

## CHANGES

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Keith Stewart

The events which I am about to relate occurred in the country of the past where we know things were done differently, or in this case somewhat differently. They involve an odd and complex mix of circumstances and characters--a university president, a trio of jazz musicians, the brother of a future president of the United States, the secretary of a university dean, a Nobel prizewinner, and myself, along with a sufficient supporting cast. I must begin with my remembered self of well over three score and ten years ago, for the circumstances brought some degree of light to my own darkness.

I grew up in the far northwest of the United States, almost as far northwest as one could be without being in the northern Pacific or in Canada. My town was a small county seat of between two and three thousand souls. In the early twentieth century, they were very largely people of Scandinavian extraction, with a sprinkling of those German and Scottish descent--some closer, some more distant. It was a thriving place with an economy based upon lumbering, fishing, and farming the rich land between Puget Sound and the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Growing up, I was generally unaware of prejudices racial or religious, but of course they were there. Raised as a Presbyterian I gathered early from my mother the impression that there was something vaguely impolite about being a Catholic. Not that she ever said anything negative about anyone, but something in her look always took care of the matter. The local Indians might have been as some still see African-Americans, but they were generally off on their nearby reservation, and in any case held nether property nor businesses in town as far as I was aware. We saw very little of them and probably thought about them even less, though my father and mother knew some of them. My father was a pharmacist who was known to members of the local Swinomish tribe as someone who would advise them on lesser ailments and also was willing to sign their names to legal documents under their own "X's." We were never socially involved with them. There was one African-American in town, a man of uncertain age who did odd janitorial jobs. Later I knew that in my older sister's high school class there were a black brother and sister. I gathered that they were generally accepted as classmates, but we didn't know the family, and among the few things I learned about them was that they had to go to Seattle, a seventy-mile drive away, for haircuts because local barbers wouldn't take them. At the time that seemed to me remarkably inconvenient, as well a pretty silly of the local barbers, but it didn't strike me as being unjust or unfair, to say nothing of humiliating or angering. We didn't talk about such matters in my family nor, for that matter, about much of anything else except our small daily lives.

So I grew up with what I suspect to have been a common complacent childhood awareness of other religions and races, with attitudes towards the latter suggested by playing cowboys and Indians, being fascinated by people dressed in furs who built igloos, and loving to have "Little Black Sambo" read to me, or like my contemporaries, making

choices with such a rhyme as “Eeny meeny miny mo,/ Catch a N-word by the toe.” Perhaps I was racially prejudiced, but whenever I developed whatever ideas of fairness or justice I had, they don’t seem to me to have been racially determined. I ultimately went to college in north California. There, among my closest friends was a student from Maui, the son of a Polynesian mother and a Scots father. I remember my mother later looking at some photographs of my friends and remarking of this one, “He’s very dark, isn’t he?” “Um. Well yes,” with an unspoken “And so what?” Another college friend invited a couple of us for dinner with his mother and perhaps stepfather in a nearby rather posh suburb of San Francisco. The next day I remarked to another of my classmates who my host had been. His only comment when I told him the chap’s name was, “Oh yes, the Jew boy.” The distinction hadn’t occurred to me, and I thought it a pointless thing to say. No doubt everyone has run into such occasions as these and with varying reactions. I think that the first time I was actively bothered by such distinctions occurred on a train trip north from San Francisco, no doubt on my way home for a vacation. We stopped briefly in Portland, Oregon; I got off the train and walked around several streets nearby. There I saw on the door of a café a sign saying “Whites Only.” In the area the short and simple phrase may well have excluded a large and complex variety of colors, but I had not seen such a sign before, and its explicit drawing of lines which had implicitly no doubt been all about me for years was disturbing. Bothered or not, I’m sure that I accepted them as part of the world in which I lived, and even had I thought about it, beyond any will of mine to change.

