

## The Jim Crow South

Former slaves and their children had little assurance that their post-Civil War freedoms would stick. By the 1890s, a system of laws and regulations commonly referred to as *Jim Crow* had emerged; by 1910, every state of the former Confederacy had upheld this legalized segregation and disenfranchisement. Most scholars believe the term originated around 1830, when a white minstrel performer blackened his face, danced a jig, and sang the lyrics to the song "Jump Jim Crow." At first the word was synonymous with such terms as black, colored, or Negro, but it later became attached to this specific arsenal of repressive laws.

During the Jim Crow era, state and local officials instituted curfews for blacks and posted "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs on parks, schools, hotels, water fountains, restrooms, and all modes of transportation. Laws against miscegenation or "race-mixing" deemed all marriages between white and black people not only void but illegal. Almost as bad as the injustice of Jim Crow was the inconsistency with which law enforcement applied it. Backtalk would rate a laugh in one town, and a lynching just over the county line.

Though violence used to subjugate blacks was nothing new, its character changed under Jim Crow. Southern white supremacist groups like the Klu Klux Klan reached a membership of six million. Mob violence was encouraged. Torture became a public spectacle. White families brought their children as witnesses to lynchings, and vendors hawked the body parts of victims as souvenirs. Between 1889 and 1930, over 3,700 men and women were reported lynched in the United States, many for challenging Jim Crow.

All this anger and fear led to the notorious trials of the "Scottsboro Boys," an ordeal of sensational convictions, reversals, and retrials for nine young African American men unjustly accused of raping two white women on a train from Tennessee to Alabama.

Juries composed exclusively of white men ignored clear evidence that the men had not touched the women. As in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a black man charged with raping a white woman was not accorded the usual presumption of innocence. In January of 1932, the Alabama Supreme Court affirmed seven out of eight death sentences against the adult defendants. A central figure in the case was an Atticus-like judge, James E. Horton, a member of the Alabama Bar who eventually defied public sentiment to overturn a guilty verdict.

Despite these and many more injustices, black Americans found ingenious ways to endure and resist. Education, religion, and music became their solace and salvation until, in the organized political action of the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow's harsh music finally began to fade.