

Sit-ins

I scarcely noticed in 1960, when I was a sophomore in high school, and it happened so fast. All of the lunch counters and soda fountains in Frankfort, KY's drug stores and dime stores disappeared overnight.

The catalyst was the phenomenon of sit-ins, or so it was said. I was pretty much uninvolved. I was distracted by being the new boy at the newly consolidated county high school.

Frankfort was a sleepy little town, among the three smallest state capitals in the USA. We only had three drug stores, and I can't even remember a dime store.

Up on the hill where US 60 headed east for Lexington, there sat Kentucky State College, an 1890 land grant college, that was the segregated, separate but equal, institute of higher learning for negroes (as we called them officially then).

Those of us in the town had little or no knowledge of their existence. The negroes who lived in the city school district, lived in a section known as "the craw" or "the bottom." There were 3 colored students at the county high school — a sister and brother and another. Of the 2 males, one was a football star and one was a basketball star. The siblings, I deduced years later, were the children of a Kentucky State professor. The three were part of a student body of greater than 700. I do not know how stressful their school lives may have been, for they got no friction from me and they returned none.

Again, they went unnoticed by me, except for the gratuitous labels they bore. Similarly, to this day I can tell you who were the two jewish students.

What went on in the mystery territory of the college campus could just as well have been the cavalcade of life on Mars. This did not affect the speculation, however, in the Caucasian meadowlands.

The campus had to be a hotbed of agitation. Interlopers from the big northern cities were putting strange ideas in the heads of those students.

It seems strange, today, to look back on this time. In subsequent years, nearly 3 decades later, I got my second college degree in Computer Science from Kentucky State, now a University, now called an HBCU (historically black college or university). I went on to become a professor — part of KSU's reversed affirmative action program.

I don't know how it worked in my salad days that I was so sheltered from diversity, but I could count the number of blacks, or other minorities, with whom I had even the most

infrequent association on the fingers of my two hands. Where were they? They could have been hiding from the white world.

I was born and raised in the South. I have told previously the story of my mother's being open to black people on the Chattanooga buses. It was there, in my first 4 years that I had any prior exposure outside my own ethnic group.

My mother was a New Englander from Boston. It was on trains going to and from Boston that my other exposure came. And then there was the time in high school when Duke Ellington and his band played a concert in the gymnasium.

This is it. I have told you about every encounter that I had outside the white European-descended world, by the time I was 16, in less than 600 words. I don't mention Hispanics, because there were none. I don't mention orientals, because there were none. I may have met a Mormon at 12 or 13, but I am not sure.

Therefore, it can hardly be a surprise that I did not feel the Earth shift on its axis in 1960. The civil rights revolution began its first uneasy steps during a short time in the South, during just a week in Frankfort.

I remember thinking, "why would those drug store owners cut off their noses to spite their own faces?" How could they sacrifice that lucrative soda fountain trade?

I realize now that they gave up very little. I'm sure that the two smaller stores were glad to have the square feet, space they could turn to more profitable uses. The big store was already a general store, almost a department store — the place where I would begin my jazz record collection soon. They probably didn't even notice a ripple.

The little town also survived. There were plenty of restaurants. None closed.

But those young people from Kentucky State College won the day whether I noticed or not, whether local merchants thought they had won or not. America would never be the same again.