

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

'The Last to Be Hired, the First to Be Fired'

(Ninth of 10 Articles)

"Racism grew up as an American ideology partly in response to the need to maintain a reliable and permanent work force in the difficult task of growing cotton. The continuation of racism after cotton was no longer 'king' is an example of the sociological principle that ideologies continue after the conditions that gave rise to them no longer exist.

—Sociologists Gunnar Myrdal and Arnold Rose, "The American Dilemma."

By BETTY DeBOLD

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The American Negro underwent a certain renaissance in the 1920s, largely thru "an almost continuous decade of brilliant entertainment," according to Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer.

The 1920s gave rise to W. C. Handy, Fats Waller and Duke Ellington (who's now experimenting with jazz symphonies and church services) as well as concert artists Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson. In the field of literature, poets Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote of the plight of their race.

A growing number of black educators and scientists reached prominence: Among them Carter G. Woodson, who founded the first society for the study of Negro history; Dr. Daniel Hale Williams, who first successfully operated on the human heart, and Dr. Charles R. Drew, a specialist on blood plasma who became first director of the American Red Cross blood bank.

The Depression

But with the 1930s and the depression, the Negro went down with so many others in this country, and generally, he fell farther and harder.

The education so important to his progress was often cut off at its base in the South. School budgets had to be pared and Negro schools — not only segregated, but never well supported — were first to feel the cuts or close. As for work, the still

predominantly agricultural South was one great blister of poverty.

Migration northward and westward "separated them from the full-blown caste system of the South," according to sociologists Myrdal and Rose, but in large cities like New York, Detroit and Chicago, which already had large Negro populations, they encountered segregation that was even "more physical than symbolic."

A pattern of ghetto housing in the cities grew and never has been outgrown. Even in those early years of the 1930s, 250,000 Negroes were crowded into eight square miles of Chicago tenements.

"As relatively unskilled workers, Negroes were hardest hit by technological unemployment — the most rapidly displaced — when changing technology or automation required an upgrading of skills," it was noted in "American Dilemma."

Negroes had their own phrase for it: "The last to be hired, the first to be fired."

Another pattern developed: increasing numbers of blacks were forced to rely on Government welfare and relief for bare subsistence.

Several Boosts

Franklin Delano Roosevelt ("Great White Father") moved into this area, and his New Deal offered several boosts to the Negro, as well as to underprivileged and newly impoverished whites. More Negroes were made advisers in Federal Government departments than ever before in history; and organizations like the Works Project Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps and the Federal Theater gave the Negro industrial training, jobs and cultural outlets.

Socially, tho, the Negro was still subject to Jim Crowism wherever he looked, whether he wanted to buy a Coke where he wasn't welcome or enter a restroom that whites used. His "place" was to be kept.

He had to look to "symbols" of Negro enjoyment of the good life in those decades: Men like heavyweight champ Joe



DR. DANIEL HALE WILLIAMS

Louis, the "Brown Bomber," who lost only one fight (to Max Schmeling) out of 71 in 11 years; and Jackie Robinson, who became the first Negro to play big league baseball, when he signed on with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1941.

Then in the last years of the 1930s and in the 1940s, something new was tried in the Negro's protest for rights. He began to picket, to use his burgeoning economic and political power.

Black Boycotts

When stores and factories refused to hire blacks, leaders like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. — then assistant pastor at Abyssinia Baptist Church in Harlem — sent the people out to say, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work." Color lines began to crumble

where employers' pocketbooks were pinched hard enough.

The non-violent resistance technique — borrowed from Gandbi and later to be used effectively by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — was first practiced by a new group called Congress on Racial Equality in Chicago in 1942.

This political and economic pressure also was put to use after the beginning of World War II when many factories refused to hire Negroes. The Negro press and groups like the NAACP put pressure on Washington until FDR issued an order barring discrimination in industries with Government contracts. He followed with a Committee on Fair Employment Practices.

Despite this, more than one million Negro men and women in American uniforms could find patriotism and segregation commingled on the same battlefield. Not only were fighting forces segregated in all branches of the service, so was their blood. The American Red Cross saw to that in their blood banks.

Fought Together

Once again, the Negro press and the NAACP brought great pressure to bear on President Roosevelt, but he moved slowly in this area, not venturing to integrate forces until the 1st Army's invasion of Germany in 1945. Blacks and whites fought side by side in Army ground troops there.

It was President Harry Truman who moved for full integration of American military services in 1948.

President Truman was aware, as many Americans were forced to become aware, that the black Johnny who came marching home from World War II had helped make the world safe for democracy (again) so he wasn't about to be denied it at home (again).

The American Negro who moved into the 1950s was done with stepping to the back of the bus.

(NEXT: "The Turning Point.")