

Book Review

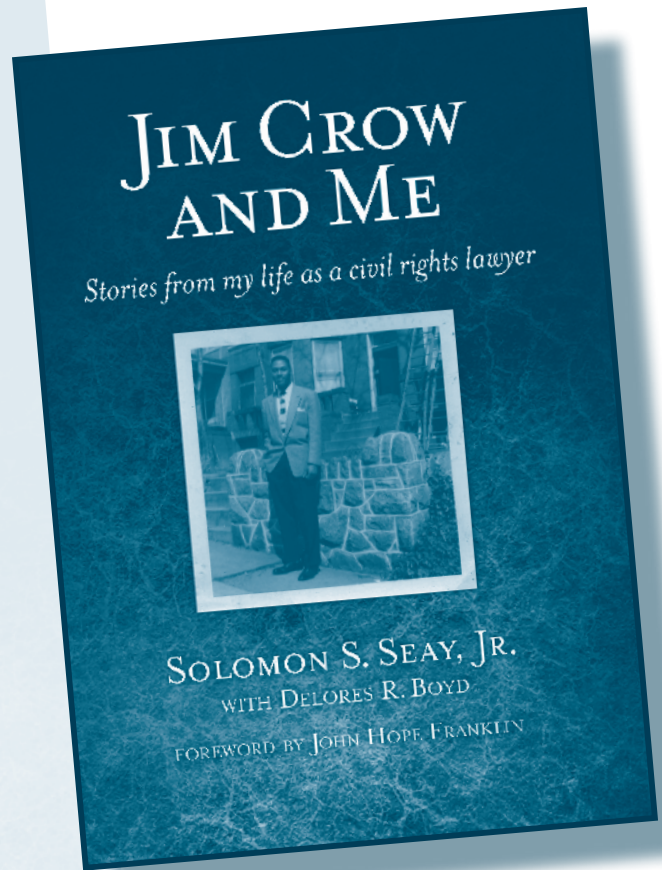
JIM CROW AND ME: STORIES FROM MY LIFE AS A CIVIL RIGHTS LAWYER

JIM CROW AND ME

Stories from my life as a civil rights lawyer

By Phi Boulé Archon Solomon Seay, Jr.
(New South Books, 2008)

Reviewed by Phi Boulé
Archon Paul B. Mohr, Sr.

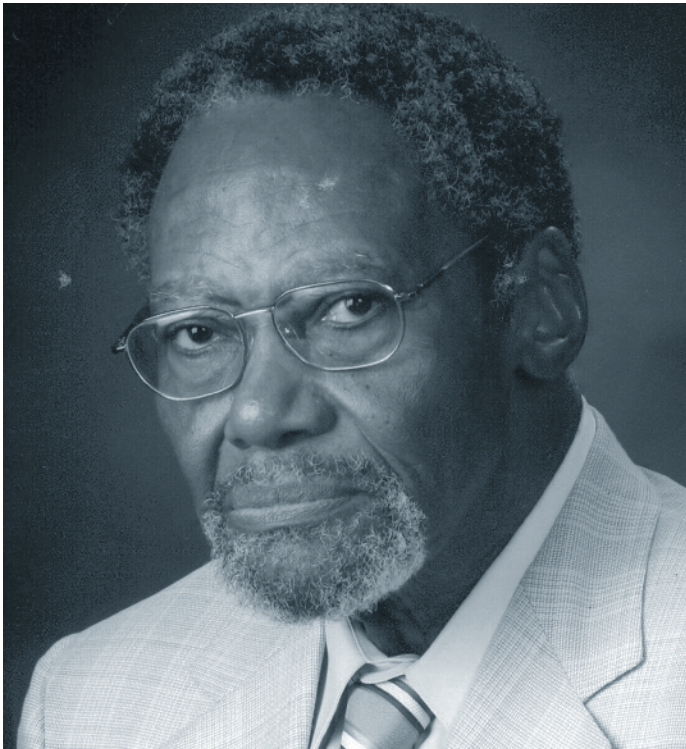


Archon Paul B. Mohr, Sr.

I am a product of a segregated era, a student of the Civil Rights Movement, and I have an insatiable appetite for reading about anyone's journey along the highways and byways of the civil-rights trails. Consequently, I was pleased to read Archon Solomon Seay's much anticipated *Jim Crow and Me: Stories From My Life as a Civil Rights Lawyer*.

The book was presented to the public during an auspicious book-signing ceremony held on November 30 at Alabama State University – auspicious because several members of the legal profession spoke about Archon Seay's historic legal incursions into previously uncontested civil-rights issues.

