

ART TO ZOO

News for Schools from the Smithsonian Institution, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Washington, D.C. 20560

December 1990

Life in the “Promised Land”: African-American Migrants in Northern Cities, 1916–1940

The United States has always been a country of people on the move: up and down the eastern seaboard . . . westward toward the Pacific . . . from countryside to city . . . from East and Midwest into the Sunbelt . . . Americans have a history of pulling up their roots when they see opportunity elsewhere.

One such large-scale population movement was the migration of African-Americans from the South to the urban industrial centers of the North. Between World War I and the eve of World War II, over 3 million blacks made this move.

This issue of ART TO ZOO looks at this migration, focusing on the helps and hindrances that these African-American migrants encountered as they struggled to build the better lives that had been their goal in moving north.

The Lesson Plan provided here suggests how your students can use interviews to compare the experiences of these migrants of over half a century ago . . . with the experiences of people they know now who have similarly struggled to build new lives in new places.

This ART TO ZOO has been scheduled to come into your hands in time for Black History Month. It could also be used in a unit on U.S. history between the two world wars, or in a unit on urbanization. The two major writing activities around which its Lesson Plan is organized also make the issue suitable for use in an English class.

Teacher's Background

In 1916, the number of African-Americans migrating from the South to northern cities swelled from a trickle to a torrent. Between 1910 and 1940, over 3 million blacks—men, women, and children—uprooted themselves and made their way northward in the hope of building better lives.

Reasons for Leaving

After Reconstruction ended in 1876, the federal government and the United States Supreme Court left it largely up to southern authorities to determine what the specific rights of African-Americans living in the South would be.

What developed in the region was a two-track system of citizenship—separate and highly unequal. Blacks were forced to live under “Jim Crow” laws establishing segregation in virtually every area of public life: African-Americans had to sit at the back of the bus and up in the “buzzard’s roost” in theaters; had to drink from separate water fountains, use ramshackle “colored” waiting rooms in train stations, and attend inferior schools. . . .

Economically too, life for African-Americans in the South was blighted. The majority of blacks farmed for a living, but only a minority owned their own land. Most were sharecroppers, trapped in an economic system based on credit controlled by the landlords. The landlords advanced money for the supplies a sharecropper needed; the sharecropper, in turn, was supposed to pay back the landlord at year’s end with a portion of the crop.

Even when harvests were good it was very difficult for sharecroppers to get completely out of debt. When harvests were poor to do so became impossible.

And during and after World War I, a series of natural disasters made harvests particularly bad. These disasters included major floods and the spread of the



A family of newcomers to Newark, New Jersey, in 1918.

bollweevil, an insect that destroyed cotton, the main crop.

Yet no matter how bad conditions were, the South was *home* (to nine-tenths of all African-Americans in 1910). Kin and friends, church and community, enriched these people’s lives and provided a sense of belonging and support. It would take more than just hard times, violence, and the threat of violence to induce southern blacks to break loose from these supports and set off into the unknown.

The missing catalyst—a *positive* incentive to move—appeared during World War I, when manpower shortages induced northern industries to turn to southern blacks to supply the needed work force. Labor recruiters came south to urge blacks there to take northern jobs, promising high wages and sometimes even offering to pay the fare north.

Those who answered this call were soon writing home describing their new lives in glowing terms. Dressed in their best clothes, they returned on visits and impressed their former neighbors with their success and sophistication.

Black newspapers too (most notably the *Chicago Defender*, which was widely read by African-Americans in the South) urged readers to break free of their oppression and come north.

Making the Move

More and more black southerners began responding to these calls. From farms and towns throughout the region, singly and in groups, they boarded trains and buses and ships, they loaded up cars, and headed north.

Courtesy Newark Public Library



© 1968 Aaron Siskind. From Harlem: Photographs by Aaron Siskind, 1932–1940. National Museum of American Art, November 22, 1990–March 17, 1991.

Store in Harlem around 1939.

Some went directly to a particular city. Often the father of a family would go first, to find work and a place to live. Then he would begin sending for relatives, each arrival helping those who came later to get a start.

Others, often single men, moved northward more gradually, taking jobs here and there along the way . . . first perhaps in southern communities, then in northern ones.

Whatever route the migrants followed to the industrial cities of the North—to Chicago and New York, to Philadelphia and Cleveland, to Pittsburgh and Detroit, and to countless smaller communities—they came hoping to better their lives, to find freedom and opportunity denied them back home.

Arrival

Though some migrants were put off by the smoke and filth of industrial centers, most reacted with enthusiasm to their first sight of northern cities. Excited by the size of the buildings, the bright signs and lights, and the bustle of the streets, they were also impressed by the absence of obvious signs of segregation. They noted that blacks and whites mingled on the sidewalks and sat together on streetcars. They noted that there were no (or almost no) “Colored” or “Whites Only” signs on drinking fountains or in restaurant windows.

Housing

The first thing newcomers needed, of course, was a place to stay. Often they moved in with relatives or friends from back home until they could find places of their own. Sometimes they boarded with strangers.

As the migration continued and more and more African-Americans from the South poured into northern cities, neighborhoods that had previously been racially mixed grew increasingly segregated.

They also grew increasingly crowded, because whites in adjoining areas usually resisted attempts by blacks to move into their neighborhoods.

As time went on, more and more white property-owners signed agreements called *restrictive covenants*, promising not to rent or sell to African-Americans. When a black family did manage to acquire a home in a white neighborhood, the household often met with violence—with bricks, or shots, or even bombs.

The result was that while the number of African-Americans increased dramatically, the size of the areas where they could find housing grew only a little. Blacks within these developing ghettos were so desperate for housing that landlords could charge exorbitant rents—even for space that was overcrowded, and often (though not always) deteriorated.

Employment

The hope of industrial jobs was what had drawn many of the migrants north . . . and this hope seemed at first to be fulfilling itself. In 1916 and 1917, work

was easy to get. Thousands of newcomers found employment in places like Pittsburgh steel mills, Chicago meat-packing plants, and Detroit car factories. . . .

Most received wages higher than they had ever earned before.

But as the migrants’ experience in the North continued, they came to realize that the employment situation was less favorable than it had first appeared.

