

Ramsey Jr., Henry: My Own Love Of The Blues ^[1]

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Henry Ramsey Jr.: My Own Love Of The Blues

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 9/9/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

A native of Rocky Mount, 60 miles east of Raleigh, Henry Ramsey Jr. has had a distinguished career as a lawyer, law school professor and judge in California. He was also dean of Howard University Law School. Now 73, he is retired and living in Berkeley, Calif., but has not lost touch with friends and family from "Around the Y," the Rocky Mount neighborhood where he grew up.

Two weeks ago, Judge Ramsey was here for the neighborhood's annual reunion. Long since destroyed by "urban renewal," Around the Y was home to many remarkable people, including the legendary jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk.

This is an excerpt from Judge Ramsey's unpublished memoir. He wrote it for his grandchildren, but he gave me permission to share a piece of a world of railroads, shanty cars and blues musicians now long gone.

In Henry Ramsey Jr.'s words:

From the time my family moved to Around the Y until I was in about the eighth grade, my male peers and I regularly used the Atlantic Coast Line freight trains, Emerson maintenance shops and rail yards adjacent to our neighborhood as a playground. We would play hide-and-seek at night in the railroad material yard and among parked railroad freight cars. We would challenge each other's courage by jumping from the top of railroad cars to the ground. Those games were a lot of fun, notwithstanding the danger. Nearly everyone who lived in Around the Y was directly or indirectly affiliated with the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company. Most of the men in our neighborhood worked for the "Coast Line," so almost everyone had a husband, father, brother or uncle who worked for the Coast Line. Some of the women themselves worked as servants ... in the homes of white people who worked for the Coast Line, usually in some supervisory capacity. One woman from our neighborhood Tut Bethea worked alongside men moving freight cars. Almost all of those railroad workers came to Rocky Mount from the Pee Dee area of South Carolina, either as transferred or as new Coast Line workers. In the late 1920s or early 1930s, much of the maintenance work being done in Atlantic County was done by men who were willing and able to move from South Carolina to North Carolina flocked to Rocky Mount either to preserve a job held in Florence or to obtain a new job with the Coast Line. The great majority of the workers were probably from the South. Other railroad workers who lived in Around the Y were also from South Carolina and Georgia. Those workers had usually come to Rocky Mount as members of "section gangs," which were composed of men the Coast Line hired to do the heavy work. Those workers interacted socially with many of the people in our neighborhood, especially some of the young women. Many lived in what were converted railroad boxcars called "shanty cars" where they slept and kept their personal belongings. The Atlantic Coast Line Railroad supplied section gang members with food, in addition to their shanty car housing. ... A cook whom I assume was on the railroad company's payroll purchased and prepared the men's food. After eating their supper, some of the shanty car workers would sit in front of their shanty car homes for several hours into the evening, playing musical instruments (usually a guitar, harmonica or banjo), singing songs (typically the blues) and telling stories. Our parents and the other "decent" folk in our neighborhood generally opposed having any of us associate with railroad workers who lived in the shanty cars. Some people in our neighborhood saw shanty car workers as violent, dishonest, immoral. A few shanty workers probably deserved that reputation, but certainly nowhere near all. Some youngsters from my neighborhood I was often among them would sneak down to the railroad tracks in the evening to listen to the section gang work.

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