

September 29, 2008 Monday 4:00 AM GMT

Blacks, whites show prejudices along racial divide

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SECTION: POLITICAL NEWS

LENGTH: 1575 words

DATELINE: DETROIT

The Classic Creations barber shop sits empty, surrounded by drunks and shuttered storefronts just two blocks from the manicured lawns of Grosse Pointe Park. The contrast isn't lost on LaVar Anthony, a young barber who speaks in riddles of race, class and politics.

"What's already understood," he says without looking up from his Ebony magazine, "don't need to be explained."

But when it comes to race, what is understood? And what is misunderstood?

And how can it be that in 2008 143 years after slavery was abolished, decades after the civil rights movement an AP-Yahoo News poll could find that racial misgivings could cost Sen. Barack Obama the election?

In search of explanations, two Associated Press reporters one black, one white listened to people of both races along Detroit's divides: Alter Road, which separates the city from the tony Grosse Pointes near Lake St. Clair, and 8 Mile Road, the vast northern border between a mostly black Detroit and its mostly white suburbs.

They found people of both races living just blocks apart who nonetheless spoke of each other like strangers. There was suspicion, contempt and yet, for many, a desperate hope that Obama's candidacy might be the final step in America's long path to racial equality. For whites, their support of Democratic economic policies forces them to confront their racial prejudices.

It is here you meet decent people with much in common both sides of 8 Mile Road are populated by blue-collar Democratic families. But many still can't get past their racial differences.

Whites say their neighbors consider blacks to be violent and solely responsible for problems in the black community.

Blacks say many of their own consider whites to be spoiled and condescending.

But nobody well, hardly anybody acknowledged their own prejudices. Both blacks and whites instead blamed "they," a vague and unaccountable surrogate for their own racial attitudes.

"They" are whites who say Obama is unqualified when they really mean he's black.

"They" are blacks who say all whites are bigots.

Anthony knows who "they" are.

"It's understood that there's still a lot of racism that goes on out there," the barber says with a nod out his window and a wisdom beyond his 30 years. "A lot of white people look down on blacks as being lazy or whatever."

Perched on a ragged leather barber chair closest to the door, his knees pulled to his chest, Anthony fixes his gaze on a white journalist visiting his shop. "The stereotype against whites is that they have all the advantages," he says. "They all look down on us. They're snobs."

Four of every 10 white Americans hold at least a partly negative view toward blacks, calling them "lazy," or "violent" or blaming them for the ills of black America, according to the AP-Yahoo poll. Such surveys draw criticism from whites who say the numbers are exaggerated and from blacks who say the numbers are too low.

Let others argue about the math. Listen while the people of Detroit explain.

"My kids have been called nigger babies. ... That was from a white family," says Cherlonda Hampton, a black woman shopping at an outdoor mall on 8 Mile Road.

A petite mother of nine who looks half her 37 years, Hampton says she was harassed by whites while living in suburban Detroit. Feces were smeared on her car. A dead bird was left on a tire. When her child was bitten by a white classmate, the white principal didn't seem to care.

After a year, Hampton returned to her segregated Detroit neighborhood.

This is an apt place to talk about race in America. Detroit's population peaked at nearly 2 million in the 1950s and has been on the decline ever since, dropping to less than 1 million in the latest Census figures. Although racial tension isn't the only cause, the 1967 race riots hastened Detroit's decline and mandatory school busing a decade later stoked unrest.

Coleman A. Young, the city's first black mayor and a racially polarizing figure, said before his 1997 death, "No other city in America, no other city in the Western world has lost the population at that rate. And what's at the root cause of that loss? Economics and race. Or should I say, race and economics?"

White working-class Detroiters fled the city in droves, many to Macomb County and its working-class suburbs north of 8 Mile Road. Detroit's white-flighters were among the first to be dubbed "Reagan Democrats" socially conservative, economically progressive, mostly Catholic voters who abandoned the Democratic Party for the GOP, in part because Republicans exploited their racial fears.

Their children and grandchildren are just as politically independent swing voters in a swing county that both Obama and Republican John McCain hope to carry en route to winning Michigan.