For one thing, living costs were higher in northern cities than in the rural South. The migrants’ higher pay did not improve their living standard as much as they had at first expected.

Moreover, some migrants moved *down* the job scale when they came north. For example, African-Americans who had been skilled workers back home often could not find skilled jobs in their trade—largely because of the discriminatory practices of white unions.

Most work available to blacks was at the bottom of the job scale: the dirtiest, worst paid, most dangerous jobs. Often, so-called factory work turned out to be sweeping the factory floors. Even when blacks had genuine industrial employment, they frequently worked at different types of jobs than whites, often in different parts of the plant.

Moreover, after World War I ended, many blacks were laid off so that demobilized white soldiers would have work.

These lay-offs reflected an ongoing pattern. Industrial employers tended to treat African-Americans as a pool of reserve labor, putting them to work when extra manpower was needed—as additional hands during economic booms and as scabs during strikes.

In fact some blacks discovered only after arriving in the North that the jobs that had lured them there



Woman filling her pail at a backyard pump.

were jobs as strikebreakers. Some refused such positions; others saw them as their only opportunity to break into the industrial job market.

This strikebreaking role earned blacks as a group the enmity of many white union members, while blacks in turn observed how often white union practices discriminated against them. They felt no pressure to be loyal to organizations that barred them from jobs they were qualified for. And employers frequently played up racial divisions as a way of curbing union growth.

Another serious facet of the employment situation was lack of advancement. Over and over, African-Americans found themselves working alongside newly arrived white immigrants. Soon the white newcomers would move up to better jobs, while the blacks who had worked far longer—and worked well—remained right where they had started.

Only a small proportion of African-Americans were able to move into better jobs in industry and business. A limited number got professional training and became doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers. Some started their own businesses. A modest number were able to earn their living as athletes and entertainers.

But the vast majority of black people—no matter how highly their supervisors sang their praises as intelligent, hardworking, productive employees—remained at the bottom of the job scale, and were the first laid off when times got bad.

For black women, the situation was even worse than for black men. Few black women were able to get even the precarious foothold in industry that black men achieved during World War I. And the little ground they gained then, they lost when the war was over. In the 1920s, large numbers of white women—including even recent European immigrants—were moving into “clean” jobs as office workers and sales clerks. Yet only a tiny fraction of black women were able to get such jobs—and almost exclusively in businesses owned by blacks. Into the 1940s, the largest proportion of black women continued to work as domestics.



New York street scene.

Northern Attitudes

Migrants quickly learned that they were not welcome everywhere, even in the North. True, the races mingled in the streets, on public transportation, on the job, and in many stores and eating places. Yet residential areas, as we have seen, were either black or white. And beaches, dance halls, and skating rinks—even hospitals and social service facilities—were separated by race.

In some northern communities, the school system was officially segregated. In others this was not so. But even where schools were supposed to be integrated, segregated residential patterns led to predominantly black or white schools. And the black schools, almost always in poorer neighborhoods, were housed in older buildings with more limited facilities, and received less funding.

The newcomers also met with a less than open-armed welcome from those blacks who were already established in the North, sometimes for generations. This group had at first encouraged the migration. But as the number of newcomers grew, the “Old Settlers” realized that they were fast becoming a minority within the black community. Until this influx, their numbers had been small enough so that African-Americans were not particularly conspicuous as a group. In most places in the North, they had lived scattered throughout the city.

The new migrants were not only extremely numerous, they also tended to be noticeable. Though they had often been better off than many of their neighbors back home—that rural southern home was very different from a northern city. Most newcomers had country ways. Many wore headscarves and overalls. They spoke differently, were often more boisterous, and they tended to be less educated than their northern counterparts.

Many Old Settlers viewed these newcomers as a threat to the gains that the previously established African-Americans had made. And in fact, for a variety of reasons, it was true that discrimination was on the rise in the period after World War I.

Black newspapers and social agencies launched campaigns to educate newcomers on how “respectable” people were expected to behave in northern cities, on and off the job. They urged migrants to work hard, to keep regular hours, to wear city-type clothes, to speak in low voices, to keep their houses clean . . . in general, to conform to urban middle-class norms . . . and to the demands of the industrial workplace.

Building Lives in the North

Once new arrivals had taken care of their most pressing survival needs—housing and a job—they could get to know their new community . . . and begin to figure out how to build a satisfying life within it.

Though often forced into substandard quarters, the migrants could fix them up to be as homey as possible: decorate them with friendly familiar objects like family quilts or Bibles, or photos from home. Magazine pictures or a giveaway calendar from a local merchant could help make a place cheerful. Even on a hot plate, a family could cook dishes they had always enjoyed. . . . They could share the day’s doings even if they had to use packing crates as chairs. . . . And if their apartment felt too hot and crowded on a summer’s evening, they could sit outside on their front stoop where it was cooler, and entertain themselves by watching the comings and goings on the street and by



chatting with their neighbors.

As in the South, African-American migrants looked to friends, family, and community for support and a sense of belonging—needs especially important within a larger environment that was often hostile and exploitative.

Being part of a social network was especially important because it could offer both moral and practical support to migrants, whose existence was often economically precarious. A lodger who was employed at a time when family members had been laid off, a neighbor willing to trade food for outgrown clothing, a cousin who would take care of the baby while the mother went out to work . . . supports like these were essential in the effort to build a stable life under unstable conditions. To help a newcomer was not only an act of kindness but an extension of one’s social insurance network.

