

Rashomon in Mississippi

How Americans developed separate and unequal memories of race

BY MICHAEL HUDSON

THEY GREW UP AROUND DREW, Mississippi, a little “walk-everywhere kind of town” of perhaps 2,000 people surrounded by fields of cotton and soybeans. They came of age in the 1960s, chopped cotton under the same Delta sun, went to the same pep rallies, sat next to each other in class.

But in many ways Archie Manning and Ruth Carter Whittle grew up worlds apart—and to this day they’re separated by race-shadowed, irreconcilable memories. He remembers Drew as a great place to grow up, a place where people didn’t lock their doors and the police force consisted of a “day man” and a “night man,” a department “more ‘Andy of Mayberry’ than ‘NYPD Blue.’” The future pro football star knew “separate but equal” wasn’t equal, but he never detected much animosity between the races.

She remembers a different Drew.

From the vantage of her family’s share-cropper cabin outside town, Drew seemed frightening. She was afraid to be on the same sidewalk with those town cops. After she and her siblings broke the color line at Drew High School, classmates called them “niggers,” smacked them in the head with spitballs and chalk, or treated them with silent disdain.

Memory is an imperfect thing, especially when it comes to race relations. Many blacks and whites find themselves at odds when they try to make sense of their shared histories. Denial, myth-making, and divergent experiences help keep blacks and whites stuck in discordant, misremembered pasts.

Manning: A Father, His Sons, And A Football Legacy, is not a book about race. It’s an often-inspiring memoir of a half-century of family and football—the story of quarterback legend Archie Manning and his football playing sons, including Indianapolis Colts phenom Peyton, one of the National Football League’s best

young quarterbacks.

Archie Manning grew up in Mississippi, however, and race relations were a big enough issue in his mind that he devotes a good part of a chapter to the subject. The book, co-authored by Archie, Peyton, and journalist John Underwood, provides a glimpse at how one Southerner has grappled with the issue of race in a changing world.

Archie Manning starts by saying he’s “Old South” and proud of it, but he’s no bigot. He recalls black friends he made over the years. He says blacks “were the ones hurt the most by segregation” and integration was “right and inevitable.”

But his memory seems dimmer when it comes to how hard blacks had to fight to end Jim Crow and how much they suffered for their efforts. When he looks back in anger, it’s not at the hurts inflicted upon blacks, but at the wrongs inflicted upon him as a white Southerner.

In one passage, he recalls an NFL teammate who complained Manning was playing favorites, throwing more passes to whites than blacks. Manning blew up at the guy: “I was so mad because I was so

right and felt so wronged.”

Manning also writes about the Carter family. It was in 1965 that seven Carter children—from first grade through 11th—broke the color line at Drew’s public schools. Manning says he had no problem with the family’s racial trailblazing, but years later “the oldest girl in that family did something that still hurts.” It was 1971. He had just completed his last season at Ole Miss and was headed for the NFL’s New Orleans Saints. Drew invited him back for an “Archie Manning Day.”

The marching band from the then mostly black Drew High had been asked to perform. But, Manning says, the band refused, and the director told him Ruth Carter was behind it, claiming Manning had been ugly to her their senior year. “There was no truth in it,” Manning writes. “I was class president, I was valedictorian, and I considered myself a leader, and that would have been

Under review...

**MANNING:
A Father, His Sons, And a
Football Legacy**
by Archie Manning, Peyton
Manning, and John
Underwood
HarperCollins, \$24.00

**ME AND HANK:
A Boy and His Hero,
Twenty-Five Years Later**
by Sandy Tolan
Free Press, \$24.00

MICHAEL HUDSON, a reporter with THE ROANOKE (VA.) TIMES, is working on a book about the history of race and sports.

the polar opposite of what I would have done. That entire year we had had nothing close to an 'incident' at Drew High. There were no KKK demonstrations, no scenes, no clashes. This girl didn't need defending over anything. I admit I have no absolute way of knowing if anybody ever said anything mean or derogatory to her, but I damn sure didn't."

Manning doesn't mention the offending classmate by name, but when I read this passage, I immediately knew he was talking about the Carters. A few years ago, I'd read a book about their story, *Silver Rights*, and interviewed the author, Constance Curry, and the family matriarch, Mae Bertha Carter. So I knew the Carters' account of their years at Drew High differed from the placid picture Manning paints—I knew that the girl who "didn't need defending over anything" went through hell in high school.

From Curry's book, I learned that after Mae Bertha Carter defied everyone by enrolling her children in white schools, someone sprayed bullets through their home. The overseer of the plantation where the family sharecropped demanded that she withdraw her children from school. She refused, and the family was boot-ed off the land. The first day of school, the children were greeted by white hecklers who shook their fists and yelled: "Get back to your own schools, niggers."

