

## Four

### *The Sixties in Orangeburg: Strom and Frankfurters*

As a child, I was not allowed to sing, hum, whistle, or in any way attempt to reproduce “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” within Daddy Spahr’s hearing. For an old guy, Daddy Spahr could hear pretty well. He could detect “Battle Hymn” from anywhere in the house. It was a “Yankee” song, he explained—and Yankees, taken as a group, were widely regarded to be ignorant, uncouth, hostile, and probably Communist.

Southerners still harbored a deep resentment against Yankees for injustices that had occurred during the Reconstruction period that followed the War between the States. Every family had at least one story about how some vengeful bureaucrat, corrupt official, or other representative of federal authority had wronged them. My mother’s grandfather, James Martin, for instance, had owned a place in the Charleston area, called “Martin’s Landing,” that was confiscated by the federal government during the Reconstruction. Mama says she still has copies of legal papers he filed in a futile attempt to get his land back from the government.

In 1945, my father returned from army service in the Pacific with a kinder, gentler view of some Yankees, but he greatly disdained the ones he encountered who didn’t want to eat food prepared by African-American cooks. My family’s attitude toward blacks resembled that described by the author Florence King, who has written expertly about the contradictory social attitudes held by southerners—and the convoluted logic required to rationalize those contradictions. For instance, it was fine to segregate people—as long as you didn’t hurt their feelings.

Compared to their hostility toward Yankees, carpetbaggers, and scalawags, my parents’ attitude toward “the Negro” seemed positively benevolent—except, of course, for the “outside agitators” that came to town during the civil rights movement to “stir people up.” The pejorative “n” word was not allowed or spoken in our home. We were taught that the polite term of reference was “colored people” and that only trashy whites used racial epithets.

“Negro,” by the way, is a word that I mispronounced grievously until my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Una Belle Hoover, taught our class the correct pronunciation. It was 1957, Elvis had just had his first real hit record, and in Mrs. Hoover’s class, we were going over the list of new spelling words, as we did every Monday, pronouncing them before learning the definitions. The word “Negro” fell to me. I looked at it.

“Nigra,” I said, making sure I put the “r” sound in there.

“Nee-GRO,” said Mrs. Hoover. My southern ears heard no difference.

“Niiii-GRA,” I said, thinking maybe she just hadn’t heard that “r.” Mrs. Hoover was very patient. She knew what she was dealing with. She knew it would take time.

“Neee-GRO,” she pronounced again.

“Niii-GRA?” said I.

“Neee-gro.”

By this time, the other kids in the class were looking around in puzzlement. They thought I had pronounced it correctly on the first try.

“Nii—” Then, something clicked. I said, “Neee-grol!”

“Correct,” said Mrs. Hoover, and moved on to the next word without comment. That’s when it first occurred to me that we can hear things all our lives and not really *hear* them.

In 1960, I started the ninth grade. By then, I had acne in full bloom and was just miserable. I was never what you would call “popular,” but my gorgeous and smart sister Marty was, and I enjoyed her achievements vicariously, which annoyed her no end. It’s a good thing I came first in the sibling order, or it would have been really sad. Her teachers, expecting another underachieving Salley, were astonished to learn that Marty would not accept less than an “A” in anything. She did the work it took to earn those “A”s, too. Thank goodness our parents never made a big deal over report cards. They seemed satisfied with my “C”s and encouraged Marty to stop and smell the roses.

By the time she got to high school, my sister Margaret had resolved not to compete with either me *or* Marty, and she set about making various teachers’ lives miserable. Mama worried that Margaret would not go to college. Higher education for us all had been Mama’s dream ever since the Depression had robbed her of that opportunity.

By that time, I was a college student myself (making “C”s, of course).

“Mama, not everyone is cut out for college,” I consoled her.

She would have none of *that*. “Margaret’s IQ is as high as yours and Marty’s!” she snapped. “Marty’s?” (I had assumed she had *me* beat.)

I found myself perversely annoyed at Margaret for wasting her potential.

In high school, while my friends participated in activities such as cheerleading, basketball, or Forensics Club practice after school, I walked home to ride my bike. There was a trick I could do that I thought was pretty great. I’d get up as much speed as I could on Central Avenue, the street perpendicular to our own Azalea Drive. When I got going fast enough, I’d stand straight up with both feet on the bike seat and stretch my arms out to the sides like airplane wings. Leaning just a bit to the right, I’d turn onto Azalea Drive and go flying past my house. Of course, I had to be careful not to turn too sharply. That caused instant crash landings, from which I still have several scars. I had to watch for loose gravel, too—and the occasional car. I once made the mistake of performing this trick for my skeptical husband, Jim, when I was twenty-five. Everything went fine until I sailed past my house and heard Mama screaming. She and my two-year-old baby James were standing at the screen door looking out (something Jim forgot to warn me about), and I got a furious lecture about how I was a mother now and had to think of *someone* beside myself! It went on for ages, but that was the gist of it.

