

# **RICHMOND JOURNAL:**

## **THIRTY**

## **YEARS IN**

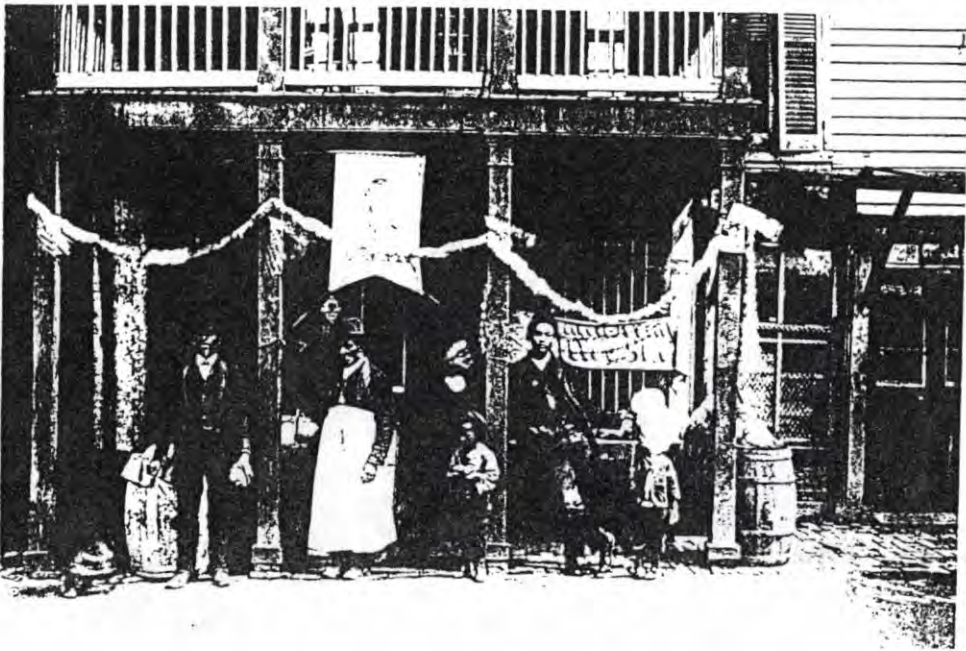
## **BLACK & WHITE**



**BY EDWARD H. PEEPLES**

**Foreward:** The pamphlet you now hold in your hands is the first in a series of upcoming booklets that will serve as an aid in the grand process of unlearning. In a time where the media and technology poison our minds from birth, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to reclaim our lives, our stories, our past. This is a step in that direction. Independent media and underground publications are one of the strongest weapons we have to counterattack the corporate power elite's ever tightening stranglehold on our existence. The four short stories contained herein are of one man's desire to break free from the still lingering ghosts of Richmond's past. The stories span 30 years of his and the city's struggle to crawl out of the ugly shadow of Jim Crow. Sadly, the battle has yet to be won. This is only the beginning.

A general store on Main Street in the 1880's.



# RICHMOND JOURNAL: THIRTY YEARS IN BLACK & WHITE

BY EDWARD H. PEEPLES

## WHITE BREAD AND BLACK PEOPLE

It must have been 1944, 1945, or even shortly after World War II. Many different foodstuffs, gasoline, and other consumer products were rationed or at least in very short supply. Life was lean. From what I could see, the Great Depression was not yet over in the Richmond I knew. My father had lost a series of jobs, mostly in the grocery business, and my mother had returned to work in her profession as a "hairdresser."

We and many others like us had to make do. I had no notion that the sacrifice wasn't universal, as most folks I knew thought our suffering was not only inevitable but noble as it would hasten the day when we would crush Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini. Whatever economic deprivation I may have endured at the time did not seem to me to be particularly acute, as my preoccupation during that period was with the painful consequences of living under the same roof as a violence-prone alcoholic father.