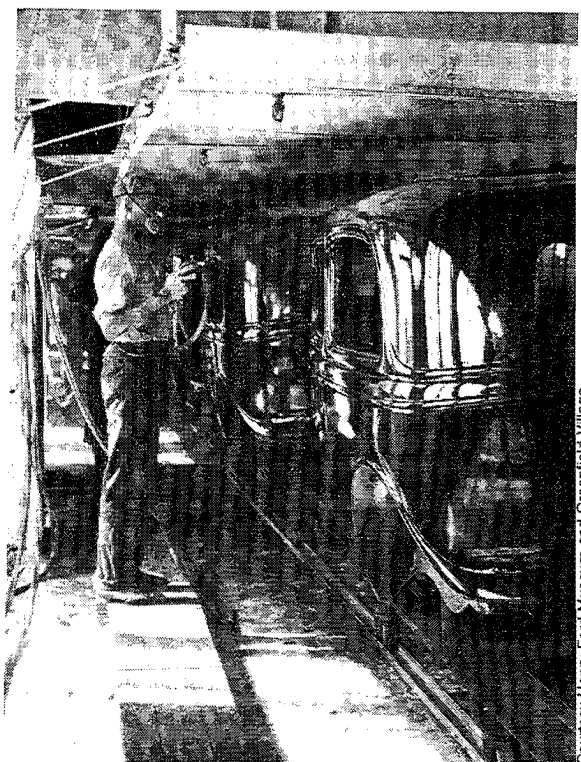
Neighborhood social networks were also important as a means of communication. Quick access to information about which companies were hiring, or which church offered child care, or where you could find the best buy could make a big difference from day to day. Chats with friends, barbershop gossip, words exchanged from front stoop to front stoop . . . all these helped information circulate fast. Even the songs a group of children sang as they skipped rope could carry a message (announcing, for example, the arrival

of a social worker) to those who knew how to listen.

Formal organizations too played a role in the migrants’ lives. As in the South, church-going was central to many, but newcomers often found the more restrained services of northern churches emotionally unsatisfying. Some opened churches of their own, often in storefronts. Groups of migrants would sometimes bring up their preacher from the South. Ministers of African-American churches were regarded by both



Picket line. In the 1930s, increasing numbers of African-Americans became union members.



Man spray-painting Ford cars.

blacks and whites as spokespeople for the black community.

Secular groups too played a role. Mutual-aid societies, insurance and social clubs, and social service agencies like the Urban League were important. The Urban League, for example, helped black migrants locate housing and jobs, played a role in educating the newcomers to the requirements of their new surroundings, and acted as a liaison between the migrants and the white community.

The migrants had moved north with high expectations, but the real world they found fell far short. A minority of the newcomers returned south; but most stayed on, accepting the challenges of their new surroundings along with the opportunities.

And this growing concentration of African-Americans in urban enclaves sowed seeds that were to bear fruit in the decades to come. It laid the groundwork for an increasingly sophisticated political power base, and it provided a market for black businesses.

By the early 1930s, black leaders were beginning to try out marches and boycotts (“Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work”), as well as votes and lawsuits, to press for change. In the decades following World War II, these same tactics would be put to use on a national scale.

Even when forced to live in poverty, migrants usually made their surroundings as pleasant as possible. This Chicago girl, for example, is dressed in pretty clothes and is pressing freshly laundered curtains . . . even though the paint in the room is chipping and she has to use a makeshift ironing board.

Lesson Plan

Step 1: One family’s experience

First, as homework, have the children read the Pull-Out Page materials.

The next day in class, give the kids plenty of time to ask whatever questions they may have and to discuss their reactions to what they read.

Then ask: What questions did Lucy and Danny ask their parents? (When your students check, they will see that the text doesn’t give any questions; it gives only the parents’ answers.)

Suggest then that your pupils, working as a class, try to figure out what questions Lucy and Danny must have asked to elicit the answers that their parents gave.

With your guidance the class should come up with questions like these:

- Why did you move? What changes in your life were you hoping the move would make?
- Did you move alone or with others?
- How did you find a place to live? What kind of place was it? Did you live alone? with family? with friends? with strangers?
- Did you already have a job waiting in your new community? If not, how did you go about finding work? Did the first job you got make use of your education and training? Did it offer advance-

ment? Did you remain in that first job? Why?

- How did you build a social life in your new community? Where did you meet friends?
- What kind of organizations played a role in your new life?
- In what ways did the residents of your new community seem different from people where you used to live? How did you feel about these differences?
- How did people in your new community seem to regard you? Do you think you were treated differently because you were a newcomer . . . or for some other reason, such as your race or national origin? In what ways? How did you feel about this?
- Looking back, are you glad you made this move?

Have each of the children make a copy of the list of questions they have created. Tell them to hold on to this list; they will be using it in a little while.

Step 2: The broader context

Explain that the Waters family is imaginary, but that the kinds of experiences they went through were typical for the more than 3 million African-Americans who migrated from the rural South to northern cities between 1916 and 1940.

Then draw on the information in the Teacher's Background to give a general description of this migration, focusing on the migrants' experiences once they reached the North. Show your students photographs to illustrate what you are telling about. (The books listed in the Bibliography on page 4 include pictures you could use; your local librarian can suggest additional sources.)

Finally, have your students, imagining that they are the Waters children, write the magazine article that Lucy and Danny planned to write—based on the information that their parents gave in the Pull-Out Page interview.

If you have no more time to spend on this topic, you can stop here. It is preferable, however, to give your pupils a chance to relate these historical experiences to ones in their own world. They can do this by carrying out Step 3.

Step 3: Migrants you know

Have your students interview a family member or friend who moved to your community *as an adult*. Tell the kids to base their interview on the questions they developed in Step 1.

Finally, have each of the children write a short piece based on the interview:

- They can simply write up the interview as a "magazine article," the way they did for the Waters interview, or
- They can write an essay comparing the experiences of their interviewee with those of the Waters family. (This second writing assignment involves more analysis than the first and is therefore more suited to older children.)



Woman in kitchen, 1935.

© 1968 Aaron Siskind. From *Harlem: Photographs by Aaron Siskind, 1932–1940*, National Museum of American Art, November 22, 1990–March 17, 1991.

See the World You've Been Reading About . . .

. . . at *Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration 1915–1940*, an exhibition at the National Museum of American History, at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. This exhibition focuses on the individual experiences of the African-Americans who moved north during the Great Migration—the conditions they lived under in the South, the hopes that prompted them to leave, the journey north, and the challenges they faced in their new surroundings. *Field to Factory* visitors can examine a tenant farmhouse from southern Maryland, a Philadelphia row house, and more than 400 artifacts and documents.

As of 1991, *Field to Factory* will also include a children's track providing special activities for young visitors to do as they move through the show.

