Memories: Registering to Vote and Paying the Poll Tax

By Edna F. Briggs

My earliest recollection of politics, voting and elections goes back to about 1952 or 1953. I was about age 6 or 7 when I accompanied my Mom to the place where people who lived in our rural farm area in Jefferson County Arkansas were required to register and vote whenever an election was scheduled.

My Mom drove us to Tucker, Arkansas, an unincorporated community in Jefferson County, located approximately five miles from our farm. Tucker probably received its notoriety from being located along a major north/south railroad track where it provided the closest station stop for unloading passengers bound for one of Arkansas’ oldest Correctional Facilities.

Today, the Tucker State Prison Unit remains situated along a road located approximately one mile east of Tucker. During my childhood, my family and I could view the prison compound from our front porch. Only white male inmates were housed there back then. Inmates are now integrated, and the Tucker Unit continues to serve as the only location in the State of Arkansas where executions (via electric chair back then, now lethal injections) are carried out. Perhaps this is why I always felt a slight surge of fear whenever we drove through this area, in route to Tucker.

Beyond the prison, a post office, one major Mercantile Store, a cotton gin, one gas station, and the Julius Rosenwald School for Negroes formed Tucker’s local metropolis during the early 1950s. The Mercantile Store is where everybody from our area went to register and to vote.

In order to register to vote, I believed back then that only Negroes or colored folks, (as we were called during that time) were required to pay something called a “poll tax.” Later, as a 10th or 11th grade American History student, I learned that the tax emerged in some states, within the United States, in the late 19th century as part of the Jim Crow laws. It was used to restrict voting rights. Payment of the tax, along with unfairly implemented literacy tests and extra-legal intimidation achieved the desired effect of disenfranchising African Americans, Native Americans, as well as poor white voters. ¹

Arkansas adopted the poll tax in 1892, requiring all males age twenty-one and older to pay $1 per year in order to register to vote. By 1920, Arkansas’ legal requirements pertaining to the poll tax were expanded to include women. ² ³ ⁴ Congress finally abolished the poll tax through the 24th Amendment to the Constitution in 1964.

The payment of $1 per year, per adult created an extreme barrier preventing the ability to vote for many poor black and white farm families. Many families in our area could not afford this because payment usually became due and payable during a period when work was not plentiful on the farms. Most often, the urgency to pay the poll tax was felt during the election year, which resulted in having to pay whatever had accrued for previous years. The night before our trip to Tucker, I had overheard my Dad and Mom discussing the amount of $3 being due for each of them, covering three years, making a total amount of $6 due for both of them.
There were two entrances at the mercantile store. The main entrance was on the east side. A porch expanded the entire front. All registration and voting activities took place from a second entrance located along the north side of the building. Tall stairways were climbed at both entrances.

As my Mom and I climbed the stairway to the north side entrance, we could hear female voices laughing and talking. But all fell silent as we opened the door and entered the room. Three middle-aged white women were present. Their faces turned slightly red, and their body language made them appear as though they were somewhat angry that they had been interrupted. Two women were sitting at a table, while another one sat behind them on the side with her arms firmly folded.

Again, fear surged inside me, because face-to-face contact with white people was extremely rare. At my age then, my contact with whites was limited to having to buy something from them in a store, or occasionally to buy postage stamps from the Mailman who delivered the mail to our roadside mailbox every day except Sunday. I always felt safer when I watched white people from a distance, rather than having to deal with them face-to-face.

Before we left our car, I thought it was odd when my Mom removed two bills from her purse – a $5 bill and a $1 bill. When we walked thru the door, she held the money firmly in her hand, with her purse on her arm. Later when I asked why she did this, she explained that our neighbors had warned her that these white women had yelled at them as they entered the room, asking “Do you have the money on ya today?? If not, you can’t register, so go on back out!.”

And so, my Mom was definitely determined to register to vote that day. As she entered the door, she wanted to clearly show them that she was prepared to pay the poll tax.

One of the ladies sitting at the table began asking questions and preparing the paperwork needed to register my Mom and my Dad. Mom held a tight grip and did not release the $6 payment until she was handed two precious poll tax receipts. She and my Dad would be required to present these when they returned to this room which would later serve as the polling place to vote on Election Day.

As my Mom took the receipts and held them firmly in her hand, the white lady sitting in the back spoke for the first and only time, in a loud and stern voice, “I do not see why y’all want to vote!” Immediately, I felt a knot form in my stomach, and I started to shake a little. My Mom never looked toward this white woman. Instead she dropped her head, looked at the floor, gripped the receipts, and firmly grabbed my hand. We walked out of the door and quickly down the tall stairs.

As we were heading back to our farm, and drove pass the prison compound again, I felt myself breathing a sigh of relief, and I was able to let the fear go. Why? I do not know. There were no words to describe my fear, confusion and other emotions felt back then.

When we arrived home the receipt was given to my Dad who placed it in his fireproof safe, located in a corner of their bedroom. I understood that this receipt was extremely precious, because it was their proof, required by law, that they were eligible to participate in a political process.

The experience at the mercantile store in Tucker, Arkansas was only one of many that I encountered while growing up in the South during the 1950’s and 60’s. Having our segregated school bus smashed with eggs or rotten tomatoes, while on the road between school and home, by those who rode the all-white school bus was a common occurrence. No reports were made, no action was ever taken. Local television commentators back then frequently took the liberty of referring openly to African Americans as “niggers” in their on-air reports.
As time passed, my mind often wandered back to the day my Mom and I visited the Mercantile Store to pay the poll tax. The white woman’s negative language, tone, and demeanor, combined with my evolving knowledge and understanding of African American history became intertwined with other events that occurred over time. From the brutal death of 14-year old Emmitt Till in 1955 in Money Mississippi, to the hatred publicly displayed on television by a large number of white people toward the African American students (known as the Little Rock Nine) who were the first to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas during the fall of 1956.

I suppose the one thing that was most confusing for me about the behavior of the white women in the Mercantile Store was that the poll tax posed an extreme adverse effect on poor white women, equal to that experienced by African Americans. However, I will never know how poor white women were treated when they arrived to pay their poll tax. But back then I could only assume that their overall treatment was not the same as my Mom’s. They may have been disrespected, but I doubt if they suffered from fear.

By the time I reached late adolescence, and while still bounded by fear to some degree, I had formed what I thought was my own profound worldview. It bore a mantra that read: White People Are Not Human!

I held firmly to this belief until 1964, ironically the same year in which the poll tax law was abolished in the United States. I graduated from high school at age 17 that year, and had enrolled in college. I was reading a newspaper that recounted events that had occurred surrounding the death, during the summer, of my 14-year old cousin, Debra Baker. Suddenly, I realized that the mantra that I had formed, starting with the poll tax experience with my Mom, was not true. I changed my mind then and there. My new mantra became, simply, that white people are human after all. And my fear subsided, a little.

Endnotes