And so, after a short stop in the Army, from which I was summarily bumped with the discovery of a defective heart, I went on to graduate school. Life in the Graduate College at Princeton was no doubt less isolating than life in a Carthusian monastery, but there were surely similarities, and I had little knowledge of matters external to the needs of my discipline, and thought little of them. I am still learning.

Before my wife and I arrived in Cincinnati, however, I spent four years from 1948 as an Instructor in English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. As I have recently read in the recollection of a member of the Virginia class of 1952, who I assume was enrolled during my years there, it was “A hell of a party school.” And so it was. I still recall the occasional student turning up in an early morning class after one of the regular party weekends looking dull-eyed and frowzy, still in his rumpled dinner jacket, dress shirt hanging open at the neck, black tie dribbling down his front.

To a northwesterner who had veered eastward it was a remarkable place in more interesting ways. It was, to be sure, immensely handsome, for Jefferson (then known to what I understood to be proper locals as “Mr. Jefferson”) had planned well. Later designers had followed his federal architectural inclinations without his distinction. In the late nineteen-forties Charlottesville itself seemed a rather sleepy and comfortably unenterprising place. It had not yet become the high-priced bedroom community that has since developed. There was a serviceable downtown with one decent hotel and no good restaurant (for, we understood, Virginians ate at home). There were a separate and, as far as I knew, poor black area, the distinctly white town, and the University--the blacks associated as servants more with the town and the gown than did town and gown with

each other. This kind of racial separation I had got used to, moving as I did from the west to the east, still innocently assuming that the basis of the separation was a normal one with no hint of more complex feelings.

The University of Virginia itself may be generally more distinguished now than it was then. Certainly, the Department of English is. More recently Virginia has had one of the more highly regarded English departments in the country. In my time there were surely excellent people on the faculty in general, and the University had maintained a Jeffersonian dedication to humane learning, but the tradition-ridden hand of southern gentlemanliness made itself felt too. When I was considering the job, one of my professors at Princeton told me that if I accepted, I'd better decide before I left whether after classes I'd go to the library and read microfilm or go off with the boys for drinks. The division was not that simple, of course, but the structure of the English faculty at the time is suggestive. It consisted of some eight or nine young instructors, of which I was one, all of us aware that our appointments were four-year ones, after which we were expected to leave quietly. There were two Assistant Professors, one Associate Professor, and six full Professors, one of whom, the Edgar Allan Poe Professor of English, was both the Head of the department and the Dean of the Graduate School. Shortly before I arrived, there had been one Professor and six Associates. But one of the six, a linguist from the north, had been offered a professorship at Columbia. Intelligently, the Head had wanted to keep him at Virginia, but in order to do that had to promote him, and in order to do that felt impelled to promote four of his immediate colleagues, all of whom were proper Virginians with resounding names. They were for the most part charming men with strong and gracious wives, but as scholars they had pretty much opted out of their fields. The one remaining Associate was a northerner who subsequently became the head of the much stronger Department of English and one of the twentieth century's most distinguished textual scholars.

As a lot, the students were interesting. They were, of course, all male, all white, and always, in class, dressed, grudgingly or not, in the local uniform of slacks, jacket, shirt and tie--the last at that time preferably a black knit silk four-in-hand. As students they were often excellent. A good many, as far as I could tell, were there because they were Virginians or were connected with Virginia families, and the University was where a proper fellow went. There were Yankees, who were thought to be there because they had not been accepted by more demanding northern schools, but my experience suggested that they were better than that. And because it was a state university, there were a good many from the towns and farms in the countryside. As young men who were still figuring out where they were and where they were going, they were often promising and more interesting than some of their peers who took being at Virginia as a matter of course. Among the local practices at the time, I should in passing mention the presence of dogs in class--dogs, which were unlike the puppies that unhappy teachers occasionally found cuddled in young women's arms in the late sixties and seventies. These were full-grown companions and were presumed to be welcome anywhere. There was one in particular, a large black more-or-less Labrador named Seal, which had the run of the whole place. If Seal jumped into one's basement classroom through a window open to a warm day, he stayed. He was particularly noted among my immediate

