
REMEMBERING JIM CROW



AFRICAN AMERICANS TELL ABOUT
LIFE IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

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I just wanted to thank you for taking my farm. Because if you hadn't taken all I had, I probably would have stayed out here and got married and had a bunch of children and made your children rich. So when you took all our money, I left. Never did come back as you know." I said, "I want you to know that I thank you for that." "Oh Bud," he said. I said, "No, you see that Cadillac sitting out in the driveway?" I said, "I paid cash for that." I said, "I live in a Roman, big structured home in Albany. I want you to come visit me sometime and you won't have to come around to my back door."

Boy, that man turned all kinds of colors, but in the meantime my classmate, Gee—we used to call each other Gee—he was sitting out there fully prepared with his pistol in his hand. But you know what that white man did after I left? He went around the whole black community and told them what I had done. "Bud came back and told me how he felt." He had never had a black man to say things like that to him before. But I had to do it because it was in me, and Gee wanted me to do it with him, so we did. But it's things like that that my son has never had to go through. None of my children ever had a job with a white person from the time they were with me because I just didn't have that. My wife ain't never worked for nobody *but* me since I've been married. I told my father when I was a boy, "Father, when I get grown my wife ain't working for nobody, no." I meant that. And he said, "Well, I'm glad to hear you say that, now I hope you mean that. The only thing is that you might have to get an education." And I went to Morehouse, I worked myself the first two years through Morehouse. And of course I had to go to the Army in 1943. And when I came out I was on the G.I. Bill. That's how I survived. I came through the same process many black boys came through.

LEON ALEXANDER

In the midst of the Great Depression, working people across the nation forged new social movements for economic justice. Like many others of this unsung generation of activists, Leon Alexander traveled an arduous path to becoming a union organizer in Alabama. His father had been an activist in the United Mine Workers (UMW) and was blacklisted by area coal mines in the aftermath of the failed 1922 coal strike. In this excerpt, Alexander stresses the pivotal role that black miners played in leading union organizing campaigns in Alabama's coal fields. A man of large stature and possessing a booming voice, Mr. Alexander reminisces about his early work-

ing experiences in Birmingham-area coal mines, including conversations with the last group of convict miners employed by Sloss-Sheffield, encounters with black workers fleeing from debt peonage in rural Alabama, and defying the Jim Crow laws they experienced in the mines.

In 1922 up until the union was reorganized in Alabama in 1933, the union was outlawed. The way they broke the union was they went down the farms. The state prison system was leasing prisoners to the coal mining company. They replaced the miners who was on strike and used the National Guard to keep the miners away from the mine and to keep them from establishing a picket line to keep a strike breaker from entering the mine. They used the National Guard to do that because the governor of the state had control of the National Guard, and he ordered them under the pretense of protecting the coal operators' property.

They set the coal miners who was involved in that strike—and these wasn't just black coal miners—they set their things outdoors because they [were] living in the company houses and ordered them to move before sun-down. Now those things happened here in the land of the free and the home of the brave, and it didn't just happen to black. I don't want to just paint a picture [that] says they done something to me. They done something to just about every poor person in the South. My father lost his job because he was branded [as an] "agitator," and it got to a place where he couldn't get a job with no major company in this state. All they had to say [was] that you were an agitator and that sealed you and they pass your name to Woodward [Coal and Iron Co.], Republic Steel, and T.C.I. [which] later became U.S. Steel. All of these were the big guns in the coal mining industry, DeBarbeleben Coal Company which controlled everything in St. Clair County. They were the big wheels in this county. What they said went. I wasn't about 12 years old, but I know about the effects of it because I felt the pangs of hunger when my daddy couldn't work, and that is one of the things that galled me.

I was raised up under the so-called separate but equal schools. They were separate, but the equal part was a joke. There was no such thing as the schools being equal. When I finished ninth grade in school, I had to come out and had to go to work because my mother and father had separated, and she had all of the children. She was trying to work and wash and iron. Back in those days black women would wash and iron for white families, wash their clothes and iron their clothes, and so my job primarily coming up was to deliver and bring them to the house. Mama would wash them and iron

them. My job was to deliver them back to the families that she was washing for. I came out of school at 13 years of age and that was the end of ninth grade.

I'll tell you an incident when I went to work in Louisburg [in 1933]. They had signs posted all around the mine, "Not Hiring, No Men Needed," and I sat on the superintendent's porch on the office. I sat there on the porch all day, from that morning until he came out of that mine. Sometime after two o'clock that afternoon, his secretary told him when he came up. They called him "the superintendent's clerk"; he spoke to him as he was going into his office, and I'm sitting on the porch and I heard him say, "What that nigger doing sitting out there?" So that man said "He wanted to see you." He said, "What he want to see me about?" "About a job." He said, "Didn't you tell him?" He said, "Yes, he can read, and he understand what the sign said, but he wanted to see you about a job." So he came back out on the porch, and he said, "I understand you want to see me." I said: "I do. You the superintendent?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well yes, I do want to see you." He said, "What you want to see me about?" I said, "About a job." He said, "Don't you see that sign there? And there's one over there at the bathhouse. There's one on the post out there [saying] no men *needed*, not hiring." I said, "Mister, you said no men needed, but I need a job." He looked at me [laugh-ter] and you see he was outdone.

Now, there were things back then that was called "a white man's job," and "a black man's job." Ninety percent of the machinery that was operated at the mine was operated by white. The cutting machines was one of the few things that the predominantly black had because that was *really* some tough work. It was hard work. Moving under that low top was really a man killer, so they were satisfied for us to have that. But, if it was a machine where you was sitting down operating a machine, nine out of ten times if you saw that machine and saw somebody sitting on it, it was a white man sitting on that machine, and those are the situations that we learned to live with.

