

## A RACIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In Clyde Edgerton's novel *Raney*, Charles and Uncle Nate get into an argument at a family Christmas dinner about the propriety of interracial marriages.

“Do you see any difference between a rabbit and a coon?” says Uncle Nate....  
“Yes—but not between a black rabbit and a white rabbit,” says Charles, “and that’s the *real* issue.”

As I stopped reading, my question to a class of college freshmen was, “Who has the better analogy, Charles or Nate?” After waiting the recommended fourteen seconds for a response, I asked a second question that I thought might evoke more than silence since several students in this class were from Aiken, SC where the breeding of racehorses is a cash crop. “If a black horse and a white horse are scheduled to race on a muddy track, is color something you consider before placing a bet?” Finally a middle-aged exchange student from Nigeria volunteered, “I don’t believe color is relevant here, sir. I’d check the racing form to see which horse had the better record on a slow track.” I had a feeling that the rest of the class thought I had planted this fellow’s answer; it was precisely what I had been fishing for. In my experience, people are as reluctant to speak about race, even in the modern multicultural classroom, as they are sex and God. Frankly, race makes me uneasy as well, but I am determined to examine it here before my computer, my priest.

After class I wondered where I had obtained my own ideas about race, for I had no formal training in anthropology beyond reading Margaret Mead and a few of her colleagues. As our family’s historian, I turned first to the letters that I had inherited from a genealogy-obsessed aunt. In a sense, the family ghosts were her children, for she never married or had children in the conventional sense. In her tenderly annotated files, I found a letter written by a distant relation who lived in western Pennsylvania and apparently dodged the draft during the Civil War. In a letter dated April 17, 1863, Barney Eisiminger wrote his brother John, who would soon see action at Vicksburg: “Dear brother, I was sorry to hear that you was in the army for I think that it is a hard place to live and I don’t know what possessed you to go. You said that you felt it your duty to go and fight for your liberty but I think that you are fitting for the nigger and before I would fight for the nigger I would stay at home....” What my ancestor apparently did not know was that the black man also was fighting for his liberty. Some 32,000, or 18% of the black men who fought in the war, died in that noble effort.

Clearly our family has a racist skeleton in the closet, but it isn’t the sort of thing that is passed along in one’s genes, so I began to search closer to home—namely Columbus, Georgia. South Georgia isn’t where I entered the world; it’s where my mother was born, and it’s where she and I spent several of the war years while my father was overseas. In the early and mid-40s, Columbus was part of the “parallel universe” that was nicknamed “Jim Crow.” A black man there could buy a suit in a men’s store but not try it on. If he wanted to buy shoes for his children, who were not permitted in the store, he had to bring a cardboard cutout of their feet to insert in the shoes. He could buy a meal in some white restaurants but not sit down inside to eat it—what Harry Golden called “the vertical integration plan.” A six-foot fence between the black and white sections of the municipal cemetery was not torn down until the late 60s. It’s what might be termed the “horizontal integration plan,” for anyone standing up here was suspect. Columbus boasted separate but far from equal restrooms, drinking fountains, motels, schools, libraries, hospitals (in At-

lanta the white hospital was called Grady Memorial; the black, Degrady's), theater sections, dance floors, churches, Pullman cars, taxis, bomb shelters, and Bibles. I didn't learn about the Bibles until much later, but the city courtroom had one Bible for black witnesses and another for whites. Since God was evidently white, He was assumed to take offense at blacks swearing on a white Bible and vice versa even though the texts of both had the imprimatur of King James. As far back as the seventeenth century, whites debated whether blacks would turn white at the Resurrection. It was agreed that they could go to heaven but not the white man's schools; it just wasn't clear what color they'd be when they arrived.

