 vote, upheld the Louisiana law, declaring that racial separation did not necessarily mean an abrogation of equality. In practice, Plessy represented the legitimization of two societies: one White, and advantaged; the other, Black, disadvantaged and despised.

Blacks were denied the right to vote by grandfather clauses (laws that restricted the right to vote to people whose ancestors had voted before the Civil War), poll taxes (fees charged to poor Blacks), white primaries (only Democrats could vote, only Whites could be Democrats), and literacy tests ("Name all the Vice Presidents and Supreme Court Justices throughout America's history"). Plessy sent this message to southern and border states: Discrimination against Blacks is acceptable.

Jim Crow states passed statutes severely regulating social interactions between the races. Jim Crow signs were placed above water fountains, door entrances and exits, and in front of public facilities. There were separate hospitals for Blacks and Whites, separate prisons, separate public and private schools, separate churches, separate cemeteries, separate public restrooms, and separate public accommodations. In

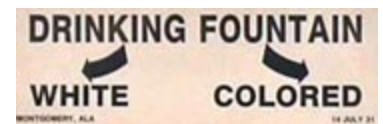


most instances, the Black facilities were

grossly inferior -- generally, older, less-well-kept. In other cases, there were no Black facilities -- no Colored public restroom, no public beach, no place to sit or eat. Plessy gave Jim Crow states a legal way to ignore their constitutional obligations to their Black citizens.

Jim Crow laws touched every aspect of everyday life. For example, in 1935, Oklahoma prohibited Blacks and Whites from boating together. Boating implied social equality. In 1905, Georgia established separate parks for Blacks and Whites. In 1930, Birmingham, Alabama, made it illegal for Blacks and Whites to play checkers or dominoes together. Here are some of the typical Jim Crow laws, as compiled by the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site Interpretive Staff:

- **Barbers.** No colored barber shall serve as a barber (to) white girls or women (Georgia).
- **Blind Wards.** The board of trustees shall...maintain a separate building...on separate ground for the admission, care, instruction, and support of all blind persons of the colored or black race (Louisiana).
- **Burial.** The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons (Georgia).
- **Buses.** All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (Alabama).
- **Child Custody.** It shall be unlawful for any parent, relative, or other white person in this State, having the control or custody of any white child, by right of guardianship, natural or acquired, or otherwise, to dispose of, give or surrender such white child permanently into the custody, control, maintenance, or support, of a negro (South Carolina).
- **Education.** The schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately (Florida).
- **Libraries.** The state librarian is directed to fit up and maintain a separate place for the use of the colored people who may come to the library for the purpose of reading books or periodicals (North Carolina).
- **Mental Hospitals.** The Board of Control shall see that proper and distinct apartments are arranged for said patients, so that in no case shall Negroes and white persons be together (Georgia).
- **Militia.** The white and colored militia shall be separately enrolled, and shall never be compelled to serve in the same organization. No organization of colored troops shall be permitted where white troops are available and where whites are permitted



to be organized, colored troops shall be under the command of white officers (North Carolina).

- *Nurses.* No person or corporation shall require any White female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which negro men are placed (Alabama).
- *Prisons.* The warden shall see that the white convicts shall have separate apartments for both eating and sleeping from the negro convicts (Mississippi).
- *Reform Schools.* The children of white and colored races committed to the houses of reform shall be kept entirely separate from each other (Kentucky).
- *Teaching.* Any instructor who shall teach in any school, college or institution where members of the white and colored race are received and enrolled as pupils for instruction shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined... (Oklahoma).
- *Wine and Beer.* All persons licensed to conduct the business of selling beer or wine...shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room at any time (Georgia).²

The Jim Crow laws and system of etiquette were undergirded by violence, real and threatened. Blacks who violated Jim Crow norms, for example, drinking from the White water fountain or trying to vote, risked their homes, their jobs, even their lives. Whites could physically beat Blacks with impunity. Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all-White: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison officials. Violence was instrumental for Jim Crow. It was a method of social control. The most extreme forms of Jim Crow violence were lynchings.

Lynchings were public, often sadistic, murders carried out by mobs. Between 1882, when the first reliable data were collected, and 1968, when lynchings had become rare, there were 4,730 known lynchings, including 3,440 Black men and women. Most of the victims of Lynch-Law were hanged or shot, but some were burned at the stake, castrated, beaten with clubs, or dismembered. In the mid-1800s, Whites constituted the majority of victims (and perpetrators); however, by the period of Radical Reconstruction, Blacks became the most frequent lynching victims. This is an early indication that lynching was used as an intimidation tool to keep Blacks, in this case the newly-freedmen, "in their places." The great majority of lynchings occurred in southern and border states, where the resentment against Blacks ran deepest. According to the social economist Gunnar Myrdal: "The southern states account for nine-tenths of the lynchings. More than two thirds of the remaining one-tenth occurred in the six states which immediately border the South."³

Many Whites claimed that although lynchings were distasteful, they were necessary supplements to the criminal

justice system because Blacks were prone to violent crimes, especially the rapes of White women. Arthur Raper investigated nearly a century of lynchings and concluded that approximately one-third of all the victims were falsely accused.⁴

Under Jim Crow any and all sexual interactions between Black men and White women was illegal, illicit, socially repugnant, and within the Jim Crow definition of rape. Although only 19.2 percent of the lynching victims between 1882 to 1951 were even accused of rape, Lynch law was often supported on the popular belief that lynchings were necessary to protect White women from Black rapists. Myrdal refutes this belief in this way: "There is much reason to believe that this figure (19.2) has been inflated by the fact that a mob which makes the accusation of rape is secure from any further investigation; by the broad Southern definition of rape to include all sexual relations between Negro men and white women; and by the psychopathic fears of white women in their contacts with Negro men."⁵ Most Blacks were lynched for demanding civil rights, violating Jim Crow etiquette or laws, or in the aftermath of race riots.

