



www.visionsoftheity.com

BADGE OF HONOR: COMING OF AGE IN 60s NEWARK

Sandra L West

They would not let me march. Black people were being lynched, tarred, feathered, and maimed throughout the south. Duped out of jobs and left for economic dead. Insulted and degraded.

While I did visit my ancestral home every summer vacation of my life, my parents would not allow me to return to march with the DownSouth, Greensboro, North Carolina college students during Freedom Summers or even to participate in civil rights rallies in the new UpSouth homeland of Newark, New Jersey. Their restrictions were the bane of my adolescent existence.

My parents were from Falling Creek, a rural hamlet surrounded by Herring Grove and Kinston. Kinston is 80 miles from military Fayetteville, and 20 miles from where East Carolina University stands this day in Greenville, 2007.

When my parents returned home to see their own parents, back to the old country, American Apartheid rules were still the same. They were not allowed in public libraries or "white" restaurants. They could not swim in a decent pool, yet they were excellent swimmers. The beach in Kinston was not that far from Grandma Janie's Oak Street house. The white side of the beach was separated from the black side of the beach by brown rope. The water was dark green/blue on both sides. There was no disco, only the falling-apart Elks Club where my family members met to socialize, and there were juke joints in the raggedy woods. My parents could not take us to the county fair, unless it was "Colored" night. They were bound by apartheid laws that I, a 1960s teenager, was bound to help break.

Many of my Carolina relatives lived in sharecropping shacks, but Uncle Richard Foy lived in town because he was a dentist and the main Queen Street was where his office was near. He served black folks when white dentists wouldn't. I recently re-read *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou and if Dr. Foy's patients could speak from the grave, they would tell a similar story. As the Arkansas saga goes, young Maya had a terrible toothache and Grandmother Henderson took her to the closest dentist, the white doctor named Dentist Lincoln, who not only refused to accept the elder's grandbaby as a patient but growled

"Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." (Angelou 184).

The south was rough, and Kinston was no different.

I was restricted in Kinston. But, I was also restricted in Newark. Unlike children of the 21st century who roam streets in herds and subways at all hours without parental supervision, my movements

were monitored. I was not allowed to run around Newark. I didn't even think about it. I was taken places by my family.

We dressed up in our Sunday-go-to-meeting best to shop Bamberger's and Kresge downtown. When it was time for new school clothes, our hair was washed and pressed so it would be clean, straight and long, with not a strand out of place. Our legs were greased with lotion so our skin would not be "ashy." All this was done so we would appear acceptable to the ruling class, to the shop owners and their Caucasian customers who carried alligator purses and sported blue rinsed hair stylishly coiffed under netted scarves. We were on their turf, and no one had to tell me that this was true. I knew it because my mother's stern tones were no-nonsense-hushed as she admonished me to stand up straight when walking down Market Street towards Bamberger's. I carried the integrity of my entire race upon the straightness of my twelve-year-old back. I could not slump in public. I could not be loud. What would white people think of us, think of our people? We were being taught to have dignity, on those trips to downtown Newark, and to have a race consciousness about us. The other mothers had their children with them too, and my mother would not be out-done. Hers were as good as anybody's.

As I advanced into puberty, I was occasionally released from my parents' control for social events. My teenage friends and I went together to the pizza parlor on Custer Avenue, the bowling alley in Hillside, the Park Theatre on Bergen Street, into New York's Greenwich Village to dance in non-alcoholic teenage clubs, to choir rehearsal at St. James AME Church, and to parties totally unlike the ones my sister went to.

During the 1960s, bowling became all the rage. My mother played with a league and went to tournaments for which she won many trophies. My father was an excellent 200 bowler, but did not commit himself to the league. My parents introduced my sister and me to the game, and we swallowed it up, as did our friends who accompanied us on the trek to the lanes. Our legs were young then. Our knees did not buckle. We were able to walk from Chadwick and Custer all the way down Bergen Street some ten blocks or so to Bailey, which was in Hillside, NJ, make a left turn for a block or two, then a right onto the main street of Elizabeth Avenue that still resembles, at that end, a mini-highway, then another left to where Hillside Lanes once stood.

