

MY SUMMER OF CYPRESS GARDENS:
A MONOLOGUE

by

Donald E. Baker

A White man in his seventies recalls the childhood trip to Florida when he “saw” Black people for the first time--toiling in the fields, doing dirty jobs in cities, working on chain gangs, and elegantly serving meals at Cypress Gardens. It made a lasting impression on him.

Duration: about 9-10 minutes. 4 pages.

CHARACTERS (1M)

JAMES, age 75+, white

SETTING

Indeterminate

TIME

Now

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MY SUMMER OF CYPRESS GARDENS

The summer of 1956 was my summer of Cypress Gardens. I was ten years old. It was my first trip South. And the first time my young mind became aware of racism.

My father loved to drive. When he got his two-weeks' vacation every year that's all he wanted to do. Pick a far-off destination that required a lot of time behind the wheel. Of course, we always left early—very early—he was itching so badly to get moving. On the road by 6 a.m. if possible. Of course, Mother insisted we have a good breakfast before we left, so that meant getting up at five or so.

When we finally piled into the car—a Pontiac it would have been in those days. Dad was always a GM guy. He eventually graduated to Buicks but never all the way to Cadillacs.

I'd be in the back seat with a pile of comic books. Dad in the driver's seat of course.

Mother in the passenger seat in charge of all the maps. Remember those? Maps? Printed on paper? Folded in such a way that they could never be re-folded that way again?

Mother acting as navigator always made the trips more interesting since she had no sense of direction. There were always unintended detours. This was before interstate highways carved up the country, so we saw a lot of towns and cities on two-lane highways. Some of which we intended to see. Some of which we didn't.

That year the destination was Florida. No Disney World yet, but the itinerary included Cypress Gardens, Silver Springs, the Bok "Singing Tower," Monkey Jungle, a "sunken" tropical garden in Saint Petersburg. Mother and I picked the sights we were going to see.

Dad didn't really care where we went as long as he was driving. He really hated to stop.

If Mother or I had to go to the bathroom, it took a lot of persuasion to convince him to

stop at a gas station that looked to Mother's critical eye like it might have clean enough restrooms.

Same thing with motels. Mother and I would be well past the point of exhaustion before he'd start looking for a nice motel that still had its vacancy light on. Occasionally that meant settling for a not-quite-so-nice motel. We never made reservations in advance. That would have required Dad to stick to a schedule and probably have to stop before he was ready to.

As soon as we crossed the Ohio River I started to notice more Black people than I ever knew existed. Our little hometown surrounded by northern Indiana cornfields had less than two thousand people. One Black family. The wife did house cleaning and laundry, the husband did odd jobs. Except for the television version of "Amos and Andy," I never saw another Black person. Suddenly they were everywhere. In the towns doing the dirty work wherever there was dirty work to do. In the countryside tending the crops under the unforgiving sun. How excited we all were to see our first cotton fields. Black folks were dragging their sacks between the rows, just like in the Disney movie "Song of the South." We couldn't tell from a distance if they were singing "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" or not.

We saw the first chain gang in Tennessee, but it wasn't the only one. We'd happen on them every once in a while. Black men in prison stripes working on the side of the road, supervised by White cops with rifles. My parents would lock the car doors whenever we saw one. Just like they would if they thought we might be driving through a Black neighborhood.

Segregation was in full force, so I was amazed when we stopped at a gas station with three restrooms—Men, Women, and Colored. I remember asking Mother why White men and women had separate restrooms but “Colored” people of both sexes had to use the same one. Notice I didn’t ask why the races were separated. I just wondered why there were only three restrooms instead of four. I remember at one gas station I opened the “wrong” restroom door and gave a Black man a shock that a White kid was invading his space.

I really enjoyed that Florida trip. We even encountered a hurricane. “Flossy” it was. When we realized what was happening, Dad got us off the highway and into a motel where we could hunker down. It was a minimal hurricane as it turned out, but with more rain and wind than I ever saw before. Yeah. It took a hurricane to get my father off the highway.

We saw all the sights on our list. My favorite was Cypress Gardens. The water-skiing show was fantastic. People on skis with other people on their shoulders holding colorful banners waving in the wind. Guys and gals doing all kind of stunts going over ramps. All the performers were White, of course, but I didn’t notice that back then.

And there were little electric boats that would take the tourists through the cypress groves. Occasionally there would be grassy areas where women—White women—would pose gracefully with their colorful Gone with the Wind dresses spread out around them. The ideal picture of the Old South myth that the tourists expected and the Southerners ardently believed really had existed once upon a time.

Mother and I even convinced Dad to shell out for lunch at Cypress Gardens' elegant café. The middle of a summer's day but all the waiters were dressed in tuxedos and wearing white gloves. They were all men. And they were all Black. Obviously each had been hired to meet some physical standard to insure the White tourists would find them, shall we say, "presentable." I didn't yet know I was gay. It'd be a few more years before I figured that out. But I was certainly intrigued by all those beautiful Black men gliding around that dining room like they were choreographed. I not only did not know such beings as those elegant Black men existed, I didn't even know they were possible.

That Florida trip made an impression on my young mind. When the schools began to desegregate and on the television news I watched stoic Black children facing angry, very angry, White mobs; and a little later when I watched film of lunchroom sit-ins and eventually the Edmund Pettus Bridge—the horses, and the dogs and the billy clubs—I thought of the three restrooms and the chain gangs and the gas station janitors and the cotton pickers and those beautiful Cypress Gardens waiters. And I had an inkling, a teeny-tiny little White boy inkling, of the social realities they were protesting. And I was never quite the same.