

## **Race Relations** <sup>[1]</sup>

Beginning in the early twentieth century African Americans were confined to menial work such as agriculture and domestics. African American men, women and children continued to work on farms as a source of livelihood. Jim Crow was the law of the South for much of the twentieth century. Segregation of the races and restrictions on African American freedoms were centerpieces to this white supremacy paradigm. The false narrative of genetic and cognitive inferior African Americans was accepted nationally by most whites. Pseudo science and stereotypes were pushed as facts and evidence of African American inferiority. Some contemporary historians have argued that race relations did not change drastically until late 1970s or 1980s. The racially constructed economic and justice system continues to have a negative impact on most African Americans. African Americans lack economic opportunities because of newly devised and cleverly masked racial policies is still ongoing. The justice system disproportionately convicts and hand out harsh sentencing to African Americans. Race relations in America continue to be at the forefront of national politics.

### **Oral History**

In this oral history, Rebecca Clark says, "Back then, the only jobs in Chapel Hill for any black person was work as a domestic lady - cook, clean, wash, iron. And the onliest job the men had was janitors and work for the university. And the women worked for the university. That was the onliest jobs available."

These limited job options had a certain impact on the relationship between white employers and African Americans. Just before this excerpt begins, Mrs. Clark is discussing what her days were like when she worked for the laundry at the University of North Carolina. She worked all day and had a half hour off for lunch, when she went home for a quick bite. She received one of her highest paychecks ever at this time, earning \$27 a week for six days' work.

## **Preliminary questions**

1. What buying power would Mrs. Clark's paycheck have today? What is the minimum wage today, and how does this compare to Mrs. Clark's income?
2. Do African Americans and other minorities still have limited job options? Explain why things have or have not changed since Mrs. Clark's time.

## **The recording**

Running time: 1:25.

[About this recording.](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

## **Transcript**

I would run home and eat and go back eating. I had a relative that lived right up here at the corner of Merritt Mill Road and Crest Drive. He was saying, "Rebecca, the way you working, I want you during your lifetime in a day, to lay down and stretch your body for ten minutes, because you need it."

But we were then doing what we was taught to do, was work for a dollar. And I almost had no choice. Because when you were even doing, before the laundry, doing domestic work, if your child got sick and you couldn't come in, they'd tell you, "If you can't come, I'll have to get somebody else." They didn't have no sympathy for you. And they didn't have no meals for you. ( ), you left it there for supper. Your meal wasn't included in that. And most times, your lunch wasn't included in that.

So coming up, the relationship between white and black, I guess everybody respected everybody, but there wasn't a lot of hostility because we knew we had to work and they knew they had to have some help. Back then, there wasn't that many black folks in Chapel Hill. During that time, in 1931, '32, '33, about five thousand people in Chapel Hill. There wasn't that much more than that were students.

## Follow-up questions

1. What is the significance of a relative telling Clark, "Rebecca, the way you working, I want you during your lifetime in a day lay down ten minutes and stretch your body out." How do you feel about a lifestyle where having ten minutes' rest is not an option?
2. What do you think about the way she describes the relationship between whites and blacks? In what way is it unbalanced?
3. What is the significance to her statement "there weren't very many black folks in Chapel Hill?"

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