However, I do especially remember shoes being in short supply around my house on West 28th Street and the familial turmoil it seemed to generate. The soles of my pair kept coming loose and would flap about as I walked to school. I can still recall distinctly how my mother would scream at my father for his inclination to lose jobs, his apparent inability to provide steady income, his drinking, and most memorably, his continuing failure to provide his oldest son with a decent pair of shoes to wear to school and church.

My mother was nevertheless very resourceful. For example, she persuaded my uncle Bubbie, who worked the night shift at the Dupont plant on the Petersburg Pike, to smuggle out small scraps of material left over from parachutes made for the war effort. My mother and her sister, Vela, used the scraps to make great silk patch quilts. They were lovely and were greatly appreciated by my younger brother and I when coal shortages left us with a very chilly house on winter nights.

My mother was not only resourceful but was a very persuasive individual with an unusual business savvy. Late in WW II, she met and was

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apparently befriended by a local labor union leader, who I knew as Mr. Hughes. Mr. Hughes was the most prosperous person with whom I had ever been acquainted. He had an office downtown on Grace Street and I think owned several businesses around the city, including a beauty shoppe in which my mother worked. He seemed to be very interested in and helpful to my mother--and me. As a child, I was perhaps unusually skilled for my age as a bicycle mechanic and woodworker. So Mr. Hughes would occasionally hire me to build shelves, partitions, a dirty towel bin, and other items for his office and beauty shoppe.

Through this man, my mother somehow secured the financial wherewithal to open a small grocery store on East 22nd Street. It was just one block off the Petersburg Pike, aka the Jeff Davis Highway, near the Model Tobacco Company and the Lucky Strike cigarette factory, sources of employment for vast numbers of both black and white Richmonders. The store was presumably my father's to operate. I never was to learn who actually owned the place, but I did come to understand that I, as a nine year old, was expected to do my time there after school and on Saturdays.

While "our boys" were all across the globe fighting for freedom and democracy--albeit in racially segregated military units--we didn't have much democracy on the home front, at least not in the old Capitol of the Confederacy. Richmond was a totally segregated city. Blacks were relegated to the worst housing, jobs, schools, and recreational facilities. Their movement was restricted; they endured ceaseless daily indignities, and faced discrimination and danger everywhere. They were not even allowed to try on shoes or clothes before they purchased them at Baldwins Department Store on Hull Street and Thalhimers and Miller and Rhoads downtown. No one too young to have personally witnessed the realities of segregation would today appreciate the extent of its hurtful impact on blacks and its psychological numbing effect on whites at the time.

As a young child, I had not a clue that anything was wrong or unjust. I met not a single soul in the first eighteen years of my life who ever once spoke up as a critic of segregation, even during the four times a week I spent in our Baptist church. To the contrary, in every institution and from the lips of every single adult whom I was instructed to emulate, I heard nothing about race unless it was about the superiority of whites or the inferiority of blacks. I, my brother, and everyone else I knew, had no way to learn that it could be different. White supremacy, as thoughts and acts, was to us as natural a phenomenon as was the sunrise.

My father as an adult was no exception to other racists of the era, unless it was that he had grown up in an even more virulent racist environment than most. His childhood and adolescence were spent in rural South Carolina at the first of this century following the demise of

Reconstruction which had been masterminded by Wade Hampton and his followers. In fact, my grandfather had been a "lieutenant" in Hampton's Red Shirts, a notorious vigilante group which, upon horseback, terrorized blacks and reconstructionists in the late decades of the 19th century. My father, I was to later learn, had witnessed without pangs of penitence several lynchings of blacks. He then, like me in my youth, never had a way to know that this vile view of the world was wrong or unnatural.

