

The Philatelist

by

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I was a typical fifteen year old, white middle class kid just cruising through life back in 1970. Not a care in the world. My grandparents were taking a trip to Africa and they asked me to join them. We planned to see all the exciting animals the continent had to offer as well as enjoying Victoria Falls and to fish in the Nile River. The adventure began in South Africa. I swam in the Indian Ocean and saw a Zulu dance celebration. Can you imagine my surprise when I saw a topless woman (not from a magazine) in the flesh for the first time!

The whites ruled the country with an “iron fist.” Apartheid laws were in full force. I began to understand what the word meant slowly. Races were separated. You were either white or a “colored.” Asians, Indians, and Mexicans were all considered “colored.” Besides in restaurants, hotels and shops, everywhere there were two sets of public restrooms, benches and drinking fountains. A deluxe stainless steel type with ice cold water for the whites, just a few yards away was a filthy old warm water porcelain one for the “colored.” No waiting at the fountain and a line for the colored fountain. I remember being shocked and confused why were these rules in place and why would people follow them? I recall sitting down and watching to see if anyone used the “wrong” water fountain. No one did!

I have been a philatelist since the age of ten. I was buying, trading and selling hundreds of dollars’ worth of stamps from people all around the globe. One such partner lived in Johannesburg. Since we were on a tour, I informed him ahead of time where he could meet me. We were staying in a fancy hotel. When he showed up, the management refused to let him come up to our room! My grandfather and I came down to the lobby. We couldn’t even eat at the hotel together! My eyes began to open regarding this unbelievable situation only because it directly affected me. My grandfather called the tour director, she immediately appeared at the front desk. After what seemed to be an eternity, an agreement was worked out. My friend could take the freight/colored elevator and be escorted to our room and have food sent up. Then, when he was ready to leave, we would call downstairs and he would be escorted out of the hotel! I recall him speaking good English and he taught me a few “Zulu” or “Swahili” words. He had brought part of his collection and gave me some beautiful sets of South African stamps. I had some recent United States commemorative stamps which he liked. We continued our friendship for a while longer before we went our own ways. After I returned home, I often thought about my experiences there. What if I were born a “colored?” My life would have been very different! I began to notice little examples around me here that I hadn’t seen before. They were always in plain sight, but I was too blind to see them. The United States of America has race problems, but on a smaller scale. Besides enjoying an adventurous vacation, I learned about racism first hand. It would still be twenty years later before Nelson Mandela would be released from prison