Roger L. Parks

I was born in a little town in Georgia called Concord, and the county was Pike County.

I grew up on a farm, what they call sharecroppin’ farm. What it was that you did the work. The owner of the land, he furnished a place for you to live. He furnished everything and you did the work. And at the end a the year, when you gather your crop, then you divide what you had comin’. Most of the time you didn’t have anything comin’.

The people that my dad sharecropped from had their own store. Matter of fact they had the largest store in town. So you went there. Naturally you was ripped off but that was the best you could do.

Lincoln called himself freein’ the slaves, but he freed ’em with nothin’ to do. They didn’t have no skills. So what they did was, when the Civil War was over and the blue coats moved out, the blacks was right back where they started from. They had to go back and do the same work. Matter of fact they was worst off than they was before the Civil War because now the white man is mad because I supposed to have been freed. So now I’m workin’ for you and you gonna take it out on me.

My dad, I was told, had 17 brothers and four sisters.

They went through the records in Georgia. You can’t even find a record of me. No birth certificate. Nothin’ like that.

We was all born with midwife. We call ’em midwife but they were women that had taken it upon themselves that they was goin’ to make a little cash by goin’ around deliverin’ babies. They had no license and didn’t have any schoolin’. It was just something they decided to do.

No one lived there other than the blacks that was workin’ for the whites. They had jobs workin’ as house maids and yard boys.

You didn’t get sick that much. In the country like that you very seldom saw someone overweight. Everything you ate, except sugar, coffee, cheese, everything else that I can imagine, we grew.

What you did with the vegetables, like potatoes, you take your corn stalks and build a pyramid and you put dirt on it. Dirt all the way around it, all the way up to the top. You leave a openin’. You take your potatoes and you throw ’em in there. You put your vegetables and things in there. And they are goin’ to keep. Now like eggs, you take eggs. You get your cotton seeds. You put your eggs in there. Put the cotton seeds over the eggs if you want to preserve ’em. My mom, she did all our cannin’. Peaches, berries, watermelon rind, you name it, she canned. You had to because you had no money.

My mom like the preacher to come to the house. She cooked for the preacher. Now, we couldn’t eat until they ate. The kids couldn’t eat at the table with the grownups. And I said, I don’t care if the president come to my house. My kids gonna eat when we eat.

The little town where I grew up, they had a tent. They showed movies. The white over here and the black over there. And when the cowboy would go to kiss the woman, they’d pull a curtain on us. They pulled a curtain ’til that was over and then they’d raise it.

Lotsa times a white woman would be walkin’ down the street in the summer. And she have on shorts. If she was comin’ towards us, we would put our hands over our eyes. We’d have to do that or turn our back.

I never saw a lynching, not at the time it happened. My cousin, she was pregnant. I wasn’t there. I know that she got shot. The story was 12 white guys, they all had shotguns and they were lookin’ for her husband. And she didn’t have any lights, only a lamp in the house. And they wasn’t waitin’ to see who came to the door. They had dogs. When she opened the door they just cut loose. You can imagine, 12 shotguns. At close range too.
In those days when you left the south and came north they always set you back. Say if I would’ve come here in the fourth grade, they’d put me back probably in the second grade. They didn’t give ’em a test or anything. They just automatically drop ’em back.

I volunteered in the service (1943) to get away from Georgia. During those days you had two services, black service and white service. When I got out of service (1946) I came here. My sister was here. I came to visit her. I didn’t come to stay.

It was no different when I came here than it was in Georgia. In some ways it was worse. Number one, I couldn’t get a place to stay. I have to live in attics, live in basements. I go into places and they have job applications in the paper. I’d go in to ask for the job and they’d turn their back on me. One day the lady told me right out. She said: “We don’t hire niggers.”

I went out to Oscar Mayer’s and they only had one department that you could work in. They called it inedible department. All the scrap meat and blood and stuff came over to that department and then you cooked it, made hog feed out of it. Then you mix this meat and blood and the water that came off the cooked meat and all, take that and cook it down into a substance that looked like tar. And you mixed it with these ingredients and cooked that together. Then you bagged it and the farmers buy it. Very high in protein.

