

[Mister Homer]

26031

February 3, 1939

Homer Jordan (white)

3456 Edison Avenue

Jacksonville, Florida

(Salesman & installment collector:

furniture, clothing, burial insurance;

Negro customers)

Stetson Kennedy, writer

MISTER HOMER

Homer likes Negroes, and Negroes like Homer. Some of them even have children for him. He is one of those most-Americans, a "genu-wine Florida cracker." Born on a small farm near Dinsmore, he left school after the fourth grade to help with the chores. When he was eighteen his father died; the farm was sold and he and his mother moved to Jacksonville.

Since then, for twenty-five years, he has been selling furniture, clothing, and burial insurance to Negroes, often for nothing down and about fifty cents per week. His competitors, whom he consistently outsells, call him "nigger-lover." Homer replies simply that a dollar is a dollar, regardless of the color of its former owners.

Library of Congress

Some of his attitudes towards Negroes are perhaps representative of the attitudes of Southern white tenant farmers, wage workers, unemployed.

I accompany him as he makes his rounds in the Negro sections. Skillfully he manoeuvres his battered automobile through the deep sand ruts and the dunes at street crossings.

2

The negro shacks are dilapidated and unpainted; very few have plumbing, but are equipped with pump and sink on the back porch, and an outhouse.

Homer is almost continuously blowing the horn at his Negro friends. A powerfully-built young man leaps from the path of the automobile, frowns at first, then recognizes Homer and grins.

“Look out dere Mister Homer!” he shouts.

As we turn a corner Homer suddenly jams on the brakes. A gray-haired Negro man is leaning on the fence.

“Well I'll be hanged!” Homer says to him. “I thought you was dead and in hell long ago! And here ya is lookin younger than ever. How many women ya keepin now Uncle Henry?”

The old Negro laughs. “Gawn [Master?] Homer—you knows ah's too old for dat. Whur you been keepin yourself? Ah ain seed you sinst de woods was burned.”

“Oh I been roun,” says Homer. “How's Mary? And all them fine [grandchillern?]-nearbout growed I guess?”

“Yessuh, dey growed all right. But times is hard wid dem, like everbody else.”

“Well Henry, here's my card. Better not lemme hear of you buyin from nobody but me.”

Library of Congress

"Yessuh Mister Homer. Ifen ah gits any money ahead ah'll send for ya."

3

"You look out fer them women now Henry," warns Homer as we drive away.

"I don't see how you remember so many faces, "I remark.

"Rememberin niggers' names and faces and famlies and troubles is what keeps me in bisness."

"You must remember a great deal—they have such large families and so many troubles."

"The two go together," he says, shifting gears to second to pull through the deep dry sand.

"What beats me is why niggers ain a heap sight worse than they is. They puts up with more than I blieve any other race of people could stand. The nigger's cursed. The Bible says so. Cursed like the mule—the mule kaint reproduce its kind. Course the nigger can do thet awright...it's a good thing, cause it keeps em satisfied. But the mule and the nigger ain got no spirit—they was meant ta work. Jus lookin at a nigger you can see he's cursed. He's cursed cause he's black—"

"What about the Chinese?" I interrupt. "Are they cursed because they're yellow?"

"Well...no. Yeller is the Chink's nachul color. But niggers ain like other peoples. They got no damn brain! Their heads is too thick—ya kaint hardly kill a nigger by beatin him in the head. Ya ever seen a nigger worry? Ya never will. Ya watch one set down with his mind all made up ta worry bout summun another, an' first thing ya know he'll be fast asleep!"

4

"Perhaps that's a good thing."

"Yeah. Maybe so. I wisht I could do more sleepin and less worrying myself. Ifen it ony took as little ta make me happy as it does a nigger..."

Library of Congress

“You said Negroes aren't very intelligent. What about all the prominent Negro educators, doctors, lawyers, writers, and other professional men?”

“Every nigger whas got any sense is got it cause he's got some white blood in him.”

“Do you know that psychologists have tried to discover if there are any differences in the intelligences of whites and Negroes, and that they haven't found any that might not be attributable to a difference in cultural factors?”

“That might be true. All I'm a-sayin is that there is differences—I ain a-claimin ta know what causes em.”

We stop in front of a rickety and abandoned-looking frame house. Scrawled near the door with a piece of chalk I see: THIS OLD SCHOOL IS 43 YEARS OLD. There are no screens over the windows, and the glass panes are broken. Children of all ages are barely visible in the gloomy one-room interior.

“What are you going to do here?” I ask.

“Tryn collect on a oil stove I sold the teacher. She owes fer three weeks now. Generly when one of my customers misses two weeks I ties their tail in a knot. But these 5 teachers don't git paid reglar—half the time they works fer nothin. I don't never aim ta see nothin ta no nigger teachers no more.”

He strides up to the door, and is met by a young woman. “I'm so sorry to have to put you off again, Mister Homer,” she says, “but I haven't received my check as yet. This makes three months now, and if I wasn't living with my mother I don't know what I would do. I called up the school board about it yesterday, and they said they weren't sure when the checks would be mailed. But just as soon as I receive it I certainly will call you, first thing.”