When we had rolled our last spare at the Hillside Lanes bowling alley and the last party was flung at Harold's house at the end of the school season, I rode with my parents down back roads, pre I-95 days, from Newark to Kinston, North Carolina. K-Town. We traveled with a potty in the back seat so as not to have to ask/beg a gas station attendant or a restaurateur for use of public restrooms where signs humiliated us. "White Men" "White Women" "Colored." We packed our lunch and ate by the side of the roads at picnic tables. We kids thought it was such an adventure, eating like that, when actually, our parents were ducking Jim Crow as best they could by keeping us far away from people who would invariably snarl "We don't serve colored here."

I could slide in and out of Kinston and its rural hamlets with parents close-by, but I could not return south to join the 1960s civil rights movement, something I yearned to do.

"I am not going back to Kinston to get you out no jail for talking back to white folks," argued my father when I, a rebellious 15-year-old, asked to join students who were on the front lines desegregating lunch counters and such. I asked, but no was no and that was that. Well, not exactly.

Now, my father had an activist history of his own with community block clubs, church stewardship, and labor unions. As a matter of fact, many times when I now see Congressman Donald Payne we share a chuckle about Willie A. West, especially if something is going wrong in the old neighborhood that the Payne's and West's once shared; we knew that none other than Willie West would negotiate and mediate and dilute the crisis.

"You don't want Willie West to come back, now, and start growling 'bout stuff," Payne said the last time I saw him at Bethany Baptist Church in Newark. We both laughed with total respect but with a little pain in the missing of such a grassroots advocate like my dad was, who battled Payne for district leader positions and lost many elections but was a respected leader nevertheless, whose good name and hard work still hold weight even in death.

My father was a character. He spoke a little high school French that he pulled out for show and tell whenever I was having trouble with my high school Latin. He said "no" to me in French, Standard English and Black English. No, I could not join the civil rights movement. I was too young, too bull-headed, NO. He was not going to bring me home in a pine box.

Emmett Till's mother had to bring him home. Just 14-years old, he was murdered by grown men in August of 1955, when he came from Chicago for summer vacation in Money, Mississippi, not knowing or not accepting the ways of the south. His tongue was cut out and stuffed back into his mouth. His private parts were cut off, and stuffed there too. He was beaten with an axe. His mother almost did not know who he was.

I was a few years younger than Emmett Till when in August of 1959 my father moved the family from the North Ward of Newark to the beautiful South Ward, seeking a higher quality of life. He purchased 395 Chadwick Avenue for \$17,000 from Mrs. Yetta Stein and her devout, religious husband. The streets were tree-lined. Chadwick extended straight past Hawthorne Avenue, with no Route 78 to split up the black neighborhood in the name of urban progress.

Early black families on Chadwick Avenue were the Characters and the Stricklands. Mrs. Character was an asthmatic who lined up tins and cereal boxes in the food pantry like little wooden soldiers, as if a military officer would one day come in, inspect, and chide her if one can of baby green peas was out of place. The Strickland family had three children who could have company when their parents were not home, something we were forbidden to do, and we wanted to obey even as we were in total awe of those "free-to-be" children.

The business area on Bergen Street, around the corner from Chadwick, was so vibrant I could buy anything I wanted right there. I bought a slip once, for \$5.00, in one of those upscale boutiques and it never wore out even as I advanced in years and hip sizes.

The neighborhood hummed with resources – until the Park Theatre and pizza parlor closed down -- the homes were well-appointed, and civility reigned between neighbors. We, from segregated Falling Creek, North Carolina, lived quietly in the same house with Polish and Russian Jews. Mr. and Mrs. Boralsky, Stanley and Sarah, with a grandfather living there too, were in the downstairs apartment with three children, and my parents demanded we be respectful. They insisted upon it.

The 2nd floor apartment where we lived had grey inlaid linoleum, and maroon flowers in the wall paper were the size of a 12x5 quilting block. To me, a youngster, my front room looked like a funeral parlor. But, it was very grand, well-polished, old world and noble

The entire neighborhood was beautiful and serene, just like 395. All was well. So, I vividly remember this particular day when the crass adult world defiled my innocence.

Riiiiing! Our black telephone rang off the hook. Before I could get "West Residence" out of my mouth an oily voice excitedly told me "The niggers are coming. The niggers are coming. Sell now." Little did he know that I, a 12-year-old child, was one of those who was not only coming but had arrived. He tried his best, but my family members were not white and were not running or selling. I had come into direct contact with housing discrimination, part and parcel with Red-Lining.

