Through My Grandmother’s Eyes

Shakuan Smith
HIS 142
Dr. Rose Stremlau
I took a history class during my first year spring titled, *The United States Since 1877*. In this class, we were tasked to delve into our family history, which was a part of a project divided into two essays. The first essay had two objectives: to detail the life of an older relative and to attempt to discover older ancestors within our respective family trees. For the project, we were required to bring the oldest family photo that we could find. The photo would serve as a centerpiece for an essay where we would detail the life of the family member depicted. We compiled details through direct interviews (if the person was still alive) or with other family members. Also, if possible, that family member was asked to supply information about our family ancestors, so we could have names and places that would be beneficial for the family ancestral search. Already equipped with pertinent information, I was able to successfully uncover my family ancestral lineage through census databases. Surprisingly, my research allowed me to discover my maternal great-great-great-grandmother, Mavers Wallace, born in 1863. The second essay, which is included below, required us to contextualize the life of the family member depicted in the photo through primary sources (newspapers) detailing the sociopolitical climate of that respective time.

The picture I selected is a black and white childhood photo from 1963. The left side is serrated with tears and rips with a small sliver missing from the side of the photo. A guileless child sits in the center of the photo, surrounded by the weathered edges, smirking at the camera. The child in the picture is my maternal grandma, Maggie Smith, at age 3. Her innocence is captured during a time of immense social and political tension. My Grandma is someone very important to me as she helped raise me, along with my mother. I lived with my grandma for 7 years and I can remember growing up and hearing snippets about her childhood, in which the way she depicted seemed to be enjoyable. She is always prideful about coming from
Portageville, an extremely small town in the “bootheel” of Southern Missouri. Yet, in the back of my mind, I could only imagine how difficult it must have been growing up in Southern rural Missouri during the tumultuous sixties. It was not until I conducted the interviews for the first essay that my Grandma revealed the obvious, which is that she faced racism and discrimination. She stated the difficulty of being constantly dehumanized and denigrated. My grandma revealed how she was not allowed to eat inside restaurants, constantly followed in stores, being taught by prejudiced teachers, and scammed for money. The fact that my Grandma and other African-Americans lived through constant degradation attests to their perseverance and strength, which I deeply admire. However, for this paper, I will focus on the year 1963, which is around the time the picture was taken and before she was old enough to remember her personal experiences.

I realized when starting this paper that the research would be somewhat difficult because of the constraints. My grandma grew up in a smaller rural town of fewer than 2,000 people, so I knew documentation through newspapers would be a hassle to discover. I originally searched for Portageville news stories using ProQuest; however, most of my results were irrelevant civil matters such as house fires or car accidents. This led to me to expand my research to the county that includes Portageville; New Madrid Country. I had slightly better luck, but all the towns within this county are very small as well, thus the news was also limited. I then moved on to the closest towns, such as Hayti, a town that is 15 miles away and also the birthplace of my mom. I also used a database under the Library of Congress that holds chronicles of historic newspapers to search these smaller towns. My next idea was to search the nearest large town or city, which happens to be Cape Girardeau, which is about 60 miles away. I had better luck but this still was not enough, so I finally decided to search the entire state during the year 1963 to complete my
research. Most of my newspaper stories came from prominent newspapers in big cities (i.e., The New York Times) covering stories that took place in small-town Missouri.

Throughout my research, I noticed a trend, one that I expected, of stories centered on the Civil Rights movements and the legal actions that came along with it. The 1960’s was a boisterous era as it was the pinnacle of the Civil Rights era. Decades of systemic discrimination, unjustified violence, and unfair treatment boiled over which finally led to a crossroads. African-Americans and other marginalized citizens revolted against the status quo of being subservient and treated as second-rate citizens. This was a striking parallel to the ideological battle between the Soviet Union and the United States, also known as the Cold War. Americans viewed the communist regime of the Soviets being anti-democratic and antithetical to freedom, yet simultaneously the U.S. systematically discriminated against minorities and prevented them from having true freedom. This was a hypocrisy that many Americans felt needed to be addressed, and the call to action became even more robust.

The Civil Rights movement was boosted by demonstrations that led to tangible change. Famous protests and marches were the highlights of this period. Organizations, such as the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, and SNCC were pioneers of the movement. They were spearheaded by vociferous leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, Whitney Young Jr., and Ella Baker. Strategic operations were organized by these leaders to disseminate the rebellion in many different avenues. The Greensboro sit-ins and the Freedom Rides were some of the various ideas that became popular and resulted in change and awareness. The Woolworth’s was eventually integrated and after the KKK firebombed of one the buses, national attention was received from the atrocity. One of the most famous examples of this is the Montgomery Bus Boycott after Rosa Park’s removal from the bus led to the integration of the
Montgomery Public Transit system. As seen, demonstrations by activists led to palpable change either legally or morally among the mainstream.

