

History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for April 8, 2021

Main Reading: Oral histories by Ferry, Glick, and Thornton

These student projects describe various white perspectives on the civil rights struggles of the 1960s era covered in chapter 27 of the American Yawp. Here are selections from student comments:

OVERVIEW

STUDENT COMMENT: Most textbooks and secondhand sources focus their commentary of the Civil Rights movement through the movement's African American leaders. Most people are taught about the achievements of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcom X, however student authors Ferry, Glick, and Thornton tells the story of civil rights from the white perspective. Thornton's narrative comes from a white people who was mostly apathetic to the Civil Rights movement. In Thornton's essay, Daniel Thornton lives a short distance away from a massive Civil Right protest. Thornton recalls simply wanting to avoid the situation and wishes to "[restore] peace and balance, the status quo." Thornton shows that Civil Rights protests did not always strike deeply in the hearts of white people and sometimes whites only wished to end and avoid the conflict. This idea is parallel to other narratives about the white perspective on Civil Rights but avoids some of the malignant attitudes. Glick's essay takes a stronger, more positive angle on whiteness during civil rights. In her essay, Melvin Glick acts with benevolent purpose while helping to protect one of the first African American students at the University of Alabama. In this case, the white character is a kind and helpful force. Within Civil Rights narratives there are some benevolent white characters, but they are not the main focus. Lastly, Ferry's essay tells the story of a white man who actively disliked and was involved in racialized violence. Ferry does well to make John Ferry's position sympathetic, however in the broader scope of Civil Rights movement history, Ferry fits the stereotype of an angry and separated white man. These three narratives together work to show the multiple facets and sentiments of whites in the Civil Rights era.

INTEGRATION IN BIRMINGHAM

STUDENT COMMENT: This week's reading in YAWP Ch. 27 covered the 1960's in the United States. This chapter examines the relationship between Kennedy and Cuba, the continuation of the Civil Rights movement, Lyndon-Johnson's presidency, and the start of the Vietnam war. While this chapter does a great job of going into the details of each aspect of the sixties and how Johnson's "Great Society" contributed to a further politically progressive climate, in a mostly racial hostile country, there is nothing like firsthand experience. A textbook can often over- (or under-) sell the importance of events, for dramatic effect, and YAWP (like almost every other book or textbook, to an extent) is guilty of this. For example, a few chapters ago in YAWP, the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) case is discussed. They talk about how it was a major steppingstone for integration and implied that it invoked quicker change. However, as Rachel Glick distinguishes in her interview with Melvin Glick, this is not how the court case was received at all. Melvin recalls that, for example, because of the wording of the case, it promoted "foot dragging" for integration, moreover, places like schools were not integrated

until at least a decade after that court decision. (Glick) Melvin grew up in Pennsylvania and then moved to Birmingham later in his life to work at the University of Alabama and attend Medical Technology school. He knew no black people when he grew up in PA, so moving to Birmingham was a cultural shock. In his interview with Rachel, he recalls learning to "not to hold the door for a black woman" because she would wait for him to go through anyway. (Glick) He recalls picking up the "separate but equal" mentality in Birmingham very quickly, remembering all the black people lived on one side of town, drank from separate fountains, went to separate bathrooms, etc. (Glick) This reminds me of what the textbook said about Birmingham. Since it was one of the most racially hostile places in the country, ideas like "separate but equal" lasted the longest in areas like these. That meant the most violence, and the most backlash to said violence. So, in Birmingham, activists would use peaceful marches and sit-ins as a way of protest, while police officers would use fire hoses and attack dogs. (YAWP, 27) This violence, while painful to endure for the activists, was helpful in getting their message out, especially when it was televised, and actually "yielded an agreement to desegregate public accommodations." (YAWP, 27) Moreover, it was at this point that the "separate but equal" mentality which Melvin was seeing firsthand, was finally starting to lift in Birmingham.

RIOT IN ROCHESTER

STUDENT COMMENT: Black people were not only discriminated against in violent and social ways, they were also challenged economically. The Rochester Riots of 1964 were caused due to built up rage from the challenges black people faced economically. "Although the Civil Rights Act passed earlier that year made discrimination illegal, blacks faced a "race tax." Important stores such as grocery and clothing stores in predominantly minority neighborhoods were charging markedly higher prices for items and allowing credit traps."(Thornton, 2016). These actions made it tough to succeed as a black person. Stokely Carmichael once stated "black power means black people coming together to form a political force"(YAWP, VII), and that would have certainly helped out these black people facing this kind of discrimination. The government was most likely aware that discrimination in this form was going on, but without any representation black communities were left to economically suffer.

WHITE FLIGHT FROM PHILADELPHIA

STUDENT COMMENT: The United States during the 1960s demonstrated resilience, bleakness, and profound cultural shifts. *American Yawp* editor Samuel Abramson expresses in chapter 27 that the memory of this period is vivid "because so much changed, and because so much did not"(section 1). This is perhaps no better exemplified by than the political progress fought for and achieved by African American, whose standards of living still predominantly remained far below of that of the average white American. In previous decades there had been a housing shortage within cities, disproportionately affecting Black Americans as they were often shunned from housing while city planners were pressed by White people to not build affordable housing that would have accommodated racial minorities. The housing that Black Americans were able to find, if possible, were substandard. Once the "white flight" to suburbs commenced after the Second World War, urban centers were opened up. As Matthew Ferry explores this change in urban areas, however, he qualifies that "blacks came to occupy the homes that were the oldest and hardest to maintain and their high rents and mortgages provided only the worst shelter."

Although the *American Yawp* textbook mentions housing shortages, “white flight”, and substandard housing for Blacks, it is very weak in connecting the relationship amongst them, particularly for the first two events. Additionally, the *American Yawp* glosses over how segregation of housing within cities after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 contributed to racial tensions, demonstrated by the tall walls of Girard College.