In a related but more personal vein, I recall that black delivery boys always brought their drugs and groceries to my grandparents' back door, but since there were no white delivery boys in the neighborhood, I never thought much of it until one made the mistake of coming to the front door where he received a tongue-lashing from my grandfather. Once when my mother and I were invited to eat at my grandparents' home, I sat down in the kitchen uninvited next to Sarah, my grandmother's black cook. Sarah had occasionally slipped me a moon pie fragment, so I thought for once I would eat with her rather than the rest of the family in the dining room just a few steps away. Sarah's response, however, startled me: "If I can't sit down out there, you can't sit down in here." I left the kitchen hurt by the rebuff and joined my mother who from the look on her face had heard the conversation. It took me quite a while to recognize the courage it required for Sarah to speak to a six-year-old the way she had; she could have lost her job. A decade earlier, she might have been lynched; some three thousand were. In Georgia after 1893, the penalty for lynchers was four years in jail. Presumably before that, one could lynch with impunity.

It's a small wonder Sarah wasn't reprimanded because my grandfather was an avowed segregationist who once told me, "Every white man should have his own nigger." Grandfather's "nigger" was named Jesse who with his wife lived in a "shotgun shack" on a red-clay farm owned by my grandfather. When the aging Jesse came to weed my grandmother's flower garden as he did every Wednesday, Sarah "helped him a plate" which he ate on his lap under a pecan tree in the back yard. Jesse grew most every thing my grandparents ate, and his wife put up the produce in Mason jars before freezers became common. Alas, Jesse was an alcoholic, and his wife was sporadically deranged. One Christmas my grandfather gave his hired man a bottle of Four Roses bourbon. As he drove off on his mule-drawn wagon, Jesse said, "I'm goin' home to let these roses bloom." Arriving drunk as he did many nights, his wife, her patience exhausted, split his skull with a meat cleaver. If Jesse had a last name, it was never used in my presence, and he probably could not have written it if he'd owned a pen or pencil. The poor fellow paid my grandfather a dime to dial a telephone number because he didn't know his numbers either.

On my paternal grandparents' side there wasn't much influence either way since they lived in East St. Louis, and we seldom visited due to the gasoline rationing occasioned by the war. My father, however, had a strong influence on my budding racial attitudes especially when he was made commander of an all-black engineer combat battalion. At Ft. Benning and then later at Camp Gordon (both in Georgia), I took great pride in my father and the men he commanded. Before going overseas, I saluted from the grandstand as my father's men passed proudly in review. Despite my best efforts, when a brass band plays a Sousa march today, the tears begin to roll. During the war, I recall gazing in disbelief at a picture in *Life* of some German POWs cavorting in a Mississippi swimming pool. In Columbus, they drained the whites-only pool every time a black kid crawled over the fence and went for a dip.

When my father returned home, he was most proud of the fact that he had not lost one of his 660 men in combat. When I pressed him on that statistic years later, he admitted that, in fact, four of his men had died: one drinking Sterno had poisoned himself, another cleaning his uniform with gasoline just prior to returning to the States had caught fire and died of the burns, and two of his men had been executed. It wasn't until 1995, however, that he told me of Cpl. Robert Pearson and Pvt. Parson Jones who had raped an eight-month pregnant British woman before going to the front. (Though I was the first person he'd told of the rape and hanging in fifty years, he recalled everything except the men's serial numbers.) Ultimately, the jury found the two guilty despite their protests that the sex was consensual. The woman's multiple bruises convinced the jury otherwise. Dad said that when he received news of the men's death he called the three companies of the 1698<sup>th</sup> together, climbed on the hood of a jeep, and lectured the men about what the dire consequences of rape would be whether the victim was friend or foe. Rape, he said, would never be a weapon in his battalion's arsenal as long as he was in charge. Some of the black warrant officers objected to the severity of the men's sentence, but that was in the hands of a foreign civilian court, and the majority of the men realized that.

