

HOME PAGE MY TIMES TODAY'S PAPER VIDEO MOST POPULAR TIMES TOPICS

Get Home Delivery Log In Register Now

The New York Times

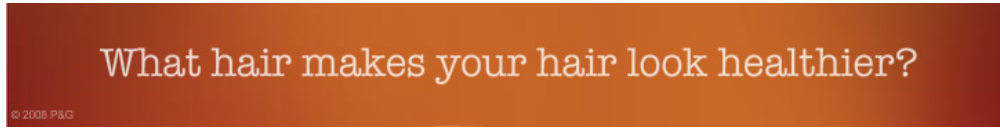
Westchester

Search All NYTimes.com

Go

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION ARTS STYLE TRAVEL JOBS REAL ESTATE AUTOS

THE CITY CONNECTICUT LONG ISLAND NEW JERSEY WESTCHESTER



Advertise on NYTimes.com

COUNTY LINES | WHITE PLAINS

Long Before Obama, a Search for Identity



FINDING ROOTS Ben Nightingale, who is by appearance white, as a boy at a Y.M.C.A. camp in 1947.

By JOSEPH BERGER
Published: November 7, 2008

WHITE PLAINS

In the Region

Complete Coverage

[Long Island](#) | [Westchester](#)

[Connecticut](#) | [New Jersey](#)

Related

Times Topics: [Joseph Berger](#)

PRESIDENT-ELECT [BARACK](#)

[OBAMA](#)'S remarkable life journey has set off deeply personal echoes for Ben Nightingale, a 70-year-old resident of this city. He too has an unconventional racial biography — though his story is more like the flip side of Mr. Obama's.

Mr. Nightingale has spent considerable energy trying to clarify his identity, for himself and for others, but his challenge has been subtly different, he said, because in the racially divided era he grew up in, society determined that he had to be either black or white and keep the other part hidden.

“Back in the 1930s they decided that those elements could not live together,” he said in a recent conversation, an urgent edge to his voice. “My job has been to reverse my dismemberment.”

Mr. Nightingale, a genial man with an elfish sense of humor, is by appearances white, and the woman who gave birth to him was white. But he was adopted at 3 by Ethyl Smith

[More Articles in New York Region »](#)

Breaking News Alerts by E-Mail

Sign up to be notified when important news breaks.
[Privacy Policy](#)

MOST POPULAR

[E-MAILED](#) [BLOGGED](#) [SEARCHED](#)

1. [At the Stove, a Dash of Science, a Pinch of Folklore](#)
2. [Op-Ed Contributors: The End of the Financial World as We Know It](#)
3. [Stanley Fish: The 10 Best American Movies](#)
4. [Where Is Our Ferdinand Pecora?](#)
5. [In Quiet Rebellion, Parishioners Keep Faith](#)
6. [Paul Krugman: Fighting Off Depression](#)
7. [A President Forgotten but Not Gone](#)
8. [The Afghan Quagmire](#)
9. [Scientist at Work | Rob Holman: So Much to Learn About the Oceans From Sand](#)
10. [A New Cigarette Hazard: 'Third-Hand Smoke'](#)

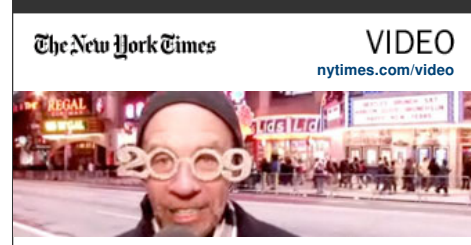
[Go to Complete List »](#)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL OR SAVE THIS

[PRINT](#)

[REPRINTS](#)

[SHARE](#)





Susan Farley for The New York Times

HIS JOURNEY Ben Nightingale.

Nightingale, a black actress in so-called race films, and her husband, Ben.

The 1930s and '40s were a time when adoptions of white children by black parents were unheard of — just as they are extremely rare today. His was permitted because the man who fathered him told officials that his own mother was part black. In that era's racial arithmetic, the Hebrew Home for Infants on Staten Island, where Mr. Nightingale spent his first months, concluded that baby Ben was black and sent him off to what was called “a Negro boarding home” in Philadelphia, from which the Nightingales adopted him.

He has three birth certificates, one filed at birth describing him as white, another filed after the adoption describing him as Negro and a 1981 revision that lists his race as Negro/white. Mr. Nightingale initiated that change because “I felt the need to have a definitive piece of paper that embraced both races and didn't say mixed.”