In addition to the exhibition itself, regularly scheduled living-history performances give visitors a chance to talk to an actor impersonating someone who "lived" the experiences in the show.

. . . and at *Harlem: Photographs by Aaron Siskind, 1932–1940*, a show of 60 black-and-white photographs documenting life in the 1930s in New York City's most significant black neighborhood. The exhibition will be at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, through March 17, 1991.

If you can't get to Washington to see the show itself, you may want to order Aaron Siskind's book, *Harlem*:

Photographs 1932–1940. It is available from: Museum Shop, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560. The cost of the book is \$14.95, plus a postage and handling charge of \$2.75. (If you are ordering more than one copy, the postage and handling charge will be higher: add 15 percent to the cost of the books themselves.)

Special tours, including ones for visually handicapped and hearing-impaired persons, may be arranged in advance. Call 202-357-1697 (TDD 202-357-1696), Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The museum exhibition areas and most restrooms accommodate wheelchairs. For further information, call 202-357-2700 (TDD 202-357-1729).

Smithsonian National Seminar for Teachers

You don't have to live in Washington to study at the Smithsonian!

"Teaching Writing Using Museums and Other Community Resources," a special eight-day course, will be offered by the Smithsonian Institution this summer for elementary and secondary teachers living more than 75 miles outside Washington, D.C.

The course carries graduate credit from the University of Virginia. Tuition and fees will total approximately \$550.

"Teaching Writing Using Museums" will survey ways in which teachers can use local museum exhibits and such diverse resources as cemeteries and houses as tools for teaching writing. In addition to working on formal and informal exercises, participants will interview several Smithsonian staff writers to learn about various approaches to writing.

This three-credit course is open to full-time classroom teachers (grades 5–12), school librarians (media specialists), and curriculum specialists. Interpreters for hearing-impaired participants can be provided for all class work.

Classes will meet from July 9 to 18 in Washington, D.C. Specially priced housing may be available in a conveniently located college dormitory. Participants arrange their own meals.

Enrollment is limited. Applications must be postmarked by March 29. Notices of acceptance will be mailed by May 2.

For an application, including complete information, write:

National Seminar
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
Arts and Industries Building, Room 1163
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560

Or, telephone (voice) 202/357-3049 or (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf) 357-1696.

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Books for teachers

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Designer: The Watermark Design Office

ART TO ZOO brings news from the Smithsonian Institution to teachers of grades three through eight. The purpose is to help you use museums, parks, libraries, zoos, and many other resources within your community to open up learning opportunities for your students.

Our reason for producing a publication dedicated to *promoting the use of community resources among students and teachers nationally* stems from a fundamental belief, shared by all of us here at the Smithsonian, in the *power of objects*. Working as we do with a vast collection of national treasures that literally contain the spectrum from "art" to "zoo," we believe that objects (be they works of art, natural history specimens, historical artifacts, or live animals) have a tremendous power to educate. We maintain that it is equally important for students to learn to use objects as research tools as it is for them to learn to use words and numbers—and you can find objects close at hand, by drawing on the resources of your own community.

Our idea, then, in producing ART TO ZOO is to share with you—and you with us—methods of working with students and objects that Smithsonian staff members have found successful.

Special thanks to the following people at the Smithsonian for their help in preparing this issue of ART TO ZOO:

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Office of Elementary and Secondary Education: María del Rosario Basterra, Teresa Mora, and Michelle Smith.



Courtesy Temple University Library, Urban Archives

PULL-OUT PAGE



One Family's Story

The time is spring 1941; the place, an apartment on Chicago's South Side, the part of the city where the heaviest concentration of African-Americans live. A brother (Danny, 11 years old) and sister (Lucy, 10 years old) come running in to talk to their parents.

Lucy and Danny: Daddy! Remember how last week you were reading that magazine article about that guy traveling around the country interviewing people? Remember? He said he was writing a portrait of the American people. . . . Remember? And you complained that the only Negroes he talked to was one family on a southern farm.

You said, "He's leaving out all us Negroes who've moved North, to cities. Our experience is important too. . . . He's sure leaving out a big chunk of Americans."

. . . Well, we were thinking: we want to interview you, you and Mama . . . and we're going to write our own story about what it was like for you coming here and send it in to the magazine! Okay?

So will you and Mama let us interview you? Will you?

Lucy and Danny's parents, Sam and Maggie Waters, agree to be interviewed. Here is what they tell:

Father: I was born in Mississippi, in 1897, the youngest of nine children. My daddy was a share-cropper. We grew up poor, dirt poor. No matter how hard we worked, we were always in debt. And at the back of our minds was always the thought: the white man can take what he wants away from us. The law was for white folks back there.

I'd helped in the fields since I was big enough to hold a hoe. When I was in my teens, I started working away from home at the times of year when there wasn't much farm work. I put in a couple of seasons in turpentine camps. Worked in a sawmill. Did a couple of months in a steel mill in Birmingham. Started learning there was more to the world. But the rest of the year, I'd come back and help out at home.

It was around 1916 when I started hearing about opportunities up north, how companies up there were looking for colored workers, how sometimes they'd even pay your-fare up. I wasn't sure how much to believe. So I listened, I asked questions.

I read how the *Defender* kept saying race members should move north and build better lives.

I saw letters friends who'd gone sent back: "Come on up. I'm working in the stockyards, making 18 dollars a week, regular. You've got to see State Street to believe it—home was never like this!" "I don't have to humble myself up here. Don't have to go round 'yes sirring' and

'no sirring.' I feel like a man.'

That sure sounded good to me.

I'd saved a little money from what I earned working away from home. I kept that cash on me all the time, inside my shirt. But I still wasn't sure whether to go.

Then one night, I was walking home late along the railroad tracks. The Chicago train passed me as it was pulling real slow out of town. And this man—I never did see his face—yelled out the train window at me, "So long, brother . . . I'm bound for the promised land!"

Why not me too? I suddenly thought.

And I went running after that train. Jumped on it as it pulled out of town.

The next day I was in Chicago.

Mother: That's just like your Daddy. He thinks and thinks before he decides something. But once he's made up his mind, there's no stopping him!