This was the racial world which I inherited and knew, and to which I was trustingly pliant. And it was also the context in which my father conducted his small grocery business in this southside Richmond neighborhood. So during this period of shortages during WW II my father always favored whites who came into the store whether he knew them personally or not. If a black individual came in--and many did for they worked at the tobacco factories and lived nearby--and asked for a scarce item such as butter, sugar, or bread, he would deny that he had such commodities. He had hid them under the counter or in a corner of the meat cooler. If whites came in and made similar requests, he would pull out the item and sell it to them. He instructed me to do the same when I was alone in the front of the store.

But my father was a drinker. And the store really had very little traffic so he had a lot of opportunity to indulge in his habit. I never actually saw him take the nip but it was abundantly clear to me when he became incapacitated. He would disappear into the backroom and fall into a stupor onto an army cot which he kept there for that purpose. This, of course, left his young son in charge of the store. So whenever I was not in school, I would find myself alone as the grocery clerk.

As I recall, it was around four o'clock in the afternoon when the day shift at Model Tobacco would let out. Several of the workers would then stop by our store to pick up a few things. Since bread was among the scarce items, almost everyone of them would ask for bread. We would have a day's stock of about twelve loaves of the local white Noldes bread stowed under the counter. If the customer was white, I would pull out a loaf and sell it to them. Initially, if the customer was black, I would parrot my father's words and insist that "We're all out."

But as time went on, my father seemed more withdrawn, and as I grew to feel that I was more in control of the store during these hours, an unexplainable development occurred. I remember it vividly.

One summer afternoon an attractive black woman in work clothes, perhaps in her late thirties, walked into our patron-less store after the day shift. She seemed to be very tired and somewhat preoccupied. She collected a few items from the shelves and laid them down on the counter.

For no apparent reason, I was seized by an immense curiosity about her. I stared at her and pondered about what her life must be like. Was she married? Did she have any children? Could she have a young son like me? My thoughts about her were interrupted by her words--"And I would like a loaf of bread."

I could not elude my fascination with this woman. There was something in her face that drew me toward a sense of familiarity and kinship with her, even if everything in my upbringing told me that she was of another species and my feelings of affinity were unnatural. Perhaps I was drawn to her because I observed in her face some of the same signs of adversity and weariness I often saw in my own mother's face. Or, perhaps in some primitive way, I sensed that we both shared a burden of cruelty in our lives. But whatever was the source of this perceived connection, it had for me an almost magical effect. For perhaps the first time in my brief life, I saw in her no mythical figure invented and embellished by white fear and ignorance. Rather, in my mind for these few fleeting moments at least, I perceived a person, who like everyone else I knew, just wanted to get through the burdensome effects of this, the last great war in behalf of freedom and democracy. Sadly, my next escape from the deadly imagery of white racial folklore was to come only years later.

She repeated her request with emphasis--"And a loaf of bread!" Her words broke my concentration. "Uh... Yea," I said and reached under the counter and brought out a loaf of bread in the familiar blue Noldes wrapper. I laid it beside the rest of her order.

Of course, I have long forgotten how much money she gave me. I do recall that I gave her change and watched her pick up her bag, walk slowly through the double screen door, down the four steps to the sidewalk, and then out of sight. However, my imagination followed her all the way home where I saw her trudge into her house, drop her grocery bag onto the kitchen table in exhaustion, and then flop down onto her living room sofa--as I had seen my own mother do so often after a hard day's work. And in my mind, I saw her young son race into the kitchen, reach into the grocery bag, lift out the bread in the dark blue wrapper, rip open the end of it, pull out a fresh fluffy piece of white bread, and eat it with great singularity of pleasure.

From that time on, my father would periodically ask me why was the bread always sold out so early when I was out in the front of the store. I told him that we were having a lot more white customers coming in now.

# THE PRICE OF VICTORY

It was suppertime on December 3, 1955. The Gallaudet College basketball team had arrived by bus from Washington, DC for tonight's game with the Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University) "Green Devils." The Gallaudet players and staff were famished, as athletes often become when they go on the road. The fact that all the players were deaf and their speech could not be easily understood did not make it any less clear that they were ready to eat. My job, in return for my small basketball scholarship, was to play host to all the visiting teams. So, I led our Gallaudet guests down the steps of Founder's Hall into the college cafeteria and ushered them through the food line.