Though one of Dad's warrant officers did write Eleanor Roosevelt complaining that the twenty-six bars in Chard, England were segregated, a colonel sent from Washington pronounced Dad blameless and the segregated bars a good thing because when they had been integrated, interracial fights were commonplace. Once the 1698<sup>th</sup> reached France and began to push east, the white officers and black enlisted men functioned and fought well together. After Germany surrendered and the 1698<sup>th</sup> was allotted some German POWs to help build "cigarette camps" in France, Dad often saw his own men step off the wooden sidewalks into the mud to allow approaching POWs to pass unimpeded. Even though back in Mississippi, some old slave chains had been donated to a wartime scrap-metal drive, the "mind-forged shackles" of the slaves' descendants were not so easy to shake loose. In the post-war era, American Jews sometimes advised blacks, "Don't wait for people to love you." Smart as that is, it's very difficult to accomplish without the self-confidence born of a first-rate education.

After the war, the Army sent my father to Ft. Hamilton in Brooklyn where he commuted to New York University in Manhattan where he worked on his masters. It was at "Ft. Ham" that I made my first black friend, the son of an engineer officer just like myself. Jerry Maxwell and I loved to roller skate, and most every afternoon we met on the one hill in the project where we lived, locked arms with several of our peers, and sped down hill like a Chinese dragon on New Years. In the winter, we sledged on the golf course hills of Prospect Park. Since Jerry was a trusted latchkey child, we were able to listen to any station on the radio after school that we wanted in his parents' apartment. Here I tasted the forbidden fruits of Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, and The Platters for the first time. Listening to baseball broadcasts with Jerry almost turned me from a St. Louis Cardinal fan to a Dodger fan because my black friend dearly loved Jackie Robinson. I did too except when the Bums played the Redbirds! When my bike was stolen from the basement of our apartment building, Jerry was mentioned as a suspect, but I knew my friend had a better bike than I had and didn't need another, especially one he couldn't ride in my presence.

Our bond, however, was sealed one summer day when my mother sent me to the park with my two younger sisters with strict orders to "watch out for the girls." Jerry had joined us on the swings when without warning a half dozen teenaged boys with stockings

over their faces came screaming out of the bushes swinging nylons filled with colored chalk dust. It could have been an outtake from *Clockwork Orange*. Jerry and I placed ourselves in harm's way and got thoroughly pummeled in a multicolored and multicultural way. The boys were screaming something about the two of us on their "turf," but their voices were so muffled by the stockings, I never fully understood their anger. The girls were unharmed, and their screams probably saved the day when the building's super stuck his head out of the basement door, shook a coal shovel overhead, and swore at the masked gang. Off they went in a cloud of chalk dust as rapidly as they had appeared.

At PS 201, the public school I was attending ("Stalag 201" I called it because it was surrounded by a ten-foot, barbed-wire fence), Jerry and I heard rumors of our assailants' identities, but we were never able to confirm the stories mainly because we didn't have the courage to press the matter to a head. Just what would we do if we found them? Most of the older boys at this formidable institution carried a switchblade in a zippered pocket of their black-leather jackets à la *Blackboard Jungle*. The upshot was, the assault went unavenged, the motives undiscovered.

Paradoxically some of our best times together were spent at the Stalag. Jerry and I had an hour together every Wednesday afternoon because we were the only two Protestant kids in the seventh grade. While the Catholic kids went to confirmation classes at the church down the block, Jerry and I sat in a study hall together and did our homework while Mrs. Munnely graded papers. He helped me with math; I helped him with English. When my father finished his work at NYU, however, I said goodbye to Jerry same as I bid farewell to dozens of friends over the years I haven't seen him since. The Army made sure that no friend I made between the ages of one and eighteen was known to me longer than three years.

In 1955, the family moved back to Columbus, Georgia where Dad began jump-school training at Ft. Benning prior to being sent to Korea. It was here that I came under the benign influence of the Reverend Robert McNeil, the minister at the First Presbyterian Church. Reverend Bob in the mid 50s stirred his congregation's passions into a maelstrom when he proposed that since the church was on the edge of a black neighborhood it should invite blacks to worship and open the Sunday School building during the week as a daycare center for the many working single mothers (both black and white) in the downtown area. This led to a conclave of the church deacons at which Reverend Bob was fired. The story made the pages of *Look* and the *Atlanta Constitution*, but the deacons' decision was final. Nevertheless, he left a lasting mark on me and many others who felt that the church's thunder had lost its lightning.