colleagues for having thrown up in the midst of what was an otherwise undistinguished lecture by one of them; but I understand that Seal became one of the local immortals during the half-time of a Virginia-Pennsylvania football game in Philadelphia--for he was taken to all such events--when he wandered across the field and lifted his leg against the megaphone of a Penn cheer leader. My own experience was with a handsome large muscular bundle of tan and white boxer which attends class with a young man of military bearing who always rose to attention when he answered or asked questions in class. I assumed that he was from a military family, perhaps stationed in Germany. At least the boxer responded only to commands in German. One day he was so restless that I asked his owner to put him out. The young man did so willingly enough--perhaps he knew what would happen. At any rate, before long I could hear claws clattering at an increasing pace along the tiled floor of Maury Hall, and the beast hurled himself at the classroom door with a great thud. After that the dog stayed home.

But I must stop this apparent digression on the curious extra-curricular practices at Mr. Jefferson's University in the middle of the last century and turn to a particular racial and legal crux which occurred late in my four years there and which continued my own still limited education in such matters. There was at the time a rather loose organization of faculty members and graduate students which called itself The Friends of the University. As I recall, it was largely composed of younger members of the Departments of English and Philosophy; and it took its function to be bringing the varied culture of the outside world to the University. It sponsored the appearances of chamber music groups, the still small National Symphony Orchestra, the occasional mime, early foreign films, and in one notable case a jazz group. In the last year or two of my stay I found myself president of the outfit--I have no idea how or precisely why, except that someone asked and I acceded. Mine was largely a figurehead job--I helped make arrangements and turned up at the beginning of programs to welcome the audience and tell them what they already knew they were there for.

One of the members of the group that really ran the organization was a young instructor in English named Martin Williams. A solid Virginian, he had taken an undergraduate degree from Virginia, an M. A. from Pennsylvania, and was perhaps working towards a degree at Columbia; but he was clearly more interested in jazz than in literary study and was perhaps biding his time until something more interesting developed. And it did: He later worked as jazz critic for the *Saturday Review*, *The Evergreen Review*, and *The New York Times*. Along with publishing a number of books on classic jazz, he also became the editor of special projects in books and recordings at the Smithsonian Press. According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (2002), from the late 1950's Williams was "one of the most powerful figures . . . in the history and dissemination of jazz . . . [and] his annotated *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* served for over two decades as the centerpiece of jazz education at many institutions."

I suspect that it was he who was the primary mover and arranger of a jazz concert by a trio composed of a chap known as Knocky Parker, who played the piano, Omer Simeon, a clarinetist and saxophonist, and Arthur Herbert, a drummer. All three were evidently well enough known to be recognized by entries in the aforesaid *New Grove*

*Dictionary.* Parker, who was also a student of English, subsequently took a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Kentucky, and went on to teach at Kentucky Wesleyan and the University of South Florida. In about 1960 he reportedly made the first recordings of the majority of Scott Joplin's piano rags. Arthur Herbert played drums with various bands, but by the time of which I write, he had stopped working as a full-time musician, though he continued to perform frequently, according to *Grove*. Without doubt, the star of the trio was Omer Simeon, of whom even I accidentally have a recording with Jelly Roll Morton. Simeon, who was born in New Orleans, was once one of a number of distinguished musicians who studied with various members of a Creole New Orleans family named Tio. For the interest of those who know much more about the history of jazz than I, besides Jelly Roll Morton, he performed and recorded with Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins, and Jimmy Lunceford. According again to *Grove*, he appeared with Wilbur de Paris in an early jazz episode of a TV series called "The Subject is Jazz" in 1958, the year before he died.