Of course, this was the era of racial segregation and the infamous doctrine of "Massive Resistance" created by James Jackson Kilpatrick and the "Byrd Machine" in reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court's school desegregation orders of 1954 and 1955. Included among its sundry white supremacist provisions was a ban on interracial athletic competition at state colleges. So anyone who was likely to put a chink in the armor of segregation was considered the ultimate traitor. RPI, the city of Richmond, and the entire Commonwealth of Virginia were like the rest of the South, under the absolute hegemony of this legal apartheid.

Washington too was mostly segregated and so Gallaudet's players were all white. However, their bus driver was a black man, an individual whose image was to be seared into my memory for a lifetime. He was a short, slightly stocky man in his forties and he wore a dark cloth jacket and a busman's cap. He was a very quiet and unassuming person who to me, despite his height and race, blended into the line of the much taller basketball players who were filing through before the steam tables.

As it was the bus driver's turn to select his silverware, without any warning, it became quite evident that this or no other black man could blend freely into the fabric of life as lived here in Richmond, Virginia. When the cafeteria manager caught sight of him progressing through the line, he leaped around the rail, positioned himself in front of the surprised bus driver, and authoritatively proclaimed-- "you can't be served here!" Having stationed myself for ready assistance to our visitors within but a couple of feet of the line, I witnessed the entire scene.

The bus driver's initial shock, in but a moment, gave way to pliant resignation. Without any hint of anger, he set his tray down, turned around, and made his way past the tall young white men who were not to be denied their supper. All eyes were fixed on the bus driver as he walked a gauntlet of humiliation, even as a half dozen or so black cafete-

ria workers peered with cautious curiosity out of the door to the kitchen.

I was stunned by how this just ordinary man could maintain such poise and dignity in the face of his agonizing retreat from this piercing insult. His heroic bearing suddenly struck some heretofore idle nerve deep inside of me. While I had spent much of the prior year and a half trying to intellectually wrench myself from the clutches of a racist upbringing, this majestic march by a man I was never to really know, abruptly was awakening my sleeping soul to the true and profound evil of segregation and white supremacy. I found myself enraged!

I raced up to the cafeteria manager, who I knew well, and barked, "He is our guest! Where else can he eat? How can you do this?" None of my reputation as a basketball ace or as a BMOC held any sway here. While I was naive to much of the reality of racism, I was to be rudely instructed this evening--we were not alone. The ominous scepter of segregation was hanging heavy over us. I could not believe what was happening nor could I understand the intensity of my rage over it. I was by now making a scene. In the past, I would have not risked my reputation in such a situation, but today was a time in which I was to enter a new consciousness about race and what my soul was to command me to do about it.

Clearly, I embarrassed the cafeteria manager and his white staff with my failure to behave as whites were expected in racial matters. No doubt, I made the deaf Gallaudet basketball players uneasy as well, despite the fact that they could detect only fragments of what was happening. More significantly, I had also added grief to the Gallaudet bus driver's already heavy burden. In those days, it was more often assumed that even good and civil people do not protest in behalf of a victim of racial abuse because--as the reasoning went--by doing so, one would only draw further attention and harm to the victim. Moreover, the prospect of violence always hovered nearby as the ultimate arbiter of racial impropriety.

I was possessed. I ran to the telephone. I knew that Mr. English, the business manager of the college and an admirer of my basketball accomplishments and my record as a campus leader, would reverse the cafeteria manager's decision and rescue us from this shameless treatment of our guest. Unfortunately, Mr. English was more impressed by the state segregation laws than he was with my petty reputation as a campus hot dog at one of Virginia's least regarded colleges. He said "I'm sorry, but the law is the law." "So where is he to be fed as a guest of the college?" I retorted. Becoming irritated with me, he snapped, "I don't care where or what he eats, he just can't go through the line reserved for whites and he cannot eat in the cafeteria dining area."