I called Curry, who called Ruth Carter Whittle in Ohio. When a younger sibling, Gloria Carter Dickerson, visited from Michigan, the two sisters went to a bookstore, read Manning's book and shook their heads in anger. It was as if all they'd suffered had been erased from memory.

Ruth had felt the same way in 1981, when a *Sports Illustrated* profile of Manning had quoted a teacher who suggested the Carters had suffered no harassment; they "were simply ignored." Three weeks later, the magazine published a letter from Ruth asserting she could have told a different story had anyone bothered to interview her about her experiences.

When I talked to her on the phone recently, Ruth told me she'd had nothing to do with the band incident, and she'd never claimed Manning had said mean things to her. Actually, she explained, he did not speak to her in the two years they went to the tiny school together. She sat beside him in one class, she said, and "it was just like I wasn't there—like I was the chair."

That made him no different from the rest of her classmates, she said, but it seemed strange to her that a student who professed to be a leader wouldn't speak to a classmate, especially one who was being so obviously ostracized by her peers. (In the *Sports Illustrated* piece, Manning said, "I talked to her once or twice, but I

wouldn't say I went out of my way to be friendly to her.")

Ruth's sister Gloria told me the worst days at Drew High were when classes were canceled and they had to go to the gym for pep rallies, where students were encouraged to get rowdy. "That was their time to really start talking about 'nigger this' and 'nigger that,' and 'you stink,' and 'nigger get out of the way,'" Gloria said. For years after, she would wake up sobbing from nightmares about Drew High.

It was Gloria—not Ruth—who caused the stir before "Archie Manning Day." By Ruth's senior year, almost all the whites in the school had fled to a private whites-only academy. For the first time, Gloria felt safe enough to participate in extracurricular activities. She joined the band. But when she was asked to play for Manning, she refused. She felt he was "part of the group. I didn't see him come forward and try to be friendly. And he didn't try to stop anyone from doing those things."

She believed she had no reason to honor him. "I didn't go out and protest," she said. "I just stayed home." Two friends joined her, she said, but the band *did* play at the event. The ceremony went off grandly, with townsfolk presenting Manning with a hulking Lincoln Mark III. And Gloria and her friends? They paid for their decision, she recalled. They were kicked out of the band.

I called Manning at his office in New Orleans and explained the Carter family's concerns about his book. He said diplomatically that he wouldn't argue with their recollections. "I've probably forgotten a lot of things." He recalls civil rights flashpoints at other places around the South, he said, but not in his school or his hometown. He was consumed with sports at the time, and integration controversies weren't something his parents discussed at the dinner table.

Manning's co-author, Underwood, said it's unfair to harp on decades-old events to suggest Manning is racially insensitive. Manning and the Carters simply remember those years through "totally different prisms, totally different perspectives," Underwood said.

I told Underwood I wasn't arguing that Manning is racist. I take Manning at his word that he is dedicated to racial equality. But it makes it all the more disquieting that someone who believes as he does would remember integration in his hometown (and in college sports in the Deep South) as a relatively smooth, almost painless process—no problems, no incidents, no big deal.

It reminded me of another book I'd read recently: Sandy Tolan's *Me and Hank: A Boy and His Hero, Twenty-Five Years Later* is the story of another great athlete, Hank Aaron, the man who had the gall to take on white America's most cherished sports hero by breaking Babe

Ruth's home-run record.

Aaron came under intense scrutiny in the early 1970s as he closed in on the magic number of 714. In less than two years, he received 930,000 pieces of mail. Only American presidents have received more in a comparable period of time. Early on, the bulk of the correspondence snarled with racism:

"Dear Henry Aaron, how about some sickle cell anemia, Hank?

"Niggers are the same as apes and have the morals of an alley cat and are Parasites and the Scum of the Earth. You are not going to break this record established by the great Babe Ruth if I can help it. My gun is watching you."

Callers threatened to kidnap his children. The FBI guarded his oldest daughter at college in Nashville. "This is just the way things are for black people in America," Hank told the press. "It's something you battle all your life. If I was white, all America would be proud of me."

Yet when Tolan interviewed people about their memories of the home run chase, a troublesome split emerged. Blacks vividly recalled the hate mail and death threats. With a few exceptions, whites could only vaguely recollect the sense Aaron was a marked, despised man. "You know, I really didn't pay much attention to a whole lot of stuff like that," former Atlanta Braves pitcher Phil Niekro said. "I figured baseball was something where stuff like that didn't happen."

Historical context is often lacking when Americans look back at painful moments in the battle against racism. The retained story line is pretty simple: Sure, racism was bad, but a few brave men like the Rev. Martin Luther King and baseball's Jackie Robinson stood for justice, fought a courageous but brief battle against bigotry, and walls came tumbling down. No problem, no big deal.