During the mayoral tenure of Kenneth Allen Gibson – [June 16, 1970 Gibson elected mayor of Newark, the first African-American mayor of a major eastern U.S. city] there was a Newark Office of Consumer Action headed by Dennis Cherot. Cherot contributed a chapter titled "Out of Necessity" to NEWARK: 1967-1977 An Assessment, edited by Stanley B. Winters and published by New Jersey Institute of Technology. This is a very important chapter – as they all were -- because it defines Red-Lining, among other injustices black people endured. Cherot wrote:

Newark residents are also exposed to the practice of "redlining" which involves banks discriminating against Blacks and other low-income groups in mortgage loan practices. The refusal of banks to grant mortgages and home improvement loans to Newark residents has seriously affected the city's growth and rehabilitation. Living in urban neighborhoods which are primarily Black or Hispanic should not be a criterion for denying loans. Individuals should be granted loans on their qualifications and their ability to repay the loan. Without monies from the lending institutions, Newark residents are denied the chance of helping themselves to improve their surroundings. (228).

So, while the real estate agent I "met" on the telephone forced a hard and quick sale in the neighborhood – and most of my white neighbors did bale out and run to Hillside, Union, West Orange – the new black homeowners were given the shaft by banks and this, coupled with the fact that 50% of Newark supermarkets fled the area , helped fuel the South Ward/Newark history of blighted and frustrated neighborhoods. Thus - along with notices of poor police/resident relationships, unemployment, and disrespect from City Hall administrators - this area and all of Newark became ripe for the Rebellion of 1967, aka The Newark Riots.

During those high school years, I saw the world partly through the television set my father purchased from Sears, when Sears & Roebuck was on Elizabeth Avenue where Branford Brothers Moving and Storage currently does business. On television news in 1963, I was traumatized when I witnessed a white segregationist politician named Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor of Birmingham, Alabama sic dogs and high powered water hoses on black folks who wanted to exercise their right to vote and to march peaceably. My dukes were up.

With parental "no's" ringing in my ears, I would steal away. I put on my brown penny loafers and walked the length of Newark behind Robert "Bob" Curvin, the leader of C.O.R.E. (Congress on Racial Equality), in protest against American Apartheid, the same system that had crippled the lives of my parents in Falling Creek. I remember a particular C.O.R.E. march keenly because, on that

same television set where I was "introduced" to "Bull" Connor, I had seen equally callous white people with turned-down mouths crack raw eggs upon the heads of trained-in-non-violence southern black college students who sat at lunch counters in Woolworth's. We marchers, in Newark, stopped on Broad & Market, in front of our Woolworth's 5 and 10 cent store where Conway is located now. Our rallying cries and chants tried to shame them for the way they held black folk captive Down-South, as if we were not held captive UpSouth. Our method of operation was called sympathy march, and my parents forbid me to leave the house, but I walked. I stole away.

I walked and marched until I wore holes in my brown penny loafers. My mother threw my loafers in the garbage on a regular basis along with the Ike and Tina Turner 45 records my sister and I loved so much and that she hated for us to listen to. I, dutifully, got my shoes out before any sanitation truck could claim them. They had holes in them, yes. To my mother and to my father who had fled dusty Falling Creek where they, as children, sometimes had no shoes at all, my shoes did belong in the garbage can. My parents were able and willing to buy good shoes for me, and I required orthopedics, as I do now, so the price was not cheap. But, holes and all, those shoes were My Badge of Honor. They belonged on my feet, ready to do as much battle as I could possibly muster.

Sandra L. West is Founder of The Camden Street Neighborhood Association. She co-authored *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Checkmark Books, NY, 2003. Her fiction is most recently seen in Pembroke Magazine #39, and her poetry was, of late, anthologized in Family Pictures.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969.
- Cherot, Dennis. "Out of Necessity." Newark: 1967-1977 An Assessment: Papers Prepared for the Conference on An Assessment of Newark, 1966-77. October 1, 1977. Stanley B. Winters, ed. Published by New Jersey Institute of Technology.
- Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*. Fifth Edition. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- New York Amsterdam News. "When The Word Is Given – They Rally Around." March 26, 1965,
- Raphael, Michael. Emmett Till, The Oratorio performed by Trilogy: An Opera Company at Trinity & St. Philip's Cathedral, 608 Broad St, Newark, NJ, June 9, 2007 at 8 p.m.
- Violence in Selma 1965. www.multied.com/Sixties/Selma.html
- West Whiteurs, Sandra. "City Supermarkets: Where'd They All Go?" Information