Upon hanging up the phone I began to think -- the linchpin of segregation was the "separate but equal" doctrine, the contention that the wall between the races never really resulted in any inequities for Blacks. Here at RPI at this moment was a classic example of the absurdity of this claim and finally a 20 year old southerner could for the first time see this tragic truth in bold relief. He was never to be the same.

It struck me that if they would not treat our guest with the dignity he deserved, perhaps the best we could do would be to raise the price of preserving segregation, at least here and now. So with great embarrassment, I asked the bus driver if he would be willing, in order to eat, to take his meal in an adjacent building. He concluded that he had no choice in the matter, and so followed me over through an enclosed passageway to an unoccupied classroom next door. The room was full of those old ubiquitous school chairs with one arm used for a writing surface. I invited him to sit in one and tried to make him comfortable, a fruitless exercise at this point. I then told him I would be right back with his dinner. Returning to the cafeteria, I picked up a tray and proceeded to fill it with a salad, a serving each of roast beef, mashed potatoes, rolls and butter, a dessert, and a large glass of iced tea. Haughtily skipping past the cashier, I raced back to deliver the meal to my special guest.

He was sitting patiently. I set the tray down on the arm of a chair next to him and he approached his long awaited meal. "Wait," I said. "Don't eat yet, you haven't got all of the choices." He paused and hesitatingly agreed with my idea to return to the cafeteria to assemble a second tray of selections--so far available only to his white fellow travelers. I repeated my trip through the line, taking all new food items not selected during my first run. I raced again past the cashier, gloating over the fact that she could not stop me because I was complying with the letter of Mr. English's commandment. Meanwhile, everyone watched me and began to catch on to what I was doing. But they were too dumfounded by my antics to yet be able to figure out how to respond with that very special form of hostility and rebuke reserved only for whites who dared to chisel a crack in the wall of segregationist solidarity.

I hurried with the second tray back to my guest and again asked him to wait for one last tray. Scurrying back to the cafeteria, I grabbed a third tray, selected all the remaining choices which had not been on the first two trays, and hastily made my way past the exasperated cashier, the cafeteria manager, and all of the other vexed onlookers who now were steaming as they saw their precious racial conventions being tweaked by one of their own.

I delivered the third tray to my guest and informed him that he now had every single selection in front of him from which the whites had to

choose. A tiny smile came to his lips and then promptly disappeared. Without a word, he began to eat his lonesome feast. Groping for words that might heal some of the hurt, I said, "It's all yours, all of this, all three trays are yours. It cost them three times more to do you this way." He said nothing and just went on eating. I sat in another chair watching him in silence for a good five more minutes and then I bid him goodbye and left for the gym to get ready for the game. We won the game 74-61, but I got only 3 points. It was no triumph for me.

## SUCH A SIMPLE ACT

(Written on the afternoon of February 20, 1960.)

Human dignity rolled over and rubbed her sleepy eyes in Richmond's Thalhimers Department Store today.

We arrived around noon at the Richmond Room. Standing there silently were some 50 well-dressed Negro young people of college age. Later we were to learn that most of them were students at Virginia Union University. They were grouped around the entrance to the dining room but the four or five feet across were blocked by a rope. Several white male store officials stood behind the rope inside the Richmond Room with their elbows in their palms, sometimes mumbling out the sides of their mouths in low authoritative tones. One very tall man neatly attired in a dark suit walked back and forth, up and down, the wrinkles growing more and more permanent on his forehead. His curly, perfectly parted hair streaked with gray told us they he was ranking executive present and represented the "Policy."

