

Ernest Burke: One Man's Journey Through Prejudice.

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Ernest Burke was born in 1924 during the early days of the depression. He was born and raised until the age of ten in Perryville, MD. Perryville is a small town in upper Maryland located on the water. In 1924 with segregation still a dominating force and Maryland being technically south of the Mason Dixon line, Perryville would not seem like an ideal place to be the only black family. However, for Ernest it was his reality. Never knowing his father, Ernest, his mother, and a much older brother and sister were the entirety of the black community in the area where Ernest was raised. However, Ernest's memories of growing up in Perryville are fond and void of discrimination or prejudice. Of course growing up in the depression he does recall the tough times when stale bread and rotten bananas for sandwiches were all his family could afford. But, Ernest recalled being just another kid in the neighborhood, and never feeling any different. He recalled eating over friends' houses at their table with the family, eating the same thing they did. It was no big deal for him and a white friend to share the same sandwich or the same ice cream cone. Ernest does not recall being excluded in any way, but rather he recalled a sense of community and all that that term implies. Matter of fact, when Ernest was ten his mother died and his older siblings wanted nothing to do with raising him, so a white French-Canadian family in Perryville took him in. And when they decided to return to Canada, the invitation was extended to Ernest that they wished to continue to raise him if he wanted to go.

Lacking options and feeling loved he moved with them to a town near Montreal called Iverville. In Iverville, Ernest continued to grow up with a sense of worth and acceptance void of racial differences. As Ernest reflected on growing up in his family, it truly sounded that they loved him and accepted him as one of their family, equal to any other member. Attesting to this fact was the family photos that Ernest shared. The photos were of Ernest with different family members and friends. Ernest was the only black in the photos and he did not appear shunned or

excluded in any of them. To the contrary, two of the pictures stand out. One was a picture of a 15-yr. old Ernest and his brother, belly-to-belly and lovingly embracing. The other was with his two sisters, one sitting next to him and the other on his lap. These photos appeared quite a contrast to the racial tension that was throughout most of America, and the tension that Ernest would soon experience.

At 17, Ernest felt the call of his nation and he headed back to the states to join the war effort. World War II was under way as Ernest joined the United States Marine Corps. "I heard they were the best and I wanted to be one of them, one of the best." However, the Marine Corps turned out to be a culture shock in the grandest way and the start to many years of direct racism that would extend past Ernest's tour of duty. At that time the Armed Forces were still segregated. The blacks had their own boot camp in the area of what is now known as Camp Lejune, N.C. and the whites had a separate boot camp in Parris Island, S.C. Most people have heard the horror stories of Marine Corps boot camps, but imagine being a black man at boot camp in the south run by white drill instructors and officers *before* the civil rights movement. "You're a nigger aren't you?!" "Yes sir!" "You a darky?!" "Yes, sir!" So went the continuous barrage of racist comments, questions, and the expected, respectful responses. In detail Ernest recalled the pickle barrels that they had to stand on with outstretched arms supporting water filled buckets. "You stood for hours enduring the pain for fear that the consequences of dropping your arms would be worse than the pain of holding them up." It was "basic training," both for war and for the discrimination that would continue throughout Ernest's life.

At first the discrimination was from both sides. Obviously the whites did not accept Ernest, but neither did the blacks embrace him. He did not sound like one of them after spending the prior 7 years in Canada. Ernest would not gain complete acceptance from his fellow black

marines until later. After boot camp Ernest was assigned to the depot or support division and often had to drive a truck to central laundry, which was in Cherry Point, N.C. But being a white Marine Corps base a black man did not dare get out of the truck. “You backed up to the dock, they unloaded and loaded the truck, and then you got the hell out of there.” “You didn’t go on any white base without having a white guard with you.” However, as Ernest’s unit started their travels abroad it was a similar incident that gained Ernest’s acceptance with the other black marines. His unit was stuck on a base in Hawaii while they waited on orders. It was during this period while in their quarters hut one morning that some white marines took handfuls of rocks and threw them onto the tin roof exclaiming, “What time you think those niggers get up?!” Ernest was the first one out of the quarters hut and running to confront the harassment he questioned the small group of white marines, “Which one of you wants to know what time us niggers get up?” It was Ernest’s stand down of the opposition that created a turn around. Because at that point the black marines realized he was not an outsider but one of them. Unfortunately, although his fellow black marines may have accepted him, the blacks were still not accepted by anyone else. Even more of a reminder of the segregation than the separation of the blacks and whites on bases was the fact that no black men could attain a rank higher than a Staff Sergeant (E-6) or Gunnery Sgt. (E-7). White men held all positions of higher authority. Unfortunately, it was not just rank that the Marine Corps made sure blacks could not attain, but Ernest recalled, with frustration, that during the war they would be sent as a unit to a “secure” island. But upon arrival they would find that the island was not secure and as Ernest explained it, “Them dirty suckers did that because if one of us got wounded when it wasn’t secure they would have to give us a medal. But if we were wounded on a secure island, it was just labeled an accident.”