The Columbus school system was segregated while I was a pupil there, but after high school and a quarter at Georgia Tech, I impulsively joined the Army and promptly took a bus ride to Ft. Jackson, SC to start eight weeks of basic training. It was one of the most memorable trips I have ever taken. When a racially mixed group of thirty teenaged boys from the Atlanta area boarded a bus in the dark, every one of us was scared and solitary. But as conversation spread during the three-hour trip, white and black came together like the integrated keys of a piano despite the tone-deaf efforts of Jim Crow. Once we had our heads shaved and donned baggy fatigues, we were a unit as solid as the Confederate Memorial on Stone Mountain that we passed on the way to Columbia. After learning close-order drill, qualifying on the rifle range, surviving the tear-gas chamber, and crawling under barbed wire as live rounds whistled overhead, we were "brothers." Then in its wisdom, the Army broke us up. Unfortunately, the intelligence unit in West Germany, where I spent the

great majority of my three and a half years in the Army, never achieved the *esprit de corps* our basic company had. The handful of blacks in our company, however, never had it so good because to German women, African-American men were an exotic, desirable species. Indeed, several of them married a *Fräulein* before returning to the States.

When I returned in 1963, I was married as well, and our first child was on the way. We decided to move to Columbus because Mother's youngest brother had generously lined up a bank job for my wife and a loan-company job for me. Like several family members, Uncle Jim was a paradoxical mixture of racial attitudes: on one hand he treated Stewart, the black foreman of his small construction company, like the heir he did not have. This kindness lasted for twenty years until my uncle caught Stewart embezzling. On the other hand, Jim was a segregationist like his father. He would occasionally invite my wife and me up to his lake cabin; then, after furtively glancing left and right, he'd tell us the latest racist jokes as he basted the ribs. About the time the Freedom Riders in Mississippi were making headlines, Jim told his assembled audience that, "A nigra had been dredged from a lake in Mississippi wrapped in chains. I reckon," Jim chuckled, "he stole more chain than he could escape with." He followed this gruesome tale with a laugh so hearty he never noticed that he was the only one laughing, and this included his wife.

While my wife was urging poor blacks to join her bank's Christmas Club (which paid no interest), I was working part-time in a rather sleazy loan office. In the late afternoon (that's why I was called a "sundowner"), I reported to the Broadway office, telephoned the mostly black clientele, and asked them if they wanted to take out another loan just before Christmas. Selling debt was the most dispiriting work I have ever performed. After a couple weeks, I noticed that my boss was hovering in my vicinity eavesdropping on the calls I was placing. He had already warned me that I needed a harder sell. Finally, he approached my desk, obviously exasperated, and said, "Is the glorification of the Negro now accepted? Listen, Skip, as long as I'm paying the phone bills, don't ever call a nigger 'mister.'" Without even thinking about it, I had asked to speak with "Mr. Johnson" unaware that I was violating company policy. In the 1940s, blacks had been lynched for not calling a white man "Mister," as he reminded me. "Have the Kennedys brought us to the point that every nigger now deserves the same title of respect enjoyed by white men?" he wondered aloud walking back to his desk. On November 22, 1963, a few hours after President Kennedy was assassinated, I walked into the office and found half a dozen re-po men and secretaries still rejoicing over the news. When I realized what was going on, I quit.

Shortly after Ingrid, my new German bride, and I arrived in Columbus, we decided that she needed to apply for her American driver's license. At the first opportunity, I drove her to the Department of Motor Vehicles, let her out, and went in search of a place to park. Meanwhile Ingrid entered the lobby and began reading her way through the thicket of crudely made signs. One sign beside some boxes of forms instructed those renewing licenses to fill out a white form and first-time applicants like my wife to fill out a pink form. When she was finished, she looked up and saw over one door leading into the office a sign reading "White" and over another door a sign reading "Colored." Having just filled out the "colored" form, Ingrid entered the door labeled "Colored." After standing in line a while, she noticed that the elderly black man in front of her was holding a white form, so in her best English she politely informed him that he was in the wrong line. The gentleman said in a thick Georgia drawl, "You ain't from these parts, now, is you, Missy?"