It was these three whom Martin Williams had engaged for a jazz concert to be held in Cabell Hall, which contained the one large auditorium at the University. Cabell Hall is still a decent enough looking building designed by McKim, Mead, and White in an attempt to harmonize with the elegance of Jefferson's original design for what is probably still called The Lawn--the original central area of The Grounds (anyone who wished to be understood by locals never called the campus anything else). Traditionalists disapproved of the building, particularly because it obscures the view of the distant Blue Ridge Mountains with which Jefferson had intended to close the grand vista down The Lawn. It housed classrooms, the occasional office, and the auditorium--a great space of semi-circularly arranged seats, one large balcony, and an open platform backed by an immense reproduction of Raphael's "School of Athens."

Virginia was in some ways no more tolerant than the Athens which dosed Socrates with hemlock, and someone informed me that Cabell Hall had not been designed to house a racially mixed jazz group or its probably racially mixed audience. Parker was white, Herbert and Simeon were black. So I was given to understand by older and presumably wiser members of the faculty that it would be prudent to have the permission of the president of the University and that I was the one to negotiate it. And so I donned my best negotiating jacket, slacks, and tie, made an appointment, and went to call on Colgate Darden, Junior. At that time, Deans, occasional senior professors who were Virginians, and presidents had their offices or homes in what are called the Pavilions, which ran down each side of the great Lawn. Each pavilion had been designed by Jefferson to exemplify a different one of the classical architectural orders. They were connected by a long colonnade and separated by a series of single Spartan rooms reserved for senior undergraduates. It was, and still is, an elegant arrangement. President Darden lived on nearby Carr's Hill, but his office was in one of the pavilions, and there I found him.

Darden, by my accounting, was not an impressive man. Gray and so self-effacing that he nearly disappeared, he had nonetheless been a congressman and governor. In my time it was bandied about that the presidency of the University was the job in the state to

which defeated governors retired. If that was true at the time, it is true no longer. A member of the class of 1952 has reported in the student newspaper, The Cavalier Daily, that “students and faculty alike [thought of Darden] as being merely a politician and no educator, even though he had studied at Oxford and held a degree from Columbia as well as the University.” The same writer also recalled that a “popular ditty of the day was ‘Cheer, cheer for Colgate Darden/ Flush him twice around the drain/ Someone forgot to pull the chain[;]/ Consequently he will remain president of dear UVA.’” It is only fair to note that both the halting meter and irregular rhyme will allow the insertion of any presidential name of any university. Indeed, the verse might well be improved by the insertion of others. And in any case, Darden proved a better man than I thought him.

Be that as it may, I put my question to the president: “Might the Friends of the University have permission to have a racially mixed jazz group—and very possibly a racially mixed audience—in Cabell Hall?” The answer was a pretty flat and unarguable “No—it’s against the law,” followed by the suggestion that I see the University lawyer about the matter. And that was that. When I called upon the lawyer, his answer, too, was that such a mix was against the law, but he went on to remark with a degree of exasperation that all that was really old stuff and to ask who in the world brought the matter up. With still an edge of the undergraduate about me, I answered with a degree of pleasure that it was President Darden. That was nevertheless still that. What we proposed to do was illegal. I learned only recently that the University administration had at the time generally maintained the letter, but not the intent of the law by designating separate sections of Cabell Hall for blacks and whites, and then letting everyone sit wherever they wanted. But neither the president nor the University lawyer told me that; in fact, since I had arrived in the fall of 1948, I do not recall having seen other than white faces in the place.

The particular law in question was part of the Virginia Code and had been since 1926 (as I have learned with the help of James Hart of the University of Cincinnati Law Library). That law required that “under penalty of a fine of not less than \$100 or more than \$500” the operations of “any place of public entertainment or public assemblage which is attended by both white and colored persons shall separate the white race and the colored race and shall set apart and designate” certain seats for each. Patrons who failed to comply with that segregation could be fined not less than \$10 or more than \$25 (1926, p. 945; Michie Cod 1942, Secs. 1796a-b). Then on April 29, 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a case against the state of Virginia involving an African-American who been charged with contempt of court on peaceably refusing to sit in a segregated section reserved for blacks in a Virginia courtroom, stated with, by that time, plenty of precedents that “it is no longer open to question that a State may not constitutionally require segregation of public facilities” (373 U.S. 61, 83 S.Ct. 1053).