How I moved up here was completely different. Just waited my turn in a line of family. First Uncle George went up, got a job, found a place. After a few months, he sent for Aunt Millie and little Hattie. (She was about the same age then as you kids are now.)

I stayed on for a year of high school. Thought maybe that way I could get me a teaching job up North. Took in sewing too, to make some money. After a year, it was my turn to go.

I'd waited so long, it seemed like a dream. I sat there in that colored section on the train, with my suitcase in my lap. I was afraid to let go of it. When we crossed the Mason-Dixon line, some fellows cheered and started to sing.

I dozed off. When I woke up, I remember, I was still holding tight to the handle of that suitcase. . . . Lord, it's hard to believe I was ever that young!

I got off in Chicago. Our town back home could have fit right there inside that station—with room to spare! Yes. . . .

Everything around me seemed *hard*: hard walls, hard floor . . . people even had hard-sounding voices. Thank goodness Aunt Millie and Uncle George were there to meet me. I was so glad to see familiar faces.

We drove and drove. I saw there was no grass almost. And the streets were full of people rushing. . . . Then we came to a part of town where nearly all the faces out on the street were black. I'd never seen so many colored all in one place,



Sam and Maggie Waters are imaginary, but their experiences are typical. The two people whose photos appear here were real migrants who moved north during the period you have been reading about.

and dressed up fancy too. There were hundreds of them! My aunt said we were on the South Side, where they lived.

Their house was big! It had six bedrooms! Running water! Gas lights! Sure, I realize now, looking back, its paint was peeling, its windows cracked, plaster was coming out, the toilet in the back yard didn't work right. But to me, fresh off the farm, that house looked like the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

To pay the rent, my aunt and uncle took in lodgers . . . and what a good thing they did! If they hadn't, I wouldn't have met your Daddy.

Uncle George had been a carpenter back home. But up here he couldn't find a job in construction: the unions wouldn't treat Negroes fairly. He had to work as an unskilled laborer for a lot less pay. Aunt Millie cooked and cleaned for the lodgers. She took in laundry too. That made ends meet, most of the time. . . . Nobody talked about it, but I knew I had to find a job fast; they needed me to contribute.

Father: The train fare had eaten up most of my money. Had just a few dollars in my pocket when I hit town. But that didn't stop me. Took my first stroll along State Street that very same evening. Had to see for myself if what I'd heard was true. It was! That place was lit up at midnight like

Photo by Jack Delano, Library of Congress



National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

high noon—cafes, theaters, signs as big as barns . . . and so many people you could hardly turn 'round!

Some guys I talked to told me, "Look for work in the stockyards. You can always get a job there. So the next morning, I went right over. There was a line of maybe 2-3 hundred men in front of the employment office. The agent walked up and down, looked us over, picked some men out. I was one: he tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Come along."

They gave me a time card and a number. They told us all, "Remember this number, this is what you're called here, check number such-and-such."

"Come along, buddy," he said. We walked from building to building. Everywhere you could hear animals bellowing, machinery clanking. . . . "You're going to be lugging carcasses from the cold storage area to the loading area," he says to me. We go into the cold storage area—and my breath just freezes up. My lungs turn into one solid chunk of ice. It was that cold.

Never did warm up long as I worked there. I had to carry those refrigerated carcasses across my back: ice against ice. Later I found out no white man would take this job.

I started hanging around after work with some of the guys in the neighborhood where I'd found a room. They told me I was crazy to stay on that job, I could do a lot better where they worked, at a steel plant out in Gary. "Come along with us, we'll show you where to go," they said. So I did, after pay day.

Got me a job right away too. Finally had a chance to warm up. Sure did! The temperature where they put me to work never dropped below about 100. You had to tie rags around your knees when you opened that furnace door or you couldn't stand the heat.

I stayed on there a couple of years. Made good money. But in 1919 they laid me off. Seems now the war was over, they wanted to give white soldiers their jobs back. . . . Was that supposed to make me feel better? Didn't we fight too?

Now looking for work was real different from back in '17. Now jobs were hard to find. Steady jobs double hard. For colored, triple hard. I worked here, I worked there. Nothing seemed to ever turn out steady.

Mother: The very next day after I moved in, I went looking for work. The teaching job turned out to be a pipe dream. Up here, you needed a lot more schooling to teach . . . and besides, they didn't hire many colored. They wouldn't even interview me.

I went to work in a steam laundry. It was real big, like a factory, and hot. They had the process of cleaning clothes all broken down, so each of us did just one little bit. My bit was to iron cuffs. I ironed one cuff after another all day long. At night I dreamed cuffs. I made 12 dollars a week."

Aunt Millie had seven lodgers, counting me. And her own family made 13 people to feed and clean for. I helped out after work.

Sundays, I'd try out different churches. It was hard to find one I liked. In a lot of these northern churches, seemed more like the pastor was reading a book than like he was preaching. I like a church that pumps up my feelings.

After a couple of months, I came across this little church in a storefront. When they saw me looking in, these two women came out, came right up to me. "You come on in, sister," they said. "We're *glad* to see you here." And they put their arms around me and just swept me right inside like bringing an old friend home. I thought to myself: This is the church for me. That pastor there knew how to preach, too!

After about a year, your Daddy rented a room with us . . . and three years later, we were married. That was in the year of 1927.

We wanted a place of our own, but housing was harder and harder to find: so many colored folks were pouring up from the South, and most



neighborhoods they couldn't live in, so people just packed tighter and tighter into the South Side.

Landlords had us at their mercy. They'd divide up a big apartment into lots of little apartments — kitchenettes, they called them — and then rent each of these little bitty apartments to colored for much more money than they'd charged whites before for the whole big apartment.

Father: Much more. That burned me up!

Mother: Your daddy and I moved into a place like that. It's true. It *was* small and run-down and we had to cook on a hot plate. But I still feel happy when I remember it: it was our first place together, just the two of us. . . .

I fixed it up real pretty, too, with curtains I'd made and those pictures of Grannie and Granddaddy we still have. Our place overlooked the roof of the building next door, I remember, and I'd throw bread crumbs across for the pigeons. . .

Then you were born, Danny, and that made it even better . . . and you a year later, Lucy . . . and then we were all together!

