

The Vanguard

Sun Writer C. Fraser Smith Chronicles The Marylanders Who Fought For Civil Rights in His New Book



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By Petula Caesar | Posted 8/6/2008

Having *Sun* columnist and WYPR senior news analyst C. Fraser Smith's new book, *Here Lies Jim Crow: Civil Rights in Maryland*, in my possession has been as interesting and eye-opening as the book itself. The book drew people's attention everywhere I went. Whether it was on my desk at work or if it fell out of my overcrowded bag onto the ground in the parking lot, it generated comments from complete strangers, black and white, young and old. They almost always asked me about it. Some of the conversations were lengthy, some were brief, and some were even terse.

A few black people I encountered shared stories about not being able to play in Druid Hill Park or not being able to shop in the stores on Howard Street downtown when they were younger. Seniors remembered the lynchings on the Eastern Shore in the early 20th century. Most white people seemed to be curious about *why* I was reading the book, wondering if I was a graduate student, a college professor, or a historian. And some did appear to look genuinely apprehensive when they saw the book.

Perhaps it was a response to its startling cover photo of activist Gloria Richardson, of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee, brushing aside a Maryland National Guardsman's bayonet. "The powerful image of Gloria Richardson pushing away a bayoneted rifle seems symbolic of the movement," Smith says during a phone interview. "It was also very representative of Richardson's implacable courage. . . . She was focused and unrelenting.

"I think people are both curious about the movement days and fearful of revisiting them," Smith says when I shared my experiences with him. "There's something almost revolutionary, I guess, about continuing to talk about things many would like to forget. But, as one of the TV guys said to me the other day, it wasn't really that long ago that black Americans couldn't sit down in restaurants with white people."

Published by the Johns Hopkins University Press and dedicated to the memory of Howard "Pete" Rawlings, the late Maryland House of Delegates representative from the Baltimore's 40th District and the first African-American to chair the Appropriations Committee, *Here Lies Jim Crow* is 300-plus pages chronicling the roles many Marylanders, both well known and lesser known, played in affecting change during a particularly painful period in U.S. history--roughly the years between Reconstruction and what is considered the start of the civil-rights movement in the 1960s. I say "what is considered" because *Here Lies Jim Crow* will make you question what you thought you knew about where, when, and how the civil-rights movement began. It offers a greater understanding of all the elements of unrest--political, legal, social, and otherwise--that went on unchecked for years and ultimately led to the events traditionally considered the beginning of the civil-rights movement.

"Black and white Americans need to know their history," Smith says. "And every generation or so someone else should write about it. Someone must tell the stories--because they are heroic and important."

The book leads off with the stories of Frederick Douglass, the Maryland-born slave-turned-abolitionist/orator, and Roger Brooke Taney, the Calvert County native and the U.S. Supreme Court chief justice who wrote the infamous *Dred Scott* decision. Smith does a commendable job at creating a sense of time and place, describing the social orders, customs, and belief systems existing during Douglass' and Taney's lives. Smith's professional experience--he is an award-winning journalist who had been writing for more than a decade before he started at *The Sun* in 1977 and became the paper's chief political reporter in 1983; he also contributed to *City Paper's* 30th-anniversary issue in 2007--is clearly evidenced as he explains how these systems impacted Douglass' and Taney's courses of action. This is particularly useful when reading about Taney--Smith speaks at length about Taney's upbringing in a highly respected, conservative, rich, influential, slave-owning family on the Eastern Shore--and this information helps put even something as heinous as *Dred Scott* in historical context, instead of just offering a knee-jerk response to the Supreme Court ruling, which stated that Congress had no power to prohibit slavery in the federal territories that would eventually become states.

Smith moves from slavery and into Reconstruction and the very early years of the 20th century with story after story of the struggles of blacks and whites with Jim Crow. Smith discusses Howard University professor William H.H. Hart, who protested a railroad-car conductor's order to sit in a blacks-only car and would not leave his seat some 50 years before Rosa Parks in Alabama, and William L. "Little Willie" Adams in Baltimore, who became a prominent figure in local politics and beyond by beginning in the illegal numbers racket and ultimately going to federal court twice to have Baltimore's public golf courses integrated in 1951 (setting a legal precedent for other states to follow when integrating public recreational facilities). Smith shares the struggles of Vivien Thomas, who worked closely with Dr. Alfred Blalock to revolutionize cardiovascular surgery, but could not eat lunch with the Hopkins chief of surgery in the hospital's cafeteria (a story dramatized in the 2004 HBO movie *Something the Lord Made*).

And Smith writes about Esther McCready, the woman who quietly integrated the University of Maryland's School of Nursing in 1950, thanks in part to a scholarship from a priest from Bon Secours Hospital. As *Here Lies Jim Crow* moves through the 20th century, more familiar

institutions that played roles in Jim Crow's demise in Maryland crop up, such as the Gilman School, Carroll Park Golf Course, Hochschild-Kohn's department store, and Northwood Shopping Center. More familiar names surface, too, like Thurgood Marshall, Spiro Agnew, Tommy D'Alesandro, and Kurt Schmoke. By the end, you have reached almost the present day and can look back on the path Marylanders have collectively traveled to arrive at our current place in race relations.

Here Lies Jim Crow came to exist in part because of Smith's previous book, *William Donald Schaefer: A Political Biography*. "I was doing research on my [Schaefer] biography . . . at the Maryland Historical Society library," says Smith, who first began covering then-Mayor Schaefer as a beat reporter in 1978. "I had something of an epiphany while reading an oral history given by William L. 'Willie' Adams. Adams and Joe Louis, the boxer, they were golfing buddies. Louis wanted to know why they couldn't play on all the city courses. . . . A lawsuit was filed, successful after many years. So Adams, a numbers man, and Louis the fighter integrated the city courses.

"Maryland had so many important figures in the civil-rights movement, going back to Frederick Douglass and Roger Taney," he continues. "Too few of us knew the story. I decided to tell it."

And once he set his mind to telling that story, "I found many people who had collected memorabilia of their relatives' records, official documents concerning burial societies and other self-help associations--some of them certified in public records" Smith says. "People eagerly agreed to provide oral histories as if to show that they were citizens, had participated in important public affairs. They seemed . . . almost disbelieving that anyone cared what they thought and was asking them to speak of it."

Here Lies Jim Crow took six years to research and write between Smith's work at the paper and the radio station. And after he completed the manuscript, he found he, too, had learned so much about the people who pushed for civil rights. "A man named Holofcener who stood up to Spiro Agnew," Smith rattles off excitedly. "Richard McKinney, the 99-year-old Morgan professor, who waited a lifetime to see the new African-American museum. Bill Adkins, a Shoreman who stood up for equal rights. Chester Wickwire, the Hopkins chaplain and friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, who crashed many social barriers. Peggy Waxter, who convened discussions of civil rights at her house and continued in spite of charges she was a communist"--and on and on and on.

Here Lies Jim Crow is by its very nature a moving but difficult and painful read. Painful or not, it is a book that helps one see present-day Maryland with a greater depth of understanding, and is certainly worth whatever discomfort it creates. It is that very unease that will allow us to continue to, as Smith puts it, "evolve as a civilized, humane society."