Not that we were satisfied with it. But it was nothing that we could do about it, because as I told you in 1922, they broke up the strike by bringing in National Guardsmen and going down in the country and hauling men in here by the boxcar load, and putting them to work in the mine to replace the men. I was a kid then. I wasn't large enough to work in the mine but my daddy was large enough to work in the mine and my daddy worked in the mine, but when they broke up that strike in 1922, the men who were involved in that strike was unable to get a job with *any* major company—Woodward Iron Company, Republic Steel Company, and Ten-

nessee Coal Iron Railroad Company. Those were the *major* companies that was in Birmingham. Those men [who] wanted a job they had to leave here and go somewhere else to get it because they were blackballed here. And when I say they were blackballed, they actually were blackballed. Each of these companies had pledged to not hire any man that was involved in that 1922 [strike].

In 1933, the International Union, John L. Lewis [president of the United Mine Workers] sent organizers back into Alabama again to organize the coal miners. Each company then set out and organized what they called a “brotherhood” or a company union, and they put all black and white in it. But, now here was the catch in that thing: the black in the “brotherhood” couldn’t sit in the meetings with the white. They had to go to a separate place and sit, and the whites would have the meeting and would come over and tell them what the decision was. When we first organized and I left Louisburg in 1940 and went back to U.S. Steel, we had the “brotherhood” thing there. That was in opposition to the union you see, they started the company union to compete with the union. We called those guys “popsicles” [laughter] because they had a picnic one 4th of July over at Highland Park, and a gang of us went over there and ran them off. And they had tubs of popsicles and things. And we started to call them “popsicle” and saying that the company had bought them out for a popsicle. But in 1942 we decided: we wasn’t going to have no two unions and that’s when we broke up the company union.

In 1942 we decided that we was *not* going to tolerate dual unionism anymore, and that’s when we shut all the mines down and said no man who belongs to the “brotherhood” was going to work in that particular mine and we made it stick. Now they went and got the National Guard and brought them out and stationed them around the mine and said, “The mine was open.” But we told the men, “The National Guard may protect you at the mine, but he ain’t going home with you; you got to go home by yourself, and that’s when you going to answer to us when you go home.” And so none of them tried to go to work, but when the company saw that the majority of the men were out, they had a submachine gun mounted on top of the commissary at Edgewater Mine.

The company used this racial thing against both the black and the white. When they talked to the black, they said, “We give you this job now.” They just said it to keep you in line. “But you see the white man, he won’t work with you.” And they sent me on a section [of the mine] and there was only two blacks up there. There was a man and another one, and they told



Workers in a factory in the late 1940s.

(Courtesy of Leola Mott, Newton, Georgia)

me, “We just decided that we wasn’t going to work with no blacks.” And I told them, “I don’t give a damn that you decided you don’t have to work with me, because you can go out, but I am not going out. The same man that signs your check signs mine, and I’m not going; you’re not running me from up here.”

So I stayed. Gradually we talked some sense into them, and told them, “Our fight is not with each other, our fight is with the company.” John Lewis came here and he spoke at a labor rally here in 1941, ’40 or ’41, somewhere in that time frame, and he pointed out to the white men that they [the coal companies] are *using* them and the black men as well. They are *using* you all against each other. That is what the company’s good at. As long as they can keep you divided, they can hound you like they wanted to.

In 1933, I went to work in the coal mine for Sloss Sheffield Steel and

Iron Company. This was the situation that they had. A white bathhouse and a colored bathhouse, and they were so designated by signs up on them saying "white" and "colored." Now the bathhouses were joined together. They were in the same building, but it was a wall between them. It was a door in the bathhouse, but the door both locked and unlocked on the white side. I'm not telling you a fairy tale. I'm telling you what actually happened. The white coal miners could unlock the door and come over on the colored side. But *we* couldn't open the door and go on the white side. Ironically they had hydrants—it wasn't no fountain—these were water hydrants where we caught our water [to] fill up our cans and buckets and move in and out of the mine. They had a sign here that said "white" and a sign over that one that said "colored." You couldn't even catch the water out of the same hydrant! If we were caught at this [white] hydrant catching water, automatically we were discharged.

We *did* challenge the colored and white fountains or hydrants. When I went back to work for U.S. Steel, I had a group of men all go to the white hydrant in 1942. The company always suspected that I'd done [it], but they never did prove it. I secretly took the handle or the key off the hydrant so they couldn't turn the hydrant off. And then we all had to catch the water [laughter] at the hydrant that was marked "white."

And the mine foreman came out and wrote out what was known as a "74." That was a discipline sheet, and they made out one of those noting that this was going to be part of our work record. Subsequently, if we got into any more trouble or caused any more trouble, we were subject to a discharge for it. And the mine foreman told me, "I *believe* you took that key off of that hydrant, and if I could prove it I would fire you right now." But he couldn't find *anybody* that said that I took the key off. Not only had I took the key off, I threw it in a cart that had a load of coal in it and they never found it.

I was a part of organizing of the mine because the international president John L. Lewis always maintained that the union was color-blind. A union meeting was called in the city limits of Birmingham, and [Bull Connor] had an ordinance passed when he became the police commissioner which said we couldn't even go in the same door [laughter]. In other words we had to go in the back door, and the whites came in the front door. You heard about Mr. "Bull" Connor? What made him famous? He was a baseball broadcaster. He didn't hide it. He'd be on the air there announcing. If a man would hit a home run, he'd holler, "Did you see that? *Way* back in the nigger bleachers!" Now that's what he was yelling [laughter] on the radio.