Father: But getting work was a real problem. More and more colored were getting laid off. Then the crash came and the depression. Then unemployment was something terrible. White or colored, you couldn't find work. You went here, you went there; no one was hiring.

Your mother found a job cleaning house for a family named Stebbins, over in Hyde Park. That's what kept us going that year, 1931 it was by then.

Mother: The Stebbinses. . . . I hadn't thought about them for a *long* time. . . . He was all right, but she always reminded me of a dish rag — all limp and gray she was, but when that lady whined she always got her way.

I did day work for them. Was supposed to be there from 9 to 7. But Mrs. Stebbins, she was always finding something else for me to do at the last minute, that kept me there later. "Oh, Maggie, I forgot to ask you to wash those windows in the guest room. I need them done before my sister arrives." "Oh, Maggie, Mr. Stebbins and I are going out. I'm going to need you to stay later, I'm afraid, and see that the children get to bed all right."

I was spending almost all my waking hours with *her* children . . . but what about my own? It was hard, I tell you. But in those days, when you had a job you didn't rock the boat. At least your Daddy was there to take care of you.

Father: After Roosevelt took over, things started getting better. . . . And then, about five years ago, I had a break. A friend who was a Pullman porter told me about an opening. . . .

And that, as you know, is the job I've had ever since. It's made all the difference to us. Wish I didn't have to be away from home so much, but this job has turned our lives around. It's steady. And it pays, especially now we get wages instead of just tips — thanks to Mr. Randolph!

Mother: All I can say is: it's a good thing we didn't know back before we left what we'd have to go through. It's easier that way. You just live from day to day.

Father: I look back and ask myself: if I had it to do again, would I still move North?

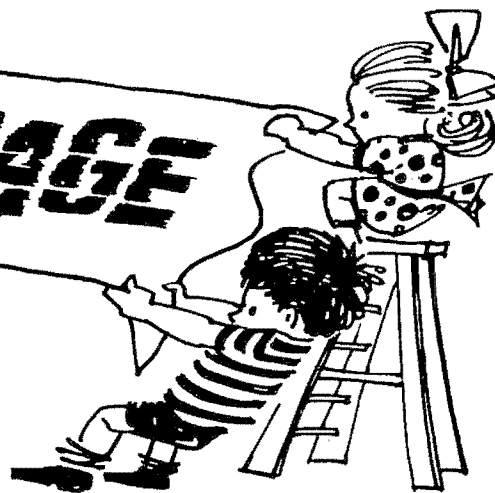
The answer is yes. . . . But I don't know if I'd feel the same way if I hadn't latched on to the porter job.

I see colored folk living in houses not fit for dogs. . . . You kids have to walk past no-goods to get to school. . . . I think of all the times I've watched a white guy be promoted while they kept *me* back, and thought: I taught that boy his job!

But back home, the odds were just too long. The only solution was to put on faces you didn't feel.

Here, people try to stop me, I have a chance to fight back.

PULL-OUT PAGE



Historia de una familia

La época es la primavera de 1941; el lugar, un apartamento en el lado sur de Chicago, la parte de la ciudad donde vive la mayor cantidad de afro-norteamericanos. Un hermano (Danny, 11 años) y una hermana (Lucy, 10 años) entran corriendo a hablar con sus padres.

Lucy y Danny: ¡Papá! ¿Recuerdas cuando estabas leyendo ese artículo de revista la semana pasada acerca del individuo que viaja alrededor del país entrevistando a la gente? ¿Te acuerdas? El decía que estaba escribiendo un retrato de los norteamericanos, ¿recuerdas? Y tú te quejaste que de los únicos negros que hablaba era de una familia de una granja del sur.

Tú dijiste: “él está dejando afuera a todos nosotros, los negros que nos mudamos al norte, a las ciudades. Nuestra experiencia es importante también. El por cierto, está dejando de considerar a un buen número de norteamericanos”.

Bueno, nosotros estuvimos pensando, queremos entrevistarte, a ti y a mamá y vamos a escribir nuestra propia historia de lo que fue para ti venir hasta aquí y la enviaremos a la revista. ¿De acuerdo?

Entonces, ¿nos dejas entrevistarte y a mamá? ¿Nos dejas?

Los padres de Lucy y Danny, Sam y Maggie Waters, están de acuerdo con ser entrevistados. Esto es lo que ellos cuentan:

El padre: Nací en Mississippi en 1897, y fui el mas joven de nueve hijos. Mi papá era un medianero. Crecimos pobres, muy pobres. No importaba que tan duro trabajáramos, siempre estábamos endeudados. Y en el fondo de nuestras mentes siempre estaba el mismo pensamiento: el hombre blanco puede quitarnos lo que quiera. La ley estaba hecha sólo para los blancos allá.

Yo ayudaba en el campo desde que fui suficientemente grande para asir un azadón. Cuando era un adolescente, empecé a trabajar fuera de la casa durante los períodos del año en los que había mucho trabajo en la granja. Hice dos temporadas en campos de trementina. Trabajé en un aserradero. Estuve un par de meses en una acería en Birmingham. Empecé a aprender que había algo mas en el mundo. Pero el resto del año, regresaba y ayudaba en la casa.

Fue alrededor de 1916 cuando empecé a oír de las oportunidades en el norte, cómo las compañías estaban buscando trabajadores de color y cómo algunas veces pagaban un salario alto. Yo no estaba convencido. Así que oía y preguntaba.

Leí como el *Defender* mantenía que los hermanos de raza debían mudarse al norte y construir vidas mejores.

Vi cartas enviadas por los amigos que se habían ido: "Vente, Estoy trabajando en un matadero, recibo regularmente 18 dólares a la semana. Tendrías que ver la calle State para creerlo, ¡allá nunca fue como esto!. No tengo que humillarme diciendo "sí señor" y "no señor". Me siento un hombre".

Eso sin duda me sonó bien.

Ahorré algo de dinero de lo que había ganado fuera de casa. Mantuve ese efectivo conmigo todo el tiempo, en mi camisa. Pero todavía no me sentía seguro de ir.