But his complicated roots took an emotional toll from the start. He grew up in a middle-class black neighborhood of Philadelphia, a few houses from the legendary contralto Marian Anderson, and his closest childhood friend was her nephew, the conductor James DePreist. He went to [Y.M.C.A.](#) camp where photographs show him as the only white child in a cluster of black swimmers.

He spent Sundays singing spirituals in the choir of the First African Baptist Church, relishing the fervor and the cadences. But he was taunted as “whitey” by children who disbelieved his black heritage. Then at 12, after his divorced adoptive mother moved to Los Angeles to audition for TV's “Amos 'n' Andy” and he attended an integrated school, he felt the sting of being a black child with a white face, hearing a teacher, a scoutmaster and students drop scornful remarks about blacks.

Mr. Nightingale tried drawing closer to whites, even having himself rebaptized in a white Presbyterian church, because, he once wrote, “my blackness was invisible to others — unknown, never thought of, only I thought of it.” But, he said, he paid a price for denying his “black essence,” ballooning to 250 pounds by 21.

“People had looked at me and not seen me,” he wrote in The Philadelphia Inquirer's magazine. “Now I wasn't allowing them to.”

He tried straddling both worlds at times, living with his black mother but letting co-workers think he was white, a kind of Zelig adapting to what people wanted him to be. But he said he found that white women broke off relationships when he confided having a black mother. He married a white woman, but her fears of having a black baby because of his genetic heritage kept them childless, and that marriage ended after 13 years. A tormented spiral ensued, capped by heavy drinking.

If his journey seems far more troubled than Mr. Obama's, that is, Mr. Nightingale says, because they grew up in starkly different eras. Mr. Obama, the son of a white mother and a black Kenyan father, has been able to “transcend race” because he came of age when the civil rights movement had made oceanic strides and elite colleges and law firms were recruiting African-Americans, Mr. Nightingale says.

“Race hasn't crippled Obama,” Mr. Nightingale said. “He has a great sense of self and a belief in himself. I don't feel I let race cripple me, but it did things to me.”

New Year's at the movies

Also in Video:

[Debt trap: college borrowing catches up](#)
[Screen Test: Tom Cruise](#)
[Watch more video](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS

Get home delivery of The Times
 - plus the historic Election Day and inauguration issues

Need to know more?
 Get 50% off home delivery of The Times.

Donate Now
 to The Neediest Cases Fund
[Click Here](#)

The New York Times STORE



NYT Ortelius Maps Edition -- Africa
[Buy Now](#)

He says he feels he and Mr. Obama have thrived by embracing their tangled histories. Like Mr. Obama did in "Dreams From My Father," Mr. Nightingale set down his story three decades ago in various articles for The Philadelphia Inquirer and Ebony, with one titled "Am I Black or White?"

"I wasn't going to leave 18 years of Philadelphia behind," he said. "I had to find some way of existing in the world with these multiple parts."

At a packed meeting last month at his synagogue, Bet Am Shalom, Mr. Nightingale spelled out his story's later chapters: how a childhood spent with black spirituals shaped a career singing for the [New York City Opera](#) and other groups while earning a living as an accountant, and how he married again, this time to a Jewish woman from White Plains, Gillian Friedlander, with whom he had two children. (He discovered after meeting his wife that Judaism was also his birth mother's religion.)

His daughter Elana, a 27-year-old production manager for Alley Theater in Houston, has sought to keep the strands of her heritage intact. She said she "didn't want to walk out of college living in an entirely white world," so at American University, she joined an African-American sorority, Zeta Phi Beta, where she is still active. Asked her race on applications she puts down "other."

"I don't feel Caucasian adequately describes who I am," she said.

E-mail: joeberg@nytimes.com

A version of this article appeared in print on November 9, 2008, on page WE1 of the New York edition.

[More Articles in New York Region »](#)

[Click here to get home delivery of The Times - plus the historic Election Day and inauguration issues](#)

Past Coverage

[The Master and the Mistress \(October 5, 2008\)](#)
[De-emphasis on Race In Adoption Is Criticized \(May 27, 2008\)](#)
[IDEAS & TRENDS; Stopping Traffic in the People's Republic \(May 4, 2008\)](#)
[Who Are We? New Dialogue On Mixed Race \(March 31, 2008\)](#)

Related Searches

Race	Get E-Mail Alerts
Families and Family Life	Get E-Mail Alerts
White Plains (NY)	Get E-Mail Alerts