In the early 1950’s that date was yet to come. Cabell Hall was still reserved for the Friends’ concert, and the musicians had been hired. I don’t recall that we ever seriously considered canceling the event. Perhaps we hoped that if the law were really as the University lawyer had said, “old hat,” nobody would notice; perhaps, being young, we hoped that something would happen, though we had no idea what it might be. It

finally defined itself, when, as a *dues ex machina*, Ralph Bunche appeared to speak in Cabell Hall. According to his excellent biographer and subsequent successor at the United Nations, Brian Urquhart, Bunche by this time was an immensely distinguished man. He had long been concerned with international politics, originally through work on his doctoral dissertation at Harvard. He was significantly involved in the establishment of the United Nations. It is now a melancholy recollection that he was responsible for negotiating peace in the Congo and, especially, between the Palestinians and Israelis after the declaration of Israel's statehood. It was for these services in the postwar search for peace that in December of 1950 he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. He was the speaker whom any University should have considered a catch.

At the time the Friends of the University were unaware that Bunche's speech had been scheduled for an evening not long before our jazz concert, as we were unaware of other circumstances which would ultimately qualify the white male "purity" of the University population. It happened that the first African-American student was being considered for admission to the Graduate School. The Grounds might be open range for gentlemen and pet dogs, but there were at the time no female undergraduate students that I was aware of, and of course there were no African-Americans at either level. There were a few female graduate students, but as far as I knew female undergraduates were all safely off at Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, the women's college of Virginia. That the admission of a black graduate student might put a bump in the even tenor of Virginia ways was buzzed about a bit, but my colleagues and I were only dimly aware of it. In fact, according to Robert O'Neil, who is now Director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression in Charlottesville, the student in question at the time was Walter Ridley, who took his doctorate in English and Education at Virginia later in the 1950's and went on to the successful presidencies of two black colleges. O'Neil has remarked to me that he "was immensely helpful to us [the University of Virginia] in recruiting what we believe has been and remains the best and brightest group of black undergraduates at any public university in the country." At the time of which I write, however, the question of his admission was creating a stir outside our concerns.

It was as an immediate consequence of Bunche's appearance shortly before the performance of our trio that the law requiring segregation in Cabell Hall became irrelevant, and the concert did come off as planned. It was literally a resounding success. On the stage were a white pianist and two black musicians, and Cabell Hall was filled with an audience of all colors. The undergraduate *Cavalier Daily* in an editorial remarked on the occasion that the contributions of the Friends of the University "to the entertainment and cultural phases of life here" during its three years of existence "deserve the highest commendation," and reported that the performance had been "in all likelihood the finest jazz concert ever presented at the University" (date unknown). As it drew to a close, the editorial continued, "the three 'hot men' had members of the audience on their feet in a noisy uproar. Really great, man." It is of some interest that the editorial made no mention of the racial mix of performers or audience. Of course, all racial problems had not been solved, and the small dinner party for the performers before the concert had been a notable social failure. I shouldn't have been surprised. I had arranged dinner at the Albemarle Hotel, an aging and somewhat rundown inn which I was told had the only

restaurant in downtown Charlottesville which would offer a meal to a racially mixed group. There were perhaps six or eight of my colleagues in a large room with the table better suited to a party of twenty or thirty than to one of eight or ten. Parker, the white pianist, had joined us; we waited for the others. And we waited long enough to become somewhat worried. Finally, the black desk clerk came in and asked me to follow him to the front desk and identify two men who said they had been invited for dinner. They were, of course, Omer Simeon and Arthur Herbert. They looked unhappy and perhaps annoyed, and as far as I could tell remained that way. Who could blame them? They disappeared after the concert into, I hope, more congenial circumstances, but the great success of the trio failed to erase the social unease of the situation.