In addition, the ceremony was a part of a weeklong celebration for ASU's eighty-fifth annual Turkey Day Classic with Tuskegee University. The venue, the John L. Buskey Health Sciences Center, is all the more memorable because Archon Seay was one of the successful attorneys in the *Knight v. Alabama* higher-education desegregation suit, which enabled ASU to construct the facility with funds provided by the state.



Archon Solomon S. Seay, Jr.

Delores R. Boyd, the esteemed lawyer who collaborated in the writing of the book, has said:

A new book honors the courageous commitment of a lawyer who battled segregation in Alabama when its persistent power effectively negated the nation's pledge of liberty and justice for all. . . . Sol Seay started his journey in November 1957, while I adjusted to second grade in a segregated public school just a few miles from his office.

When I returned home with my law degree in 1975, Sol was still fighting to enforce desegregation orders for the state's public schools, colleges, and universities. . . . His tenacious opposition to racial inequality and criminal injustice honored both his schoolteacher mother and his father, a legendary preacher in the leadership vanguard of Montgomery's bus boycott.

It is significant to note that the celebrated historian and author Archon John Hope Franklin wrote the foreword. He said:

As one who lived through the Civil Rights Movement and who participated in it on a limited basis, I am delighted to cheer along the Seay-Boyd collaboration. This is indeed an exciting joint effort, not unlike the project my son and I worked on together when we published my father's autobiography, *My Life and an Era*. It is virtually impossible to portray a period unless one had a special prism through which to view it or, at least, a vantage point from which to consider its momentous events.

For groups that have not yet broken the back of segregation in their lives and experiences, the battle of the Seays and Boyds is an ideal place to begin their own battle against racial segregation in their own lives.

The book's style is simple and direct. There is no exorbitant explication whereby you have to engage in laborious reading to arrive at the authors' intended message. Nor did I find the 152-page book an esoteric dissertation of a multiplicity of legal treatises. In fact, the simplicity and the humanizing vignettes render this book accessible to anyone with at least an eighth-grade reading ability. I use that reading level since newspapers, at one time, were written for the average eighth-grade reader. However, even some of our precocious grandchildren of elementary-school age may be able to enjoy this book.

As I rapaciously read, I was mesmerized by the adroit use of humor, and I assumed that Archon Seay concurred with another famous lawyer, the late Sam J. Ervin, Jr., author of *Humor of a Country Lawyer*, who said, "An ounce of revealing humor often has more power to reveal, convince, or ridicule than do many tons of erudite argument."

Beguiling titles and provocative consequences also permeate Archon Seay's book. For example, the reader would not know at first glance that "They Must Have Been Brothers" is a chapter detailing the desegregation of Oak Park, Montgomery's oldest public park. In 1957 the city received a jolt when Archon Seay submitted a petition to the Parks and Recreation Board requesting an end to the ordinance that denied "colored persons" the right to use the public parks. Ultimately, Archon Seay had to file a class-action lawsuit in the federal court on December 28, 1958.

U.S. District Judge Frank S. Johnson issued an opinion on September 9, 1959, enjoining the city from operating city parks on a segregated basis. However, to avoid desegregating the parks, the city closed them for nine years, until a new city government reopened them on an integrated basis.

In the haste to close the parks and round up all the animals, Archon Seay reports that park employees somehow missed two deer, and he asserted that after nine years, they "were as fat, frisky and free-spirited as ever. Either they had been living in celibacy, or the two must have been brothers."

I can continue an exhaustive incantation, but I would prefer that you corroborate my perceptions by reading the book, which can be purchased through your favorite local or online retailer or from New South Books (toll-free 866-639-7688 or newsouthbooks.com).

Let me conclude by saying that I concur with Judge Delores Boyd, who said, "*Jim Crow and Me* features two dozen of Sol's earliest encounters in lively language which captures the enormous challenges and raw emotions of the struggle for civil rights. . . . Heartbreaking and humorous, infuriating and inspiring, these stories present a reliably revealing reminder of the many 'dangers, toils, and snares' we have overcome."

Archon Solomon S. Seay, Jr., an Alabama native and civil-rights lawyer, received his degrees from Livingstone College and Howard University School of Law. He was married for fifty-three years to the late Archousa Ettra Spencer Seay.

Delores R. Boyd practiced law for twenty-five years in Montgomery before serving as a municipal court judge and United States magistrate judge. Currently a mediator, Boyd is a product of Montgomery's transition in the 1960's from a Jim Crow society.