The Civil Rights movement was also “fought” in the courts. A series of high profiled cases and monumental Supreme Court decisions invigorated the movement and added fuel to the activists’ fire to continue fighting. Brown v. Board was a historic decision in 1954 that struck down the concept of “separate but equal” in public education. The rollout, however, was not hastily implemented and there was significant backlash. Some states took stances to halt the decision and sometimes required later court trials to re-litigate. When searching for newspaper stories, I found several articles that detailed the “Bootheel Area Schools”. In Cape Girardeau, Missouri a petition was filed by the NAACP on the behalf of twelve African-Americans after the school system was accused of only hiring Black employees at the “negro elementary” and whites in the “white school”. It was also stated that the “district board has refused to permit even one Negro Child to attend the white school”. In the same city, a lawsuit was filed that alleged the “two-room Negro school…is substantially inferior…to an all-white elementary school”. Another article talked about “Missouri Schools ordered to integrate” after an “interracial team of the NAACP lawyers” brought a case that proved “the Board of Education…not giving Negro students educational opportunities guaranteed to them under the Constitution”. In the same article, it was mentioned that NAACP was “prepared to push for similar victories in…Hayti and other Missouri communities that have failed to comply with the Supreme Court decision”. My grandma was a child when these court cases were taking place, however, she experienced the

1 *Chicago Daily Defender*.
5 Ibid.
residual effects. By the time she went to primary and secondary school in the late 60’s and early 70’s, her schools were integrated after the previous communities that withheld finally lost their legal battles.

Besides integration, voting was another primary issue fought. After slavery was abolished, the 15\textsuperscript{th} amendment was passed to allow African American men to vote. However, soon after there were systemic efforts to undermine this decision. The preventive legislations that perpetuated discrimination would come to be known as the Black Codes or Jim Crow. The grandfather clause, literacy test, and poll taxes were the intentional efforts to disenfranchise Black voters. By the time of the Civil Rights movement, these efforts were widely known and being challenged. States began to ban these discriminatory laws, and by 1963 Missouri became the 34\textsuperscript{th} state to ratify the poll tax ban.\textsuperscript{6} This is about two years before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which shows that with this issue, the efforts of the movement were pushing the states to act faster than the federal government.

Even with some progress that was being made, there were efforts to deliberately counteract the movement. Citizens and government officials alike were complicit in thwarting the progress. The KKK was the most controversial due to their violent and heinous vigilante tactics. They were involved in many clashes with other citizens and protestors such as the “Battle of the Maxton Field.” It was their goal to intimidate and to obstruct any headway. They would block voters from entering booths, impede marches, or kidnap and lynch individuals. State legislators could also be obstructionist when it came to advancements of laws in favor of the Civil Rights movement. As mentioned earlier, certain towns, such as my mom’s birthplace Hayti, had school board members that were still implementing segregation. I came across an

interesting article that discussed an “Equality Bill” that “died” in the Missouri State Legislature and was scheduled to reappear in 1965. The bill would have “ended discrimination in public accommodations in Missouri but the “slowdown” was from the “[Missouri State] Senate reluctance to act”. Yet, not too long after came the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which ended discrimination in public accommodations. Nonetheless, my grandma recalled that growing up she was not welcomed in certain places still, whether it was being followed around or being forbidden to eat indoors at a restaurant. This shows that despite federal and state mandates, White citizens may not have been compliant or prepared to accept the rapidly changing laws because they are used to the “old ways” that upheld the systemic structures of racism.

It honestly pains me to know that my grandma had to endure rampant racism, but her experience reflects her resilience that I come to know she possesses. From conducting my research for the first essay, I discovered my distant relatives resided in Tennessee and Arkansas, therefore they were also experiencing the same vicious racism prevalent in the South. Unlike my grandma, who was born during the moral battle, my ancestors actually had to live amidst it before the moral and legal victories of the Civil Rights movement liberated them from much of the oppressive grips of systemic racism. Although, today there are still vestigial structures remaining that continue to perpetuate racism which needs to be vehemently addressed, it is nowhere near the magnitude of the past. I could not begin to imagine the hardships and tribulations my ancestors had to endure. Heading into this project I had my reservations about exploring my family history, aware of the reprehensible treatment my people received. I knew it would infuriate me to closely examine the deplorable atmosphere of this time, especially when it directly affects my loved ones. Though, as I continued along with the research, I realized It was

\[7 \textit{New York Times}, \text{July 2, 1963.}\]
refreshing and uplifting to learn more about my family past and quite intriguing to place direct historical context to them. Overall, completing these two essays have left me with a greater appreciation of my family and my Black identity, showing how strength and tenacity are a part of my DNA.
Works Cited


Chicago Daily Defender. April-May 1963. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

   http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89066652/.