Entonces, una noche, estaba caminando tarde a casa a lo largo de los rieles del tren. El tren de Chicago me pasó como si se estuviera yendo de la ciudad muy lentamente. Y un hombre al que nunca le ví la cara me gritó desde la ventana: "¡hasta luego, hermano. Voy rumbo a la tierra prometida!".

¿Porqué yo no también?. Pensé de repente.

Y empecé a correr detrás del tren. Salté a él cuando dejaba la ciudad.

El día siguiente estaba en Chicago.

La madre: Eso es justo como su papá. Piensa y piensa antes de decidir algo. Pero, una vez que lo hace ¡no lo para nadie!.

Como me mudé yo aquí fue totalmente diferente. Sólo esperé mi turno en la línea familiar. Primero se fue tío George, obtuvo un trabajo, encontró un lugar para vivir. Después de algunos meses, envió a buscar a tía Millie y a la pequeña Hattie. (Ella tenía entonces la misma edad que ustedes tienen ahora).

Yo me quedé durante un año en la escuela secundaria. Pensé que quizás de esta forma podría enseñar en el norte. También cosí para conseguir algún dinero. Después de un año, me tocó el turno de irme.

Había esperado tanto tiempo que me parecía un sueño. Me senté en el tren, allá en la sección de los de color, con mi maleta en el regazo, tenía miedo de perderla. Cuando pasamos la línea Mason-Dixon, algunos tipos lanzaron vítores y empezaron a cantar.

Me adormecí. Cuando me desperté, recuerdo que todavía sujetaba fuertemente el asa de la maleta. ¡Señor, es difícil creer que alguna vez fui tan joven!.

Me bajé en Chicago. Nuestra ciudad natal podía caber dentro de la estación, ¡con espacio de sobra!. ¡Si señor!.



Fotografía de Jack Delano, Library of Congress

Sam y Maggie Waters son personajes imaginarios, pero sus experiencias son típicas. Las dos personas cuyas fotografías aparecen aquí fueron inmigrantes verdaderos que se mudaron al norte durante la época sobre la cual has estado leyendo.

Todo a mi alrededor me pareció *duro*: paredes duras, piso duro, gente con voces de sonidos duros. Gracias a Dios tía Millie y tío George estaban esperándome. Me sentí tan contenta de ver caras familiares.

Recorrimos mucho camino. Casi no vi campos. Y las calles estaban llenas de gente apurada. Llegamos entonces a una parte de la ciudad donde casi todas las caras en la calle eran negras. Nunca había visto tanta gente de color en un solo lugar ni vestida tan fantásticamente. ¡Había cientos de ellos!. Mi tía me dijo que estábamos en el lado sur, donde ellos vivían.

¡Su casa era grande!. ¡Tenía seis habitaciones!. ¡Agua corriente!. ¡Luces de gas!. Claro, ahora me doy cuenta, mirando hacia atrás, que la pintura se estaba pelando, las ventanas estaban rotas, el yeso se estaba cayendo, el baño en el patio no funcionaba bien. Pero para mí, recién llegada de la granja, esa casa parecía el palacio de Nabucodonosor.

Para pagar la renta, mis tíos tomaron huéspedes y ¡qué buena cosa hicieron!. Si no lo hubieran hecho yo no hubiera conocido a su papá.

Tío George había sido en casa carpintero. Pero aquí no pudo encontrar trabajo en la construcción: los sindicatos no trataban a los negros justamente. Tuvo que trabajar como un obrero no especializado por un salario bastante menor.

Tía Millie cocinaba y limpiaba para los huéspedes. También lavaba. Eso hacía que se tuviera sólo el dinero justo, la mayor parte del tiempo. Nadie habló acerca de ello, pero yo sabía que



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tenía que encontrar un trabajo rápido; ellos necesitaban mi contribución.

El padre: Tenía sólo pocos dólares en el bolsillo cuando llegué a la ciudad. Pero eso no me paró. Hice mi primer paseo a lo largo de la calle State esa misma noche. Tenía que ver por mi mismo que lo que había oído era verdad. ¡Si era! Ese lugar estaba encendido a la medianoche como al mediodía: ¡cafés, teatros, avisos tan grandes como establos y tanta gente que uno casi no se podía mover!.

Algunos tipos con los que hablé me dijeron: “busca un trabajo en los mataderos. Siempre puedes encontrar trabajo allí”. Así, la mañana siguiente, me fuí para allá directamente. Había una cola de quizás 200 o 300 hombres enfrente de la oficina de empleo. El administrador caminaba arriba y abajo, nos miraba y escogía algunos hombres. Yo fuí uno, me tocó en el hombro y me dijo “ven”.

Me dieron una tarjeta de marcar tiempo y un número. Nos dijeron a todos “recuerden éste número, éste es su nombre aquí, el número del cheque y todo lo demás”.

“Ven, compañero”, dijo. Caminamos de un edificio a otro edificio. Por todas partes se podían oír animales bramando y maquinaria haciendo ruido. “Tu cargarás reses muertas desde el área refrigerada de depósito al área de carga”, me dijo.

Fuimos al área de depósito y mi aliento casi se congela. Mis pulmones se volvieron un solo pedazo de hielo. Estaba tan frío.

Nunca se calentó mientras trabajé allí. Tenía que cargar esas reses muertas en mis espaldas: hielo con hielo. Después supe que ningún hombre blanco tomaba este trabajo.

Empecé a reunirme después del trabajo con algunos de los compañeros del vecindario donde vivía en una habitación. Me dijeron que estaba loco si permanecía en ese trabajo, podía irme mejor donde ellos trabajaban, en una planta de acero en Gary. “Ven con nosotros, te mostraremos donde ir”, dijeron. Así que fuí, después del día de pago.

Me dieron también trabajo inmediatamente. Finalmente tenía la oportunidad de calentarme. ¡Por supuesto que sí! La temperatura en la cual me pusieron a trabajar nunca bajó de los 100 grados. Tenías que ponerte trapos alrededor de las rodillas cuando abrías la puerta del horno o no podías aguantar el calor.