And, like the Reagan Democrats of a generation ago, whites in Macomb County today aren't sure whether to vote their pocketbooks or their prejudices.

"I work at a grocery store and I know a lot of people who are not going to vote for (Obama) because of the racial thing," says Colleen Mullins, a white woman who lives with her husband Daniel in a black neighborhood south of 8 Mile Road.

"I'm hoping Obama wins because he's for the middle class," says Mark Coccia, 48, outside a suburban post office just north of Detroit. He's white, a laid-off factory worker and lifelong Democrat who's about to declare bankruptcy.

An American flag cracks in the wind as Coccia explains that he agrees with Obama's politics and admires the Illinois Democrat. But Coccia can't move beyond race.

"They can't blame the white man," he says of blacks. "Their own color sold them into slavery."

Coccia takes a seat at a picnic table and opines that McCain will die in office if elected and leave a woman, Sarah Palin, as president. "That," he says, "is not right."

Still, he may not back Obama.

"What kind of choice do guys like me have? A black guy or a woman," Coccia says. "It's a lesser of two evils."

He laughs, then turns serious though it is never clear how serious he was all along.

"If Obama was a white candidate and gave the same convention speech," McCain wouldn't stand a chance. "But people are going to judge by the color of his skin."

"Not me, mind you," Coccia hastens to add, "But they will."

There's that pesky "they." You can talk for hours about "they" and "them" along 8 Mile Road. Though race relations are nowhere near as bad as they were in the 1960s, a white person can live for years in the suburbs without ever coming in contact with a black and, conversely, a Detroiter can grow up in the city without getting to know a white suburbanite.

Here, it's unfamiliarity that can breed contempt or at least misunderstanding.

It would be a mistake to dismiss Coccia as a "bigot" or "redneck." such labels turn him into a cartoon, somehow taking the edge off his racial views.

He exists, and so do his views, and they're shared by countless blacks and whites.

"They're everywhere," says Scott Flatt, 37, after stopping his bike just north of 8 Mile Road in Eastpointe to talk about blacks. "But I don't mind blacks as much as some of my neighbors. They're bigots."

Richard Mosely, a 35-year-old engineer working just west of Alter Road in Detroit, sets aside his blueprints to discuss the sentiments of fellow blacks. "They think whites are punks," he says. "I don't, necessarily."

Blacks are more generous in their description of whites than whites are of blacks, according to the AP-Yahoo News poll, but the two races see racial discrimination in starkly different terms.

When asked "how much discrimination against blacks" exists, just 10 percent of whites said "a lot" and 45 percent said "some."

Among blacks, 57 percent said "a lot" and all but a fraction of the rest said "some."

Two blocks from Anthony's barber shop in Detroit, James Turnbull of Grosse Pointe Park takes a break from his morning gardening to show off his prized blooms to a black journalist. Before long, the conversation turns to race, class and politics, subjects the 71-year-old white man encountered as a young man working in poor, black neighborhoods in the Jim Crow South.

While repossessing a family's kitchen appliances, "I would have a, pardon the expression, pickanniny on one arm," he recalls.

In one breath, Turnbull politely uses that long-passe pejorative for a black child. In the next, he says he's been around black politics for a long time and worked for former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, who is black. He believes the poll results showing white Democrats are letting their prejudices affect their vote.

"It does surprise me that they admitted it," he says.

Separated by a short walk from Anthony's barber shop to Turnbull's blooms are two ways of life: Porsches north of Alter Road, busy bus stops to the south; canopied awnings decorating storefronts to the north; bars and steel sliding doors protecting shops to south; white and black drivers pumping gas across the street from one another at unofficially segregated stations.

Not that Turnbull minds. "You live here, you don't see it," he says.

But he does notice a group of young, black men walking west on Jefferson, headed out of the Grosse Pointes into Detroit.

"You see them?" he points. "Some folks would look at them and say, 'There go three potential gang members. They've got the black do-rags. Their pants are sagging. They don't look like your neighborhood kid here.'"

But to him?

Turnbull wipes the soil from soiled hands and thinks for a minute. "I would hope that I would see just a bunch of kids."

LOAD-DATE: September 30, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire

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