From the distance of time, segregation seems so undeniably stupid and evil, it's hard to grasp its reality. It's easier to soften the memories, to recall the heroes in warm sepia tones, and to forget the ugly confrontations and decades of struggle it took to end American apartheid. Archie Manning, for example, recalls integration in Drew this way:

"The one incident I remember as a forerunner involved a group of white college kids who came to town one summer to organize Drew's blacks into exercising their voting rights. Drew didn't look too favorably on being invaded, likening it to carpetbagging, and the college kids were longhairs we called "beatniks" in those

days, but as controversies go it really wasn't much. No fights, no arrests."

But integration in Manning's hometown did not come as peacefully as Manning recalls. The "incident" Manning cites was the Freedom Summer campaign, a massive, multi-racial effort to support homegrown activists who were taking on Jim Crow. Blacks weren't trying to exercise already existing rights; they were trying to

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win back rights that had been taken from them through violence, legal obstacles, and economic retribution.

By early 1965, after years of struggle, just 155 blacks were registered to vote in Sunflower, Manning's home county—1.1 percent of eligible black adults. Eighty percent of whites were registered; they didn't give up their dominance without a fight.

During the summer of 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council recorded several confrontations in Drew, including voter registration volunteers being confronted by gun-toting whites and dozens of civil rights workers getting arrested for "distributing literature without a permit" or "willfully and unlawfully using the sidewalks." Across Mississippi, churches were torched, homes were firebombed, and citizens were arrested, beaten, and murdered for challenging segregation. That doesn't mean that all white Mississippians were cross-burning bigots. But the race baiters did control the state, and few local whites were willing to challenge them.

Ultimately it was local blacks—not out-of-state whites—who turned the tide in Mississippi. Ruth Carter Whittle and a sister, Naomi Carter Granberry, were among 482 people arrested at a demonstration in Jackson, the state capital, during the summer of 1965. They were herded into makeshift jails at the state fairgrounds forced to sleep on bare mattresses, which were taken away at 5:30 a.m. The sisters say police used billy clubs to beat many detainees, especially young men with beards, who were told: "We'll have no damned Malcolm X around here."

As I paged back and forth between *Manning* and *Silver Rights*, I was struck by sadness.

Archie Manning was a small-town kid who graduated first in his class by sheer hard work, endured his

father's suicide, suffered through injuries and defeats to become a football legend, then passed his work ethic on to his children.

Matthew and Mae Bertha Carter overcame poverty and a lack of education to raise 13 children—five of whom were forced to attend segregated schools, and eight of whom overcame the odds to integrate their hometown's school system. Before they died, the parents saw seven of their children graduate from Archie Manning's alma mater, the University of Mississippi.

The Mannings and the Carters are two great American stories, two Southern families with much in com-

mon. But they remain divided.

Archie Manning writes that "even the most avowed integrationist would agree that you can't always get from A to Z right now. That you have to go through B, C, D, et cetera, et cetera, to reach the level of empathy needed."

He's right. Putting our dark racial past behind isn't something that can be done overnight. But white Americans have to realize that the first step to healing is acknowledging that segregation wasn't just a theoretical wrong, that real people suffered real pain—and that many of the wounds have yet to heal. ●

The Washington Monthly Journalism Award

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ED HILTON

**NASCAR Idles While Drivers Die: Racing Officials Fail To Mandate
Lifesaving Device**

Orlando Sentinel, February 11, 2001

A six-month investigation into the complacent attitudes inside the NASCAR organization regarding driver safety, published one week before Dale Earnhardt's death. Unlike Formula One, Champion Auto Racing, and the Indy Racing League, NASCAR has repeatedly failed to participate in researching safety devices, enforcing safety precautions that are now standard on other race tracks, or disclosing the details of efforts they claim to be making to improve their own safety record. Chillingly, Earnhardt stood virtually alone inside the organization as an advocate for improving safety measures.

AMY WALDMAN

An American Block: Life on 129th Street

The New York Times, February 18-21, 2001

A series of three articles takes readers back to a Harlem neighborhood described by the Times in 1994 as a place where "hope is swallowed by decay." In 2001, Waldman encounters the same block on 129th Street transformed by the economic boom and a surge of urban renewal. But along with vast decreases in crime and landscape improvements, have come rising rents and the entrenchment of multiculturalism on a historically black neighborhood. The new and old residents are now being forced to grapple with their prejudices and disparate hopes for the neighborhood's future.

BOB DAVIS

**Crunch Time: President Owes a Lot to Two Economists You've Never Heard Of:
Bush's Debt to CBO Shows Impact of the Forecasts from an Obscure Agency**

The Wall Street Journal, February 27, 2001

Davis describes the incredible power two under-the-radar economists at the Congressional Budget Office, Robert Dennis and John Petterson, have to shape the national agenda through their economic growth forecasts. Their current estimate of economy's growth at 3.0 percent greatly strengthened President Bush's budget claims, even though, as Davis points out, the CBO analysts are frequently wrong.

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