If Ralph Bunche's appearance in Cabell Hall a few weeks earlier had effectually cleared the way for our trio to have its own way with the audience, it had not come about easily. The initiator of that occasion was Robert Kennedy. He was a student in the Virginia law school, to which, according to his biographer Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., he had been admitted by special grace, with the official comment that "unless he does better work than he did at Harvard, he is most unlikely to succeed in this Law School." He was evidently sufficiently diligent to graduate.

At some point, Kennedy became president of the Student Legal Forum, which had been established "to bring outside speakers to the Law School" (Schlesinger, p. 87), and in that position his success was brilliant. Whatever his own talents, he had his father's field of acquaintances to call upon, and the Legal Forum was graced during his presidency with such speakers as William O. Douglas, Thurman Arnold, old Joe Kennedy himself, and Joe McCarthy, for whose presence "grace" becomes an awkward term. Among these was Ralph Bunche.

Whatever Bunche's distinction, Schlesinger reports that Kennedy's proposal of him as a speaker aroused "tremendous opposition," particularly after a letter from Bunche made it clear that "As a matter of firm principle, I never appear before a segregated audience." To continue with Schlesinger's account, "Virginia law... forbade the mingling of blacks and whites in meeting halls." Kennedy proposed to the student government a resolution calling for an integrated audience. That failed, but the Student Legal Forum adopted it and sent it to President Darden. Kennedy rejected the usual compromise of posting and then neglecting segregated sections (as Bunche very likely would have done) and "carried the case to the Law School's governing body, the Board of Visitors. Finally, two of the law professors, accompanied by the dean of the Law School, took the matter to President Darden," who, according to Schlesinger, was opposed to the usual form of segregating in any case. They pointed out that the Supreme Court had recently required the University of Texas Law School to admit an African-American. "Darden [clearly to some extent a more liberal man than I had taken him for] seized the point, defined the Bunche lecture as an educational meeting and declared that it would be unsegregated" (pp. 89-90).

And so it was, though as an "educational meeting" it clearly didn't change old habits of mind. My wife and I were both there, and thought it an exciting, marvelous

occasion. What Bunche said I can no longer remember, nor have I been able to find among his printed speeches anything identified as one having been given at the University of Virginia. Perhaps it was an all-purpose talk to respond to the mass of invitations which he had received since being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. No matter. Along with a good many members of the University and the white community, Cabell Hall was packed with members of the African-American community, including what appeared to be their entire families of all ages and sizes, handsomely dressed – unsegregated and apparently as pleased to be there as I assumed the rest of us were. As we left, we ran into our friend, Elizabeth Purvis, the immensely competent secretary of the Dean of the Graduate School and Head of the Department of English. There she was with a friend, striding firmly away from Cabell Hall.

“Elizabeth,” either my wife or I or both of us said, “Wasn’t that just wonderful?” It didn’t occur to me that Elizabeth had no doubt been up to her neck in whatever problems there were for the University and, perhaps for herself, in the question of admitting the first African-American graduate student to the University. “Wasn’t that just wonderful,” we said; and she responded immediately, her southern accent hardened by her feelings: “Keith, I’ll be happy if I never hear the name of another damned nigger!” This was no Little Black Sambo, no childhood object from “Eeny, meeny, miny, mo,” there to be caught by his toe. I can hear her still. It sounded to me like an obscenity then, and it sounds like an obscenity now. It would be foolish to urge that the integration of Cabell Hall for the two evenings I have remarked upon was any more than a small episode in the slow improvement of racial relations, but Ralph Bunche, and Bobby Kennedy, and Knocky Parker, Omer Simeon, and Arthur Herbert, and yes, Colgate Darden, Jr., did provide at least signs of change.

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