Oscar Mayer’s was very prejudiced when I went there. You tell ’em your name but they’d come around and: “Hey nigger, go do such-and-such.” I got to be shop steward. I was the first one. I was shop steward for nine years and I gave it up in about 1973. It was years afterwards before they had another one.

Oscar Mayer’s at that time had over 3,000 employees. And out of that 3,000, I would say maybe 30 were black. It was our department here, and here was a department they called the lard department. Because the lard department had about 75 percent women in there, white women, we wasn’t allowed to go through there while they were workin’. The white guys could go through but we couldn’t. We had to go out the back gate or go underneath the tunnel. But I was used to being kicked around. I didn’t want my blood pressure to go up for something that I couldn’t do anything about. I couldn’t go to the union. I couldn’t go to the company.

But I couldn’t get the black guys to fight with me at that time. They were satisfied with whatever they dished ’em. Naturally at that time most of the blacks was what you call Uncle Toms. They was satisfied. This was better than what they had back where they came from.

The only difference I found in here and Georgia in those days, I didn’t have to sit in the back of the bus, and I didn’t have to say “yes ma’am” and “no ma’am’ and “yes sir.”

I had two jobs for 40 years. My wife didn’t work.

Some guys came by one day. Two white guys. They knew my name and everything. I never seen ’em before in my life. First they asked me, how would I like to move out there to Blooming Grove. He said he wanted to break the segregation barrier. This was in 1956. I figured I had nothing to lose, and we moved out there. I stayed out there eight years. I didn’t know the guy. I never saw him after that. They treated my family all right. The people didn’t bother me. Not the neighbors. It was the police that I went through the hell with. I didn’t even own a gun, but they didn’t know that. Everytime I’d walk two blocks from my house the police was there. They’d want to see my driver’s license.

I used to, with my family, just to do something...this was back in the late ’40s, early ’50s, maybe even the ’60s. A day off or something, or a Sunday. I drive through different neighborhoods. Some people hadn’t never even seen blacks. And I would slowly drive through. I guess what I was doin’ I was dreamin’. I was dreamin’ of livin’ in some of those neighborhoods is what I was really doin’. I did this for years. I would drive through Middleton, Sun Prairie, and Madison I’d drive the east side. I used to drive up and down Whitney Way. I always loved that street.

Ninty percent of the blacks that was here, lived out here or either on West Washington Avenue in the Bush. A few lived on Dayton Street. But most of the blacks lived out here. Madison was very prejudiced. You can’t imagine how prejudiced. You’d have to be me in those days to realize how prejudiced Madison was.
He said, I'm going to get on the police force. He said, come go with me. I said, I ain't gonna be able to get on that police force. We go up there and the guy, I forget what that chief was in the 50s, and he says, who you gonna arrest? I says whoever's breaking the law. He says, you can't go after no white folks. He said, "On top a that, do you see any niggers anywhere on this force?" That was the end of that.

I can't see any difference in Wisconsin than it was in Georgia. A guy couldn't be caught with a white woman. Whoa! You were goin' to jail if you were caught with a white woman. I knew a guy that was married to a white woman at that time (1950s). They'd go in the store, and this I saw with my own eyes, and they'd act like they didn't know each other.

Another place was very prejudiced was Beloit, and Milwaukee. They were worse than Madison. That's the reason why I organized a baseball team...the Madison Eagles. So that I would have something to keep me in the summer time. Keep my family. We'd have something to do. We went around different places over the state and played baseball. By we being black, they thought we was the Kansas City Monarchs. There were a lot of times we'd go to play some team and they would have guys from the minor leagues.

I bought the suits. I bought the balls. I bought the whole thing. It was all mine. And when I'd have teams to come here, then I would sell hot dogs and pop and stuff like that. I played Racine, Beloit. I played the guy that was my foreman. He had a team out at Westport. I played Lone Rock. Quite a few towns I can't even think of. I played Penn Park and here on Olin Avenue.