Library of Congress

"All right, Sister Singleton," says Homer. "You know I'm bein mighty good ta you. It's very seldom I lets an account git thin far in arrears. You got sense snuff ta know I kaint give stoves away. I'm gonna wait on ya a little while longer, but I'm dependin on ya ta have some money fer me the nex time I come out here"

"I'll do the very best I can," she promises, "and I certainly appreciate our being so lenient with me."

He walks slowly back to the car, and we jolt on our way.

After a few minutes of silence, Homer suddenly exclaims: "A nigger's got no more use with schoolin than he is with a airplaine! Whas he gonna do with it? Thas one of the things ruinin em now. They goes ta school awhile and first thing ya know they done decided they don't wanna work. They git so 6 no-count and sorry they ain no good ta nobody. All they does in tryn figger out some way ta make money fer theyselves. They gits the notion they wants white-collar jobs, when there ain no white-collar jobs fer em."

"Perhaps Negro schools aren't good enough." I suggest. "Although the constitution provides for the equal education of the races, this state spends about forty dollars per year for the education of every white child, and only about fourteen dollars for every Negro. And throughout the South, seventy-five percent of the Negro children leave school before completing the fifth grade."

"I done told ya what nigger schools is good for. Ifen the State's a-spending twelve cents a year on em, then thas just twelve cents throwed away!"

"Do you think it would be a good idea to change the schools; to teach trades and agriculture, rather than the traditional subjects which the Negroes seldom use?"

"How ya taklin. [md;]But after ya trains em ta be good mechanics and farmers, who's gonna give em jobs on farms? The way things is bein run, the world ain makin use of the

Library of Congress

mechanics and farmers there is now... and changin nigger schools ain gonna change that !”

Again we stop, this time in front of the Zion Star Baptist Church. A group of women are gathered on the church steps, roasting spare-ribs over a charcoal pot. Homer gets out, walks over to them, slaps a buxom black girl loudly on the rump.

7

They laugh, and the girl complains, “Wy you got to be so hateful Mister Homer?”

“Roberta,” he says, “I jus seen thet sorry husben of yours lyin up with a high-hat yeller gal on the other side of town.”

Roberta pretends to be indignant. “You ain seen no siche thing—you de bigges liar ever was!”

“Sho nuff. It's the honest ta God's truth. I don't know why you don't git shet of thet no-count rascal and let me pick you out a good man.” He selects a spar-rib and begins to chew on it.

“Gimme a dime for dat spare-rib,” demands Roberta. “We gotta buy de Revrun a new pair of shoes.”

He gives her the dime. “You tell the Revrun I'm gonna pray fer the Lord ta strike him dead ifen he don't hurry up and buy some carpet fer the church.

“Man, you better gawn bout your bisness! De Lawd ain pain no mind ta folks what talks like you.

“How bout some of you ladies givin me a little order? I got the bigges sale goin on ever was held in this county. And it ain no wild-cat stuff—real high class merchandise. Ya kaint afford ta miss it.

Library of Congress

“How we goonal buy nothin when we [ain?] got no money?”

“You don't [?] much. You got plenty money anyway.”

“Huh! Ifen ah is got it, ah sho like ta know whur it's at! Money is scarce as hens' teeth. It ain a matter of 8 needin—ah needs plenty stuff—but ah ain had no steady work now for seven months. [Las?] job ah had ah worked for a lady what had plenty money; ah mean ah worked full time, and she ain paid me but five dollars a week. Colored folks in dis town has to work for little or nothin.”

“Well, when ya gits ready, lemme know,” says Homer. “Bye Sugarfoots,” he calls to Roberta as we drive away.

“[Les?] stop somewhere fer a beer,” Homer suggests, “my [bisness?] always picks up after a beer or two. We'll go over here ta the Red Rooster Bar.”

We enter the Red Rooster; it is a typical “jock joint” there are the requisite nickelodian, booths, and small dance floor. A [placard?] over the bar reads: I DO NO BUSINESS FOR CREDIT AND DAMN LITTLE FOR CASH

We sit in a booth and order beer. Several young Negro men gathered at the bar talk bolster [usly?] to the light-skinned waitress. The nickelodian breaks into a full-voiced roar, playing a record that is currently popular: “Hot nuts! Hot nuts! I got the hottest nuts in town! Anybody here wanna buy my nuts? I got nuts for sale...”

10

The Negroes at the bar begin trucking and jitter-bugging.

“Take a good look at er,” says Homer. “They's probly school gradu-ates. Thas the kinda niggers whas growin up in the cities--not ary one of em worth the powder and lead twould take ta blow him ta hell!”

Library of Congress

“You prefer Negroes from the country?”

“They's better niggers--knows their place. Ain none of these lazy smart-alecks.”

“I don't suppose that, for a Negro, there is much choice between a poor-paying job, unemployment, or relief in a city, and share cropping, working with turpentine, phosphate, citrus, or beans in the country.”

“Cept country niggers is ginnerly more healthy.”