The Negroes were silent. Each stood expressionless and each held a book, I thought it to be a bible in their hand. Their eyes, however, belied their mute pacifism. I could see the tumult storm raging in their eyes, their longings, their determinations, their hopes. But most of all, I could see in their eyes patience, a quiet, graceful, yet fervent patience seeming to me to be a quality especially invoked by some divine force for this remarkable moment. To me the blinking of their eyelids appeared like the first moments of flickering light on the newly illuminated marquee of a theater that had been closed and empty for years.

I had seen Negroes all my life, but to me there had never been this light. Nothing had ever shone with the radiance I saw today. Negro aspirations had always seemed to me to be boarded up like abandoned storefronts. While I had known that conditions were terribly wrong, I had really understood very little of their personal consciousness and desires about freedom. And they had no way to know of my painful identifica-

tion with their struggle.

But today, it was different, they were young and they believed in themselves. They also believed in peaceful means to overthrow this monster of segregation, for not one made a move that could have been interpreted as aggression. They just stood there, prayerfully still with only an occasional "clear the aisles" or "keep clear of the aisles please" spoken softly by two of the Negro leaders as they extended their arms to sweep demonstrators back into a neat aggregate. One of the leaders was a big handsome young man with a warm smile. The other was a short fellow with horn-rimmed glasses. His face was stern, but his voice was gentle.

The only noise or movement came from behind the rope inside the restaurant. More and more executives began to congregate, their foreheads wrinkled. They stood in circles whispering to each other, their arms folded across their chests, their faces looking more and more troubled by the minute.

At first, my three friends and I witnessed all of this from amidst the growing crowd of antagonistic, disbelieving onlookers standing about in the nearby toy department. As these tense moments wore on, each of the four of us wrestled singly and together with the prospects we would face were we to join the students. The consequences for the other three would have been so serious they eventually chose to leave the store. Despite the doubt and terror which gripped me, I finally made my way out of the white crowd and took my place with the Negro protestors. I knew none of them personally and none of them knew me. I nevertheless sensed an intense familiarity with each of them, as if we were all part of some great consciousness, far beyond ourselves.

Among the white spectators, I saw here and there faces I remembered from my childhood. I saw their heads tilt toward one another and their hands cover the words they were exchanging as they looked at me with vicious eyes at this traitor of their race. The rancor I felt by one elderly woman, who I vaguely recalled from Southside Richmond in the 1940's, was apparently too much for her to contain. With no warning, she marched up and spat in my face. In the first instant, I was simply startled. But as I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket, I began to feel the heat of humiliation. I mopped my face as my heart cried out desperately inside me. "Don't you people understand?" But I knew they didn't. They were slaves to the Southern credo known as "Our Way of Life."

Every so often one of the student leaders would ceremoniously approach the rope barrier by the restaurant with a futile request to be admitted. In each instance, he was confronted by the tall, gray-haired executive who, with a scowl across his face and deep wrinkles on his

forehead, would shake his head "no."

After some time, this official unhooked the rope and started down the walkway formed by the students on each side of the entrance. One small pretty girl was positioned about six to eight inches out from the group in his path. As he walked by, he bumped her slightly. Upon feeling her impact, he quickly swung around and glared angrily into her beautiful golden brown face. His fists were clinched and he leaned forward with taut lips pressing hotly against each other. Her lower lip curled down and we could see that she was about to lash out. At that instant, the handsome student leader stepped up and took her hand. The tense look on her face turned into a tiny smile and the two amicably stepped back together into the group of students.

Some moments elapsed, and then two officers from the Fire Bureau arrived. They walked around quietly for the most part, but occasionally would stop in front of the demonstrators and demand in a vehement, rude tone, "clear the aisle!"

For what seemed like hours, I stood there with the students, for the first time in my life feeling what it was like to bear an irrevocable moral witness, to have my skin burn with the absolute rebuke of my own people. My chest pounded with fear, and inside my mind was screaming at the white store executives (some of whom attended college with me) "We are sick of this crazy, archaic, social inequality. We want it changed and we want it done here and now in Thalhimers."