Lynchings were most common in small and middle-sized towns where Blacks often were economic competitors to the local Whites. These Whites resented any economic and political gains made by Blacks. Lynchers were seldomly arrested, and if arrested, rarely convicted. Raper estimated that "at least one-half of the lynchings are carried out with police officers participating, and that in nine-tenths of the others the officers either condone or wink at the mob action."⁶ Lynching served many purposes: it was cheap entertainment; it served as a rallying, uniting point for Whites; it functioned as an ego-massage for low-income, low-status Whites; it was a method of defending White domination and helped stop or retard the fledgling social equality movement.

Lynch mobs directed their hatred against one (sometimes several) victims. The victim was an example of what happened to a Black man who tried to vote, or who looked at a White woman, or who tried to get a White man's job. Unfortunately for Blacks, sometimes the mob was not satisfied to murder a single or several victims. Instead, in the spirit of pogroms, the mobs went into Black communities and destroyed additional lives and property. Their immediate goal was to drive out -- through death or expulsion -- all Blacks; the larger goal was to maintain, at all costs, White supremacy. These pogrom-like actions are often referred to as riots; however, Gunnar Myrdal was right when he described these "riots" as "a terrorization or massacre...a mass lynching."⁷ Interestingly, these mass lynchings were primarily urban phenomena, whereas the lynching of single victims was primarily a rural phenomena.

James Weldon Johnson, the famous Black writer, labeled 1919 as "The Red Summer." It was red from racial tension; it was red from bloodletting. During the summer of 1919, there were race riots in Chicago, Illinois; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee; Charleston, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska;

and two dozen other cities. W.E.B. DuBois, the Black social scientist and civil rights activist, wrote: "During that year seventy-seven Negroes were lynched, of whom one was a woman and eleven were soldiers; of these, fourteen were publicly burned, eleven of them being burned alive. That year there were race riots large and small in twenty-six American cities including thirty-eight killed in a Chicago riot of August; from twenty-five to fifty in Phillips County, Arkansas; and six killed in Washington."⁸

The riots of 1919 were not the first or last "mass lynchings" of Blacks, as evidenced by the race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); Springfield, Illinois (1908); East St. Louis, Illinois (1917); Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); and Detroit, Michigan (1943). Joseph Boskin, author of *Urban Racial Violence*, claimed that the riots of the 1900s had the following traits:

1. In each of the race riots, with few exceptions, it was White people that sparked the incident by attacking Black people.
2. In the majority of the riots, some extraordinary social condition prevailed at the time of the riot: prewar social changes, wartime mobility, post-war adjustment, or economic depression.
3. The majority of the riots occurred during the hot summer months.
4. Rumor played an extremely important role in causing many riots. Rumors of some criminal activity by Blacks against Whites perpetuated the actions of the White mobs.

5. The police force, more than any other institution, was invariably involved as a precipitating cause or perpetuating factor in the riots. In almost every one of the riots, the police sided with the attackers, either by actually participating in, or by failing to quell the attack.
6. In almost every instance, the fighting occurred within the Black community.⁹

Boskin omitted the following: the mass media, especially newspapers often published inflammatory articles about "Black criminals" immediately before the riots; Blacks were not only killed, but their homes and businesses were looted, and many who did not flee were left homeless; and, the goal of the White rioters, as was true of White lynchers of single victims, was to instill fear and terror into Blacks, thereby buttressing White domination. The Jim Crow hierarchy could not work without violence being used against those on the bottom rung. George Fredrickson, a historian, stated it this way: "Lynching represented...a way of using fear and terror to check 'dangerous' tendencies in a black community considered to be ineffectively regimented or supervised. As such it constituted a confession that the regular institutions of a segregated society provided an inadequate measure of day-to-day control."¹⁰

Many Blacks resisted the indignities of Jim Crow, and, far too often, they paid for their bravery with their lives.

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¹ Kennedy, Stetson. *Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was*. Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1959/1990, pp.216-117.

² This list was derived from a larger list composed by the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site Interpretive Staff. Last Updated January 5, 1998. The web address is: http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim_crowlaws.htm.

³ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*. New York: 1944, pp. 560-561.

⁴ Myrdal, op. cit., .561.

⁵ Ibid., pp.561-562.

⁶ Arthur. A. Rapier, *The Tragedy of Lynching*. Chapel Hill, 1933, pp.13-14.

⁷ Myrdal, op.cit., p.566.

⁸ W.E.B. Dubois, Originally in *Dust of Dawn*. Cited here from DuBois: *Writings*, Nathan Huggins (editor). New York: Viking Press, 1986, p.747.

⁹ Joseph Boskin, *Urban Racial Violence*. Beverly Hills, 1976, pp.14-15.

¹⁰ George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image In The White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny 1817-1914*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p.272

<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/what.htm>