

Discrimination in the Early Years

Cox picked an amazing time to head off in the field of mathematics. The time of his upbringing was filled openly with racism, segregation and outright hatred. His hometown, Evansville, Indiana, was a racially mixed college town. Despite lack of complete segregation, living conditions were worse for the blacks than for the whites. Discrimination, bigotry and desire for equality fed tensions between the races. During Cox's childhood a race riot broke out in his neighborhood. Most whites viewed blacks as the culprits, which increased the tensions. Some white leaders did make efforts to improve the situations, however their efforts were geared towards conflict management. They sought to improve conditions as a means of pacification instead of in the genuine interest of African Americans. Equality was not achieved.

Discrimination in the Institutes of Higher Learning

The University of Indiana

When Cox graduated from the University of Indiana, there were three other African Americans in his class. Just in case they forgot or the masses were unsure, the word COLORED was printed on their transcripts. That label was meant to have negative connotations. Symbolic Interactionists and those specializing in Social Deviance recognize the power of labels and stigmas. Stigmatizing a person can have many negative affects on his or her view of life. Those affected may be given a sense of hopelessness and feel there is no way to prove themselves, therefore they begin to play the role placed upon them. Those African American graduates accomplished something of which they should be intensely proud. They also posed a threat to white male supremacy. COLORED was printed on their transcript to remind them of their "place" and thus try to oppress future accomplishments. However, the attack placed on Cox with that label served as a dual edged sword for the University. Cox's accomplishments made a mockery of any negative labels placed on him. In fact having COLORED on his transcript should serve as inspiration and give a sense of pride to all of those who may have COLORED on their transcripts.

The Cornell Years; Support from an Awesome Advisor

Cox entered Cornell in 1922. His work was significant beyond question. (For an introduction to his work, go to the Mathematics section of this page). His advisor at Cornell was William Lloyd Garrison Williams who was the founder of the Canadian Mathematical Society. (Williams also comes from an impressive list of advisors view this in the Mathematical Genealogy section of this page). Impressed by Cox's work, Williams arranged for Cox to travel to Montreal for the final stages of his dissertation. Once Cox was finished, Williams had him send his work outside of the United States to attempt to insure Cox was not held back in the name of white supremacy. The predominately white countries, England and Germany, rejected the dissertation. However, not all hope was lost. Japan's Imperial University of San Dei accepted Cox's Dissertation and he became the first African American in the world to earn a Ph.D. in Mathematics.