I had other after-school activities, as well. Some days, I’d come home and pick out a good book, which I’d take across the street and up into my favorite tree. The tree didn’t have any low limbs, so I had to shinny up a good six feet or more before there was a foothold. Then I’d climb all the way to the top. It was a tall tree. I’d sit there and read until Mama started calling me—usually not until almost dark, or when supper was ready. From that tree I could see for miles. I could see the red blinking light from the radio tower behind the house of a boy I had a crush on. And I could read in peace. I thought I was invisible up there, but Margaret tells me that she and Mama could stand at the front door and see me clearly. Margaret was alarmed, even as a child, to see me so high in that tree, she says. She asked Mama more than once if somebody should go out there and get me down. Mama would just sigh and say, “She’ll come down when she’s ready.”

When I finally came inside for the evening, I often found lively supper-table discussions underway. We always had questions about the civil rights movement and Vietnam, but those questions seemed to upset my father—he was as much at a loss for answers as we were.

When I was growing up, my parents were southern Democrats, which until recently has had very little to do with being a *real* Democrat. Every southern politician who hoped to be elected

to office or who even wished to be taken seriously had to be a Democrat back then. Democratic primaries—not general elections—settled politicians' futures, because no member of the Party of Lincoln stood a possum's chance on the highway of being elected to any office anywhere in the South. Only Strom Thurmond could break this rule. He could call himself just about anything he wanted to—and still get elected. In 1954, for example, he became the first—and still only—candidate for the U.S. Senate to be elected on a write-in vote.

My parents were kind and good people, but they didn't swim against the political current of the times. Once, curious about presidential elections, I remember asking Mama which candidate she and Daddy had favored for president in 1948—Dewey or Truman. "Billy," Mama called, "who did we vote for in 1948—Truman or Dewey?"

Daddy mulled it over. "Isn't that the year Strom Thurmond ran for president?"

In the presidential election of 1948, when I was two years old, my parents, together with practically every other registered voter in the South (meaning whites, of course—this was before the Voting Rights Act), had deserted the Democratic Party and voted for Governor Strom Thurmond on the "Dixiecrat" ticket. Thurmond had led a walkout of several southern states at the Democratic National Convention over the issue of civil rights. He was nominated for president at a separate convention in Birmingham and eventually carried four states in the national election: South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana.

Then, in 1952, my parents—again, along with most of the other registered voters in the South—voted Republican for the first time in generations. They liked Ike and his Commie-baiting running mate, Richard M. Nixon. Anyone in the South who continued to vote the old party line in national elections was thereafter known as a "yellow-dog Democrat" (because he'd vote for a yellow dog if it were a registered Democrat).

Later, in 1964, Senator Strom Thurmond abdicated the Democratic Party for the politics he loved, stumping the state for Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. The South effectively turned Republican after Goldwater, following Thurmond's example.

In 1960, the year I entered high school, it was generally understood that a vote for John F. Kennedy was a vote for the pope, Communism, integration of the public schools, and God knows what all. We watched some of the debates on television and all agreed that Mr. Nixon was clearly the winner.

There were a few exceptions. My friend Ginger's daddy was a yellow-dog Democrat who had served one term in the U.S. House of Representatives before Orangeburg realized he was a liberal and voted him out of office before he could do any damage. While he was in Washington, Ginger's daddy had met Kennedy personally and liked him. Whenever we had a sleepover at Ginger's during the 1960 campaign, I piously refused to lick Kennedy envelopes. Our high school held a mock election that year, and Ginger's older brother, Huey, played Kennedy. I forget who played Nixon, but I believe Kennedy got only one vote in that election. Huey's, I guess.

In the end, Orangeburg High School proved not to be representative of the rest of the country. Kennedy won, and Nixon skulked off to California. Though the rabid McCarthyism of the 1950s had faded slightly by this time, Communism and the Cold War would continue to dominate the political landscape for years. Required reading for graduation from Orangeburg High



*Strom Thurmond, circa 1977.*

School in 1964 was *Masters of Deceit* by J. Edgar Hoover. We had to pass a test on it. The book was all about the Communist Plot to take over our country by pretending to be like ordinary folks—and we wouldn't know until it was too late that the groups we belonged to were just infested with them. The year Kennedy was elected, Castro's revolution in Cuba had brought Communism to America's doorstep, and there were increasing fears that it would spread throughout Southeast Asia and Latin America. President Kennedy won my father's grudging admiration during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but the Vietnam War loomed on the horizon.

One warm evening during this time, Senator Thurmond came to Orangeburg and gave a speech at our high school gym. Mama and Daddy took us kids to hear the senator, perhaps less out of conservative zeal than in a quest for entertainment. The school was only a block from our house; there was nothing good on TV, and my parents' recreational resources were pretty limited, what with the six of us crowded together in a rather small house. (One of my parents' favorite activities at that time was to drive back and forth in front of the bank to watch the new time and temperature sign change.)

Thurmond drew a simple analogy in reference to the conflict in Southeast Asia that night. The world and its countries, the senator insisted, are like a string of frankfurters: if we let the Communists get away with taking one little tiny bite, then they'll want another. If we let them have another, they'll take another, and another, and another—"until all you have left is the string."

"Dang right," said Daddy, who had no use for anyone who wasn't willing to fight Communists. (Of Arkansas's Senator Fulbright, Daddy scoffed: "He wouldn't wipe spit out of his eye.")