While my thoughts were of anger and agony, I sensed the peaceful imperative from the other protestors. Somehow, even though it was uncharacteristic of me, I managed to continue to stand with them in silent revolt. I thought over and over again: "Is it worth it? What are we accomplishing? What if something disastrous happens--then the ascaris of the ideal would mean only an arrest, the loss of my job and I would have to leave Richmond, my home, and find work elsewhere.

"Then what about my family? They would be so hurt. Such a simple act--to stand quietly and passively in behalf of the fundamental American principle of equality. How could such a small act, so obviously justified, result in such grave consequences?"

Soon the thought was interrupted. The tall grey-headed executive was pointing at me and saying something to a newly arrived police captain in a smart brown uniform. The police officer, the executive, another policeman, and several other men walked the few steps over to me.

The captain demanded, "Are you from New York?" "No," I said. "Then where are you from?" he asked in an irritated voice. "Richmond," I replied. "Where do you live?" "The West End." "Are you a student?" "No, I am a City employee." "In what department?" "Welfare," I

responded. He stood dumbfounded for a few seconds and when he seemingly recovered, he asked my name. I told him. He then said, "You are going to be escorted from the store." The tall grey-headed man stepped forward and issued the order "Leave the store!"

With that, two large men in plain clothes each took one of my arms and led me to the escalator as the contempt of the white onlookers burned down my neck. Just before I reached the next floor below, the two men gave me a shove and I stumbled to my knees. They grasped me by the arms once again and herded me to the next escalator stairway and then the next, and so on until we reached the first floor.

I was then jostled along the Sixth Street exit and thrust onto the sidewalk. One man even shouted, "Don't you ever come back here," while the other burlier figure clapped his hands together making a loud popping sound as if he were ordering dogs to attack me.

I walked hastily home to my apartment at Franklin and Ryland Streets, seized by the frightening awareness that today I was ushered out of a door through which I could never return.

## THE NEWS IN BLACK AND WHITE

To the best of my memory it was 1976 or 77. It was a warm, sunny spring day about one-thirty in the afternoon. I was by now distracted from the morning's heavy concentration, and was becoming conscious of being restless and very hungry. I stood up to stretch, looked out the window at the inviting sunshine, and persuaded myself that I deserved a real lunch and a walk to unwind.

The first stop on any self-respecting noon walk "uptown" from work for any hungry Richmonder would, of course, be at one of two gastronomic meccas, Thalhimer's takeout food department with their divine deviled crab or Angelo's hot dog emporium. Angelo's won out today because I wanted to sit down to eat.

Straddled on a stool at the counter packing away a hot dog heaped with fresh sweet onions and mustard, it occurred to me that I had not read the Richmond *Afro American* newspaper in several weeks. So upon paying my check, I decided to walk a few more blocks along Broad Street to the Greyhound Bus Station where there was a newsstand.

The bus station was its usual bustling crossroads, with a couple of hundred assorted would-be passengers and others--standing, walking, running, milling, sleeping, talking, shouting, and even singing. And of course, there were also the customary contingent of homeless people seeking roof and respite. The preponderance of faces in the bus station

were black, as has been typical of much of the history of downtown Richmond, a predominately black city. The small news shop, situated in a room off to the right of the waiting room, however, had but three or four black patrons inside. They were all standing about reading magazines and sundry other literary curiosities found at bus station newsstands everywhere.

I entered the news shop, headed straight for the newspapers in the rear, pausing only momentarily to get a glimpse of the cover story titles on some of the magazines on the rack to my left. Then I scanned across all of the tidy stacks of newspapers. First, of course, were great piles of the two metropolitan Richmond dailies, *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *The Richmond News Leader*. And to their right was a small heap of the current week's Richmond Afro-American, our only alternative to the arch conservative voice of political correctness published by Richmond Newspapers, Inc.

I picked up a copy of the two day old Afro, fumbled through my pocket for a quarter, walked the couple of steps over to the cashier, and laid the paper and the coin down on the counter in front of her.