Me mantuve allí un par de años. Hice buen dinero. Pero en 1919 me despidieron. Parecía que ahora que se había terminado la guerra, querían darle a los soldados blancos sus trabajos otra vez. ¿Se suponía que eso me haría sentir mejor? ¿No habíamos peleado nosotros también?.

Buscar ahora trabajo era totalmente diferente que en el año 17. Los trabajos eran difíciles de encontrar. Los trabajos estables doblemente difíciles. Para la gente de color, triplemente difícil. Trabajé aquí y allá. Nada nunca se volvió estable.

La madre: Al día siguiente de mudarme, fui a buscar trabajo. El trabajo de enseñanza se volvió un sueño de humo. Aquí, se necesitaba mucho más educación para poder enseñar y además, no contrataban a mucha gente de color. Ni siquiera me entrevistarían.

Trabajé en una tintorería. Era realmente grande, como una fábrica y caliente. Tenían toda la maquinaria de limpieza de ropa rota, así que a cada uno le tocaba hacer un pedacito. El mío era planchar puños. Planchaba un puño detrás del otro todo el día. En la noche soñaba con puños. Me pagaban 12 dólares a la semana.

La tía Millie tenía siete huéspedes, contándome. Y con su propia familia, éramos trece personas que alimentar y atender. Yo ayudaba después del trabajo.

Los domingos iba a diferentes iglesias. Fue difícil encontrar una que me gustara. En un buen número de estas iglesias parecía más que el pastor estaba leyendo un libro que predicando. A mi me gusta una iglesia que sacuda mis sentimientos.

Después de un par de meses, encontré esta pequeña iglesia en un local que daba hacia la calle. Cuando me vieron mirando, salieron dos

mujeres y se acercaron a mi. “Adelante hermana”, dijeron. “Estamos felices de verte aquí”. Y me abrazaron y me condujeron hacia dentro como se hace con un viejo amigo en casa. Pensé para mis adentros: esta es mi iglesia. ¡Y el pastor también sabía predicar!.

Un año mas tarde, su papá nos alquiló un cuarto y tres años mas tarde, nos casamos. Eso fue en el año de 1927.

Queríamos tener una casa, pero alquilar era muy difícil: eran tantos los compañeros de color que se estaban viniendo del sur y no podían vivir en muchos vecindarios, así que la gente se mudaba mas y mas en el lado sur.

Los caseros nos tenían a su merced. Dividían un apartamento grande en pequeños apartamentos -apartamentos tipo estudio, los llamaban- y rentaban cada uno de estos apartamentitos a la gente de color por mucho mas dinero que por el que alquilaban antes el apartamento completo a los blancos.

El padre: Por mucho mas. ¡Eso me molestaba muchísimo!.

La madre: Su papá y yo nos mudamos a un lugar de éstos. Es verdad. Era pequeño y decadente y teníamos que cocinar en una plancha caliente. Pero aun así, todavía soy feliz cuando lo recuerdo: era nuestra primera casa, sólo para los dos.

La acomodé bien bonita, le hice cortinas y coloqué las fotos de abuelita y abuelito que todavía tenemos. Nuestra casa sobremiraba el techo del edificio próximo, yo lanzaba migas de pan a las palomas.

Entonces naciste tu Danny, y eso lo hizo todo aun mejor y tú, Lucy, un año después . . . entonces, ¡estuvimos todos juntos!.

El padre: Conseguir trabajo fue un verdadero problema. Mas y mas gente de color estaba viniéndose. Entonces vino la ruina y la depresión. El desempleo entonces, se volvió algo terrible. Blanco o de color, no podías conseguir trabajo. Ibas aquí y allá; nadie contrataba.

Su madre encontró un trabajo limpiando la casa para una familia Stebbins, en Hyde Park. Eso fue lo que nos permitió mantenernos ese año, era ya 1931.

La madre: Los Stebbins. No había pensado en ellos durante un *largo* tiempo. El era bueno, pero ella siempre me recordaba un trapo de secar pla-

tos, toda flácida y gris, pero cuando esa señora se quejaba siempre lo conseguía todo.

Trabajaba para ellos por día. Se suponía que debía estar de 9 a 7. Pero la señora Stebbins siempre encontraba algo mas que hacer en el último minuto que me mantenía allá hasta mas tarde. “Ay, Maggie me olvidé pedirte que lavaras esas ventanas en el cuarto de huéspedes. Las necesito listas antes de que mi hermana llegue”. “Maggie, el Sr. Stebbins y yo vamos a salir. Necesito que te quedes mas tarde y veas que los niños se acuesten”.

Gastaba casi la mayoría de mis horas útiles con *sus* niños, pero, ¿y los míos?. Fue duro, les digo. Pero en esos días cuando tenías un trabajo no podías perderlo. Al menos su papá estaba en casa con ustedes para cuidarlos.

El padre: Después que Roosevelt llegó al poder, las cosas empezaron a mejorar. Y entonces, hace como cinco años, tuve una oportunidad. Un amigo que era portero Pullman me dijo de una vacante.

Y eso como ustedes saben, es el trabajo que he tenido desde entonces. El ha hecho que las cosas sean diferentes para nosotros. Desearía no tener que estar tanto fuera de casa, pero este trabajo ha cambiado nuestras vidas. Es estable y paga, especialmente ahora que tenemos salarios en vez de propinas, ¡gracias al Sr. Randolph!.

La madre: Todo lo que puedo decir es que fue una buena cosa que no supiéramos antes de dejar casa, por todo lo que teníamos que pasar. Es mas fácil así. Vives día a día.

El padre: Miro hacia atrás y me pregunto: ¿si tuviera que hacerlo otra vez, me mudaría aun al norte?.

La respuesta es si, pero no sé si sentiría lo mismo si no me hubiera conseguido el empleo de portero.

Veo hombres de color que viven en casas inadecuadas aun para perros. Ustedes tienen que caminar lo suyo para llegar a la escuela. Pienso en todos las veces que he visto promover a un blanco mientras a mi me mantienen rezagado y me digo: ¡yo le enseñé a ese muchacho su trabajo!.

Pero allá en casa, las posibilidades eran demasiado lejanas. La única solución era hacerme el indiferente.

Aquí la gente trata de pararme, pero siempre tengo una oportunidad de luchar.