In November 1963, I went on a school visit to Erskine College with my friend Anne. As her mother drove us up to Due West, we heard a song on the radio about going to San Francisco and being sure to wear some flowers in your hair. "Do you know what that song's about?" asked Anne, who always did (and still does) know more about the world around us than I.

"No," I said

"Hippies."

"What's a hippie?"

"They're flower children who live out in San Francisco."

"What's a flower child?"

"I don't know. I read that they love people—they love everybody."

"Well, they sound nice."

Anne's father was a Presbyterian minister, so she didn't mention the free love part. Not that she or I would have understood it, anyway.

Anne's mother returned a day later to drive us back home to Orangeburg. We were just leaving the college when some of the girls we'd been hanging out with ran out to stop our car. "Turn on the radio!" they said, breathlessly. "The president's been shot!"

We thought they were teasing us, as they had done during most of our visit, but the radio confirmed the worst. We listened to the radio all the way home. For a long time, we persisted in asking Anne's mother if the president was going to be okay, or if he would die. She was too stunned to talk much. Finally, we fell into a dazed silence. When they announced that he was dead, we all cried. The world didn't seem safe. I wondered what those hippies with flowers in their hair were thinking.

We later learned that, had we been at school that day, we'd have witnessed laughing and cheering at the announcement. I wish I had been there. I'd love to know who *didn't* laugh; who *didn't* cheer. Peer pressure is a powerful thing. Knowing some of the dimwits I went to school with, though, they were probably just cheering at the prospect of getting out of class, like when school lets out for a hurricane. You know it's bad, and it's going to get worse—but hey! We might

get out of school for it!

I watched Kennedy's funeral at Ginger's house, with her family. It was a quiet time—the first “live event” covered by TV cameras. We couldn't take our eyes off it.

Later, on a Sunday, my family had just come into the house from church; Daddy cut on the TV just in time to see Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. “He shot him!” Daddy exclaimed, turning to the rest of us, stunned. “He shot him!” Turning back to the TV, he murmured, “He just *shot* him. . . .”

Kennedy, a civil rights advocate, was now gone, but it didn't stop public school integration. Daddy had seen early on that this was Kennedy's intention, although it surprised him when President Lyndon Johnson—a southerner—signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. There was no way he could avoid signing it, really. The civil rights movement was popping up in places where white people didn't even know they were racist, and the nonviolent protests led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proved impossible for anyone to ignore. The tide of American public opinion had irrevocably turned.

South Carolina's social and political climate, too, had changed drastically. In 1963, Clemson College had successfully integrated under the guidance of Governor Ernest F. Hollings, Clemson President R. C. Edwards, several enlightened industry leaders, and the watchful eye of the national press. Our state's local public school districts followed suit with varying degrees of cooperation depending upon the ability of their respective superintendents to decipher handwriting on the wall.

My friend Barbara's father, Mr. Clark, was the superintendent of the Orangeburg school system. He resolved to see our schools integrated calmly, without the use of force. He gathered folks from both races and held several strategy sessions to devise a plan. Orangeburg High School integrated in 1965, the year after I graduated and as soon as they could after the Civil Rights Act was signed—if you can call two black students “integration” in a town whose population ratio of blacks to whites was about seventy-thirty. It happened peacefully; Mr. Clark had planned well.

But a prominent person in our town, whose brother was a powerful state legislator, provided seed money and encouragement for a “segregation academy,” one of many private schools that sprang up like mushrooms in the South wherever public schools integrated. Orangeburg's was called Wade Hampton High School, where “Dixie” was the school fight song and they flew the Confederate flag as often as possible. “White flight” began in earnest. My baby brother attended the public schools (he had Mrs. Hoover for the sixth grade, too!) until he started wearing his hair too long to suit Daddy and making “B”'s without bringing his books home.

By that time, both Marty and I had taught in the public schools, and we told our parents at a family meeting that we thought they should leave Bill in the public system because we believed that white flight would hurt our town in the long run—and it has. But my parents wanted more discipline for Bill—a dress and behavior code (and rules about hair length). So they sent him to Wade Hampton in the eighth grade and through high school.



Ernest “Fritz” Hollings in 1987



*The Salley siblings in the 1960s. Left to right, standing behind Bill: Marty, Margaret, and Kate.*

In retrospect, it may have been a good thing for our family. Daddy died of cancer in 1975, at the age of fifty-seven. Bill was then sixteen, a junior in high school. Wade Hampton's rules and regulations helped Mama and Bill at a difficult time in all our lives—but especially in Bill's. The stricter system worked for him. He was elected president of the student body, excelling in the classroom and in football. Then The Citadel gave him a full athletic scholarship, just when his mama and sisters were wondering how we'd be able to send him to college. He graduated from The Citadel (where they *major* in discipline) with good grades—and he was elected co-captain of the football team his senior year.

Bill's collegiate accomplishments made us very proud—especially me. I lived in awe of my siblings who did well in higher education. They fulfilled their potential. Margaret did not go to college—and didn't really need to, as it turns out. A talented businesswoman, Margaret would only have been slowed down by college.