



# Video Story Transcript

## Beach Drowning and Race Riots

**By: Storyteller Susan O'Halloran**  
www.SusanOHalloran.com

**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiRaNGCaPrE>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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In the summer, between my freshman and sophomore year of high school, I took a special summer course with a focus on housing. I had an internship where I was assigned to a community organizer named Lee whose specialty was Chicago housing. Now, I guess today we would describe my mentor, Lee, as an aging hippie. He was in his 40s and his long hair in a ponytail went all the way down his back, only the top of this head was shiny clear skin. It's as if the ponytail was pulling the hair right off the top of his head. I'd never seen a man with so much hair, going bald.

Now from Lee, I learned one of the most startling facts I've ever heard up to that point in my life. That the city of Chicago had not always been segregated. Lee mentioned this fact, oh, just casually, one day as if it were common knowledge. We were on our way to go get a pop. Now this shows you I'm from Chicago. Not soda pop or soda but a pop. We are going to Max's Barbershop. Because at the front of Max's shop, he had a vending machine where he sold soft drinks. And Lee opened the door for me and the little bell, to give a little ding-a-ling, announcing our arrival. Lee mentioned again, just kind of casually, you know about Chicago before it was segregated. I liked flipped out. I said, "Chicago was integrated once? When?"

Well, we got our pops. We settled onto the torn leather couch at the front of Max's shop and Lee lowered his voice so as not to start a racial diatribe in the barbershop. And he told me at the turn of the century that blacks were less segregated in Chicago than Italians and other European groups. He said, oh, maybe by 1910 or so there were a dozen or so all black blocks in the whole city. You know, because families would want to move in near each other. Near somebody they know. But it wasn't like those blocks were adjacent to each other. There wasn't what we would call black and white part of town. "Well, what changed things?" I asked.

He said, "More and more African-Americans coming up from the south. They were trying to escape the injustice of the migrant farmer system or crops would fail so there was no work. And it was perfect for the factory owners, the business owners, 'cause they could set one group against the other and the competition would keep those prices low." And I realized I knew something about this because my grandfather told me over and over again while I was growing up, all the times he'd lost jobs to black men. My grandpa had worked construction, worked at the stockyards. And I told Lee about this. And he said that, oh yeah, it was true that my grandpa could have lost jobs. But the real reason was because all kinds of black workers were shipped up north, I mean, by the train load. Unsuspecting. Because the business owners could use them to bust up the unions. The white workers, they're working conditions were deplorable too. They were trying to form unions. And sometimes we'd bring those trains right into the stockyards. They didn't know, the black workers didn't know, they were busting unions. But he told me the biggest thing that started the segregation in Chicago was the Chicago race riot of 1919.

One summer day in 1919 a young boy was floating on a raft in Lake Michigan. His name was Eugene Williams. Now, Eugene liked school well enough, he did well enough. But, awe, how he loved his summers! And he loved to hang out at the beach even though he wasn't a very good swimmer. Now, some of you know Lake Michigan. It can get pretty wavy, almost like an ocean sometimes. It was one of those kind of rough sea days and it was wavy. And Eugene, some of his friends had made this makeshift raft. And the waves pushed Eugene across this imaginary line that some people thought of as the white part of the beach. And some white men and boys saw Eugene. They got mad. They started throwing stones and rocks, boulders, planks of wood, anything. And they knocked Eugene off and, as I said, he wasn't the best swimmers, it was a wavy day. And Eugene drown.

Now some black people spotted some of the white men and boys who had thrown the stones and planks at Eugene. They ran up to a white police officer, the only kind of officer there was back then. And said, "There, those guys! Those are the guys that killed Eugene! They murdered Eugene!" But the police officer refused to make an arrest and a fist fight broke out.

That fight spread up and down the beach. It spilled out onto the streets on the South Side of Chicago and then to the middle Chicago to the North Side of Chicago. It's like all that, that tension that was simmering there because of the competition over housing and jobs, it just exploded. It took four days and the National Guard to finally stop the violence. At the end, hundreds were injured. Scores of men and boys, mostly black were killed. Many right in their own homes, at the hands of their very own neighbors.

I sat on that torn leather couch looking out the door. I had heard absolutely nothing about the Chicago 1919 race riots. And all through my high school years, there had been race riots in Chicago. Just the year before, in my senior year, when Dr. King had been killed, there was unrest all over the city. Why hadn't I heard these stories before?

I was so stunned by what Lee told me that I actually talked to my Grandmother McHugh that night about race. It was a subject I usually avoided with her at all cost. It was my turn to make dinner that night at our girls apartment for this special summer program. So, I called my grandmother get her spaghetti and meatballs recipe. That's that famous Irish spaghetti and meatballs. And she was giving me her instructions, I guess it couldn't get out of my head would Lee had said, and I just blurted out to my grandmother, "Ma did you ever hear of the Chicago race riots of 1919?"

"Oh yeah," she said. Then there was this long pause and then she added, "I remember a family that hid by us."

“What do you mean, hid by us?”

“Oh, they were a Negro family,” she said. “They had children. I think they lived a couple blocks away. And well, the city had come through and rounded up all the colored people and taken them to one area like a safety zone, you know. But they must've missed this family. And they were hiding in the gangway, next door to us. They were just too scared to move.”

I said, “Ma, how, how long this go on?”

“I don't know, maybe three, four days. But, but my mom had me feed them. She would make sandwiches and she'd wrap it up in newspapers. She'd have me go out by the garbage cans like I was going to throw the newspaper away, but I tossed the sandwiches to them.”

“So you fed them? How long?”

“Well, like three, four days,” she said again. “They were too scared to move through the neighborhood.”

“So now, why didn't you ever tell me any of this before?”

“Oh, I don't know,” she said. “It happened a long time ago. Besides what good does it do to talk about it?”

Well, Lee and I were talking about it and I wanted to know everything. I said, “And what, what happened after the 1919 race riots?”

And he said, “It was like after that the race riots. You just couldn't run a city like that with wholesale violence, people punching each other and killing each other in the streets. So the leaders their... their focus became on keeping the peace.”

Now, this is where Lee said the city could have gone one way or the other. Keeping the peace could have meant standing up to everybody and saying, “Hey, we *are* going to learn to live together.” But instead the politicians, the business owners, they came up with a strategy to separate whites and blacks in more civilized ways. Lee told me, he said, “For instance, in the city council, they invented what we call restrictive covenants. It said that certain areas of the city, and this is a quote, ‘could only be occupied by people of white or Caucasian race.’” And then Lee said, “In certain areas they were trying to make all white, they'd go knock on the doors, they'd invite the black people to leave. They'd offer money or they'd make threats. And then they go to the store owners in that area and they threatened them that they'd better not sell anything to black families. I'm talking even a loaf of bread,” Lee said. “Or even stamps at the postage office, at the post office.”

Now Lee was some kind of working class scholar. Every quote, everything I heard that summer, he would make me look up, you know. Do research, get primary quotes, get my statistics straight, even if the quote came from him. So I looked and I looked and I found all kinds of tidbits. Like a 1920 Hyde Park neighborhood association newspaper and it put a big ad in there. And said, “Every black man who moves into Hyde Park knows he is damaging his white man's property. Therefore he's declaring war on the white man. If store owners and businesses should refuse to give a job to any black man that stays and resides in Hyde Park, well, that would show very good results.”

I'd always been told that blacks live with blacks and whites with whites, browns with browns, because everybody preferred their own kind. But that day I learned that segregation had been forced. I sat on that leather couch, sipping my orange Nehi pop, staring through the door and out at the barbershop pole. It's red and white stripes twirling around each other but never, ever touching.