Livin' in the south, you do something, they might hang you. I never saw a hangin' here or anything like that.

I'd get the paper everyday, and I'd go in. "We don't hire niggers." You couldn't even get the elevator job.

I know a case. His wife was working. They didn't know she was black. And how they found out one day he went out and he was as dark as your satchel there, and he went out to pick her up one day. And that was the end of her.

I wish I would have had the opportunities they have today. There's so many things that I couldn't do. You couldn't be a policeman. You couldn't drive a bus. You couldn't work for the city. You couldn't work for the state. You couldn't work for the federal. You couldn't work for the county. County don't have too many now. Your hands were tied.

I taught myself. Plus mistakes, you learn from your mistakes. I had no business experience, but I was determined.

If I would've known that Madison was the way it was, I probably would've stayed in the south. When I came here I was on my way to New York. That's where I was goin' to make my home. New York. I came here, and I got stuck. I made Madison, in a way, be good to me.

I said to 'em when you go to school and the teacher asks you a question, put your hand up. Even if you don't know the answer, put your hand up and give something. Now you are the first one. The other one got to be better than you. And that's the way I was. First when I got in to be shop steward, first meeting I went to, I got there and I sat down in the front seat. Everybody got in the back. I'm up there by myself. After about two meetings, I couldn't get my front seat. I had to get there early to get my seat. The guys became very friendly to me.

I had lived a hard life and grew up in a hard life in the south. So I just decided to make the best of what Madison would offer me.

I read the bible. A lot that people went through in the bible, I experienced it. I was shot. I was shot at four times. I was hit three times. With a .38. A guy came to the door and he started shootin'. Shot me here. Broke my arm. Shot me in this arm. And I saw an angel. Angel appeared by my side. When I saw this angel, this guy turned around, walked out the door. It was a white angel, with wings just like I read and heard and seen pictures of 'em. And I always feel that angel looks over me.

I walked out to the paramedics and got in. And he said, you was shot and it doesn't seem to bother you. I said, no, I got to live my life. You can't weep over what have happened. You got to go on with you life.
You’re gonna spend a whole lotta money goin’ to the psychiatrist when you can do this for yourself.

Right now if I get feelin’ down and out which I very rarely do, I just get and read me a couple passages and it tells you there what to do. I don’t need to go to a psychiatrist when it tells me right there in the book what I can do.

We as a people are very easy to brainwash. What you do is you take me, put me up front, promise me a whole lot in order to satisfy the whole community. How does he know what my needs are here on Beld Street? He don’t know what my needs are, but as soon as something happens, there he is, he or she. What they after is to get recognition for themselves. They want to be on TV so that people will get to know them in case they want to run for something.

If I got somethin’ against you, I’m gonna write the mayor, or I will try to get a group together and go down on Tuesday night to the meeting and voice my opinion against you. If you got an opinion, go down Tuesday night and voice your opinion to the council. If you got enough they’ll hear you. Don’t go down there with no one or two, now. I mean, they ain’t gonna let you in. But if you got 20 or 30 people, or 100, they gonna listen to you. You’ll get somethin’ done.

If you don’t have high school, you expect to wash dishes. You expect to scrub the floors. That’s all you know how to do.

It’s one thousand time better than what it was when I came here. A change I guess came during the time of Martin Luther King when he started his march. When I came to Madison I never had anyone refuse me other than jobs. I’ve never had no refusen in goin’ into places to eat or to drink. I didn’t go in to make love. I went in to be served. I had refusen of jobs. I went because I thought that actually these jobs were more for minorities, sweepin’ the streets, runnin’ the elevators, haulin’ the garbage. I couldn’t believe it when they say we don’t hire you to haul garbage. I couldn’t get a job sweepin’ the streets. I said what kinda place is this? Even where I came from I could of gone and got a job sweepin’ the streets.

Plus you got the law now. You don’t give me a job for a good reason, for a reasonable reason you have to give me that job if I’m qualified. When I came here so much was against you. I could go on and on what was against you.