

Exclusive Material
By Gerald A. Archambeau

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I feel very strongly about my adopted country Canada today, and by sharing my life story I hope to give something back to a country that helped me to survive in a sometimes hostile world. My autobiography is written from the heart and to the best of my memory. In it I try to point the way for people to have better attitudes in a changing Canadian society.

As a person, but primarily as a human being, I have never cloaked myself in my skin color or my race. The motto of Jamaica, where I was born, is “Out of Many One People.” Not all Jamaicans are black and speak patois. Coming from a mixed racial and cultural background of English, French, African and aboriginal Indian (from the San-Blas tribes that live on islands off the coast of Panama) I know all too well the damage that can be done by bad behavior and attitudes towards people of different races and skin color; this was evident within my own family. As a child, these attitudes had a profound effect on my own life, and it took me many years to realize that something was wrong.

After being sent to Canada in 1947 to start a new life with my mother as a thirteen year old boy, I was put out to work by my stepfather on the second day after my arrival in Montreal. As I had day jobs, I attended night school in order to finish my high school education; this was only after my mother’s insistence to my stepfather. Eventually, however, I was able to break new ground as an early black immigrant in the 1940’s – as few or no other blacks in those days attempted to apply for jobs, because of non-acceptance.

I worked in a variety of jobs as a young fellow. I started as a newspaper boy and then I applied and was hired as a bonded Western Union Messenger, in the Wall Street of downtown Montreal. I was also the first black Naval Sea Cadet in the Rosemount Division of Montreal. Eventually, I was thrown out of my so-called “family” home in Montreal by my stepfather, who thought that I should be making more money for my keep, after hearing that plumbers made a lot of money.

I was sent to the Montreal Building Trades Training Center to train in plumbing, steam fitting and welding as an apprentice for 6 months. The apprentice did most of the hard work in the trade, so I would come home quite dirty with my lunch pan in hand only to be laughed at by other black kids in the area that were all in school. I was eventually told by an elder to try the railways, CPR or the CNR. As it was one of the few good jobs open to black men at that time in Canada and offered job security to the black men who immigrated to Canada. In those years, most immigrants were pigeonholed in different jobs, and speaking proper English was an advantage. I watched closely the developments of the Civil Right movements in the US.

I always had a love of trains and rail travel as a boy in Jamaica, and no other job would give me the opportunity to see this great country from coast to coast as my job of Sleeping Car Porter did. I met and greeted people from every part of Canada on both of Canada’s great railways. I was awed by the drive and courage of the people who took on the task of taming this vast land with its great rivers and lakes and varied terrain, and its challenging weather conditions.

For me working for the railway was an opportunity to improve myself, a stepping stone that

allowed me to watch Canadians grow and develop a better social attitude toward people of color that they met when traveling by train. Many other immigrants of different backgrounds and cultures were also pouring into the country. Having a great love for jazz music I was impressed by the many black jazz musicians who came up from the States in the 1940's and 50's to entertain Montreal's music fans. Montreal had a strong Black Community at that time, because of the headquarters of both major railways being there. After the decline of rail travel in the 1960's I went on to finish my working years in the airline industry, as a Lead Ramp Foreman, and I established the Employees Relations Right & Equity Committee in the I. A. M.A.W. Union at the Airport. I have also never been unemployed in Canada.

I hope my book resounds with Canadians of all races and colors, particularly immigrants who are truly interested in Canada's growth and history. My story shows that newcomers have to be willing to work for what they want to get the opportunity to improve their lives here. This book is easy to read and is focused primarily on human interaction. It will inspire one never to give up hope, because there are always people willing to help. My middle-class background from British colonial Jamaica was a help to me, mainly because of my ability to speak proper English, as well as the historical ties between Canada and Jamaica.