One hero I had in the racial “wars” of the 60s was my Aunt Clarice. Clarice was teaching first grade just north of Columbus in the tiny community of Waverly Hall. Civil Rights legislation had just recently been signed, and schools everywhere in the South were reluctantly integrating. At Columbus College (now Columbus State University) where I started back to school in 1963 after completing my military service, the first black student entered the following year. In the district where my aunt taught, school officials decided that they would test all the black applicants and admit only the two brightest in the first year. Both of these terrified children landed in Clarice’s classroom. For a while the white and black kids got along fine, but soon the white parents found out who their children were sitting beside, and the class began to fragment as the kids brought their parents’ racial philosophies to school. My aunt knew that she was in for a long school year, but she really had no ulterior racial motive when she praised one of the black children’s homework papers as “a model of neatness that the rest of you might strive for.” Word got around because the next day an infuriated parent, whose son was not even in Clarice’s class, showed up after school and said, “How dare you use a nigger’s work as a model for white children!” The parent then took his case to the school principal and the district superintendent. Though my aunt had served ten unblemished years as a teacher in Harris County, she was informed that she would not be rehired even though at the time she was the only teacher in the school with a four-year degree. The principal of the local high school offered her a job teaching home economics, but on appeal to the state board of education, probably with a federal howitzer pointing at its head, Clarice won back her job as a first-grade teacher at Waverly Hall. Twenty years later Clarice told me that the young black man she’d taught was working as a private flight instructor and the woman whose work Clarice had praised was a medical technician at Emory Hospital in Atlanta. Clearly these two had not waited for anyone to love them.

After I finished my master’s degree at Auburn in 1968, I was offered a job at Clemson University in South Carolina as an instructor in English. Looking at some maps of the campus on an orientation tour, I realized that Martin Hall, the building where I would be teaching, is located near the spot where John C. Calhoun’s slave quarters had stood a century earlier. Calhoun was the man who said, “Show me a nigger who can do a problem in Euclid or parse a Greek verb, and I’ll admit he’s a human being.” I don’t suppose that it ever occurred to the former vice president of the United States that his mother and grandmothers probably could not parse a Greek verb either. In his defense, however, it’s quite likely that Calhoun acquired his self-taught prejudice reading Hegel, Kant, Jefferson, and other luminaries of the Enlightenment. Just a few yards away from the old Calhoun family mansion stands Tillman Hall named after Benjamin “Pitchfork” Tillman, a former governor of South Carolina, who once said, “The black man must remain subordinate or be exterminated” presumably on the tines of a pitchfork. On at least one occasion while he was in office, Tillman aided and abetted a mob bent on lynching a black man even though the victim had declared the suspect was not the man who raped her. A few yards in another direction from the Calhoun home is the Strom Thurmond Institute building named for another former governor and a graduate of Clemson. Much like Gov. George Wallace in Alabama, however, Thurmond underwent a dramatic and apparently sincere transformation of racial attitudes. Early in his career as the leader of the Dixiecrat Party, Thurmond declared, “There’s not enough troops in the Army to break down segregation and admit the Negro into our homes, our eating places, our swimming pools, and our theaters.” Years later

he said, "It seems to me that we ought to give this black man a chance. Years ago, minorities didn't have a chance." Of course, one reason opportunities were scarce for people of color, including his own mixed-race daughter, was obstructionist legislators like Thurmond.

Despite the bad karma created by the ghosts of Calhoun and Tillman, Clemson had admitted its first black student, Harvey Gantt, just five years before I arrived. After graduating from Clemson and MIT, Gantt became a successful architect, mayor of Charlotte, NC, and candidate for the US Senate. On a return visit to Clemson in the mid-90s, I heard Mr. Gantt tell an audience of over a thousand, "Thirty years ago, Clemson was a large salt shaker with a single fleck of pepper, and that was me. Tonight it is a pleasure to look out over this salt-and-pepper audience. There has been progress!" Well, racial progress in South Carolina is a relative term as I soon learned thanks to Dean Howard Hunter.