But the worst injustice for Ernest and his unit happened on their long trip home after their tour of duty in the war. They were on a train traveling from Camp Pendelton, CA to home. The train had a dinner car but had run out of food on the long cross continental trip. When they pulled into the train station in Florence, S.C. one mid-morning they exited the train tired and hungry, but were welcomed by a large banner on the train station that read, “No Niggers Allowed”. Ernest remembers them deciding, “heck with this, we’re going in.” Needless to say they were not welcomed and a fight ensued. “We busted up the joint a little and then some of them hillbillies showed up with shot guns and hunting rifles, so some of our boys got their machine guns and rifles off the train.” Their they were in a stand-off when their white commanding officer told them to put down their weapons and let the local authorities take them to jail, and he would be back later to get them out. Ernest chuckled as he remembered there were too many of them for the jail, so they were corralled into a school gymnasium. There they waited while locals with shotguns circled them like vultures. That evening their commanding officer returned and they quickly got back on their train and headed home. They still had not got anything to eat but neither did they hear any more about the incident again. Ernest states, “what made it so bad was that we had just got done fighting for them and this is how they treat us.” Ernest reflected more on the Marine Corps before moving onto his experiences in baseball. But maybe the most passionate statement was when Ernest summed up his experiences in the Marine Corps, shaking a clenched fist, “They tried to break us, but they couldn’t! We made it!”

After getting out of the Marine Corps, it wasn’t long before Ernest’s athletic ability and strong throwing arm were discovered by the Baltimore Elite Giants, a Negro National League team that signed him up in 1946. But even the Great American Past-time was segregated. With all the traveling involved in baseball, their welcome was different in each town. Negro National

League teams played league games on the weekend, but would play local black or white teams during the week to help raise money. But it was these weekday games that were tough. Some times they had to stay with black families because there were no hotels or at least a hotel that accepted blacks. Many times they were not allowed to use the locker rooms or go into the local restaurants. When we think of pro-sport teams today, it seems strange to realize that at times Ernest and his team had to live on bologna sandwiches. One of the most frustrating experiences for Ernest in baseball came at a restaurant in Mississippi. Certain areas were becoming desegregated, but the arms of whites were not opening as quickly as doors were. As the team was preparing to leave the restaurant they witnessed the staff breaking and throwing away every dish the team had used.

Sadly, Ernest's story of discrimination did not end with the changes in the 40's, 50's, and 60's, but instead continues to this day. Certainly the method has changed but the message has not. The aggression now comes in a more passive form. Ernest is aware when he does not get waited on as quickly as a white person, or even his presence acknowledged. As an older man Ernest still keeps fit, and goes to work-out frequently at the same location. But, he states it is not uncommon for him to walk into the locker room and for the white men to not acknowledge his presence until he speaks to them.

With the dramatic changes Ernest has been a part of and witnessed in his life I had to know. What is the future? Is there a resolution to racism and discrimination? Is it possible? Ernest was not rattled by my questions and answered with the wisdom of an Aristotle. His philosophy is for parents and adults to keep their opinions and prejudices out of the children's way and just let kids do what kids do. Because prejudice and racism definitely stem from nurture and not nature. This is a man who speaks from experience of nonprejudicial parents and

spending countless hours at schools and in other settings sharing his life experiences with children of all ages.

Ernest is a man whom has had to endure extreme amounts and acts of prejudice. But, his impressiveness is not in his ability to respond but his ability to not respond. Ernest has always viewed himself as equal and worthy to any person and for him to respond to prejudice and racism with any thing less then love would be lowering himself to the level of ignorance of the other individual. The question is, as a black man is he going to accept his view and opinion of himself or the opinions and views of others. What is his view? He never needs to work hard to prove himself equal to a white man, but respects himself as equal already. The great thing about my interview with Ernest Burke was that I went to learn about a man. And in the process I not only learned about the man being interviewed but the man conducting the interview as well.