The cashier was a gaunt middle-aged white woman, with pointed facial features and shallow rolling wrinkles, looking, as so many working class Virginians, severely worn down a life that has not come easy.

When the cashier caught sight of the paper I had selected, she stared at me for a moment, as if she was searching her cultural grab bag for the rules and words needed to advise a fool who is about to violate a natural law. Shortly, she put it all together and proclaimed, "You don't want this newspaper, it's the colored newspaper."

I had long endured attempts at intimidation from whites when I showed interest or revealed respect for black people and their activities and culture in our city. And I had also, since my first racial awakenings, longed for effective techniques to elude the embarrassment and dangers of white measures designed to coerce non-compliant whites. Finding these means had never been easy for me.

However, on this day and in this place, I was better prepared for I had just recently met Ted Allen.<sup>1</sup> Ted's framing of the problem offered to me an entirely new premise about "being white." He argued that white identity is an invention. In short, I did not have to be white and neither did I have to converse in the language of race used by those who like to call themselves white! This was an exhilarating and heartening discov-

*1. Ted Allen is a Brooklyn resident and contributing editor of Race Traitor. His seminal articles were instrumental in the development of the views that inform this journal. The first volume, Racial Oppression and Social Control, of his two-volume study, The Invention of the White Race, will be published in 1994 by Verso Press; we hope to review it in our next issue.*

ery. It liberated not only my thinking about the prospects for race relations but it also freed my tongue from the racial script so-called whites are expected to employ in their daily lives.

The cashier continued her instructions about reading materials which are fit for white consumption--"And besides, the news in it is old," she said. I looked swiftly about the shop as I thought about how to respond. There were now two black customers who were so close to us that there was no doubt that they had heard the cashier's words, just as they had overheard similar white shibboleth so many times before in their lives.

Seeing that I had an audience, I turned back to the cashier, who by now was informing me where to obtain the "white newspaper." I let her finish speaking, and then I said in a loud, crisp voice, "You must think I'm white."

She was startled. But within seconds she came to realize that these simple words represented a profound act of racial sedition. I had betrayed her precious "white race". At this moment her eyes wandered beyond me to see, as I could also see, the two black patrons who were apparently amused because their faces had broken into a grin. Upon being discovered, they both sought to cover their faces with their hands. The cashier became furious. But she was clearly at a loss of what to do with this Judas.

For a split moment I felt very sorry for her humiliation and even sensed a momentary pang of guilt for unfair tactics in besting her. But then I was reminded of all those perhaps thousands of instances in my lifetime in which white people had excused or tried to explain away racist behavior in my presence even if they in some way objected to it. The white supremacy I had been taught, of course, not only entailed permission and even encouragement for acts of racial animosity and brutality toward black victims, but more importantly it also included an elaborate catechism of apologetics in which justification and diversionary explanations for white malice could be derived even for those whites who claimed not to approve of such behavior. Needless to say, this is what has always held white solidarity against racial justice in place.

The thought then seized me--liberation from racism involves rejection of the catechism of apologetics every bit as much as ceasing to engage actively in racist acts, thoughts, and words. So a clean and refreshing feeling crept over me as I thought further about this and then the internal struggle, which because of my remark, the cashier must now confront.

I pushed the quarter across the counter toward her, picked up my copy of *The Richmond Afro-American*, and strolled out of the shop. I sensed the eyes of all three of those inside following my exit, all for their own reasons.

Strolling down Broad Street scanning the front page, I recall thinking, here is a story you can't read in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* or *News Leader*.

About the writings: The stories in this pamphlet were written by Edward H. Peeples, a native of Richmond, VA. They originally appeared in the Spring '94, Volume 3 edition of Race Traitor, A Journal of New Abolitionism. For further info on Race Traitor write to: PO Box 603 Cambridge, MA. 02140.

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Richmond in 1865.