For some reason, Dean Hunter, Clemson's dean of Liberal Arts, took a personal interest in me, and shortly after we arrived, my wife and I were invited to dinner. But as soon as I entered the dean's lovely home, I felt like I was back in my grandparents' home in Columbus: a black cook in the kitchen was finishing preparations for our meal. After she served us, she closed the door and shutters between the kitchen and the dining room with a clatter, I thought, of protest. As we ate, I was uncomfortably aware that Mrs. Phillips, the cook, was eating on the other side of the louvered shutters, and I felt the same guilty urge to sit down beside her so that the clink of her silverware would not be quite so deafening.

The summer after our children's college graduation, I drove the family down to Columbus for a visit with, among others, my grandfather who was now nearly deaf and living in a retirement home. We stayed with one of my cousins who has two children herself. One afternoon the adults and the four children drove over to the retirement home to "set a spell," as my grandfather liked to say. At some point, one of my cousin's kids raised the topic of busing, and my grandfather snorted, "Niggers!" When all the kids laughed, he said it again, which evoked more laughter. It quickly became a game for the old man who could barely hear the laughter he evoked. What he failed to understand was that the kids were laughing, not at the offensive word, but at him, the dinosaur in the tar pit. All four of these kids were going or had gone to school with black children and had accepted the rainbow reality of a diverse culture. They had never known times like 1948 when, for example, the West Memphis, Arkansas school district spent \$145 per year for each white student enrolled and \$20 per year for each black.

The easiest part of desegregation for me was the friendships I developed in my life starting with Jerry Maxwell and continuing with several black colleagues from across the campus at Clemson. This socialization was epitomized, not by the department in which I worked for thirty years which continues to have problems retaining black faculty at the higher ranks, but by the interracial softball team that I played on for almost as long. There's something about tossing a ball back and forth that allows men of all races and ages to open up with each other. Often we would straggle sullenly on to the field, but as soon as the pepper game started, spirits rose and the banter began. Some of the closest friendships I have ever made with members of the human race have been made on a softball diamond. Occasionally on weekends, we would travel to tournaments across the state, and while nerves would occasionally frazzle in making travel or sleeping assignments, on the field it was sweetness and light.

Skin color is to me a biological irrelevance. If genetic engineering could make the next generation of Americans the same shade of brown, I'm convinced the change would be beneficial.

Along the way, we had better make all noses the same width and all hair uniformly curly, or people are likely to find something other than skin color to fight over. As my uncle in the Lions Club likes to point out to potential cornea donors, organs, bones, bone marrow, blood, and skin are all transplantable across racial lines. In the year 2006, about 70% of the world's population is non-white and non-Christian. By 2050, it is estimated that half of the American population will consist of "minorities." Like global warming, the handwriting is writ large on the wall.

Finally with regard to racial harmony, America today reminds me of the family of three who needed a new car. Problem was that while they had agreed on the model and make, the vehicle's color was unresolved: the wife wanted yellow, the husband blue, and their adolescent son wanted red. An ombudsman suggested white because when white light is passed through a prism, yellow, blue, and red are all visible. The family compromised and chose black.

### THY WILL BE DONE

Child of Auschwitz,  
Mina was taught to pray  
in the boxcar  
that delivered her.

Nights, she beseeched the dark,  
and days, the condensation trails  
that diced the blue  
beyond the smoke she breathed.

Some Baptists have concluded  
Jehovah does not answer  
the prayer of a Jew.  
Of course He did.  
He said, "No."  
But while many were not listening,  
Mina was.

She figured His cargo planes  
and bombers were busy—  
mercy temporarily snarled  
by anger  
and logistical nightmares.

She weeps for His inability  
to set things right,  
forgives Him for His failure,  
and thanks Him  
for the little strength  
she has left—  
He could have left her a void.