“I understand the incidence of syphilis and tuberculosis among Negroes in Southern cities is alarming.”

“I don't know nothin bout no inci {Begin inserted text}(Begin handwritten)-dence {End inserted text}(End handwritten), but I do know for a fact that nine outa ten niggers has syphilis or gonorrhoea at one time or another durin their lives. Half the houses I go to I can show you somebody broke out with syphilis sores. They don't think nomore of it than they do a cold.”

“Did you know that this is one of the six counties, out of the sixty-seven in the State, that offers free treatment to Negroes with syphilis?”

“Yep; the niggers here is lucky. But the way them syphilis shots is give they don't do no good. A nigger will wait till he gits it real bad, and then run over ta the hospital and take

10

a shot or two. The shots make him feel so good he jus decides he's [overed?] it and don't need no more treatment. After a few years when it comes back on him it's too strong to cure so he turns up his toes and dies. Givin the shots is like mowin grass on rough ground—whacks off a little on top of the hills.”

Library of Congress

“I suppose Negroes are pretty busy trying to earn a living. According to the last census, only half of the half million Negroes in this State are normally employed.”

“And half of them whas got jobs is women. Thas another thing ruinin the men in the cities—they have ta lie roun and let some women support em. The niggers on farms is in a even worse fix. I went ta a political rally not long ago, and heared some fool politician stand up there and say that the reason [cabbage?] is rottin in the ground is cause the govermint is [meddlin?] in agriculture. A man who'd say a thing like that oughta be lynched! The ony [darn?] reason farmers ain gittin one cent a pound fer cabbage, instead of three cents like they is, is cause the govermint helped em out.

“Politicians is ruinin this country. The ony time they ever work is durin campaigns, and after that them whas elected steals all the money they can while they rests up fer the nex campaign.

“Roosevelt ‘s tried his bes ta help the poor people, but the big shots and crocked politicians have jus about spoilt it all.

11

Ifen it hadn't been fer him, them crooks woulda gotten whas comin ta em long afore now.

“But lemme tell ya [summums?] Jus as sure as God made little apples, the laborin men's day is comin. and it ain far off. The labor unions better git shet of their crooked leaders and shake the lead out while Roosevelt is still in the White House—otherwise there ain no tellin what kinda outfit will be runnin this country nex!”

“Why aren't more Negroes joinin unions?” I inquire.

“They're joinin. Ya jus don't see much about it in the papers. Till right recent there wasn't no nigger unions in the South ta speak of; there was a few skilled craft unions, but they

Library of Congress

wasn't no way directly connected with local white unions. now industrial unions is really doin the job, specially with the [seaman?], [??], citrus workers, and sich like.

“Ya notice the papers had plenty ta say bout thet citrus strike—said them niggers strikin wadn't [good?] Americans. Now maybe thet paper was right—maybe niggers never was meant ta be good Americans. But ain [nary?] a slave asked ta be brought over here.

“The white men and nigger been so busy fightin over little jobs what don't even keep em from starvin, thet they ain been able ta see they oughter git together so they could demand higher wages. I reckon when thet does happen the papers will have a lot more writin ta do bout “bad Americans.” But the 12 whole thing in a nut-shell is: the ony reason why [thet?] poor people ain actin like “bad Americans” is thet they [jus?] ain had nobody explain it ta em right!

“Them union organizers what comes down here from the North don't know how ta talk ta us crackers, much less how ta handle niggers. The organizers I talked ta acted like they had too much sense; they thought they knowed everything. [md;]Ya know a [ignort?] man thinks [edjacated?] folks is all crooks.

“I may not know nothin bout the organizin bisness, but ifen I was ta ever take a notion ta organize niggers I'd have fifty percent of em in this county signed up in three months!

“Ifen ya goes bout it right, with a little time and sense ya can sell a nigger anything. Ya kaint hardly tell a nigger a thing is so good he won't believe ya. All my life I been sellin em stuff thet wudn't worth a tenth what they paid fer it. I've sold em thousands and thousands of dollars worth of junk and they liked it; it was no good or bettern the stuff other people sold em. I sold it by talkin ta em and treatin em like they was human beins—and I didn't act high-hat or let em know how much I know.

“When talking talkin didn't do the trick. I handed out free dishes, medical advice, or lines from the Good Book. I got em divorced and I got em married again. And you think I'd have

Library of Congress

trouble 13 gittin em inta unions? When all I'd have ta do is sign em up, and git em ta pay a little dues? Not me! I'd sell em unions like I sold em everthing else—and fer onest they'd git their money's worth, and more!

“If thas bein a bad American, I reckon as how I'm one awright. I may not be the smartest man in the world, but I is got horse-sense. I kaint figger out whas wrong with the world cause I ain got the edjecation. I don't know whether ta expect [more?] war or depression—it's bound ta be one or the other. But jus from what I seed with my own eyes, I'm dead certain thet poor people—white, black, all colors—is gonna have ta fight [together?] ta even keep alive. And no matter what happens, ifen they git together and stick together the can do anything!”