Migration and Jobs: The New Black Workers in Pittsburgh, 1916-1930

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Beginning in 1916 and continuing until the depression of the 1930s, Pittsburgh received thousands of southern black migrants who were participants in the Great Migration which carried a million and a half black men and women from the South to the North. Most of those new arrivals in Pittsburgh left the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. They moved north basically for the same reason the southern and eastern European immigrants had come to America — to seek jobs in the iron and steel mills. Between 1910 and 1930, the black population of Pittsburgh grew 115 percent — from 25,623 to 54,983. The number of black iron-and steelworkers in Pittsburgh in this period increased from 786 to 2,853, or 626 percent.¹

The experience of southern black migrants to Pittsburgh represents a chapter in the epic story of rural people lured from their homelands by the possibilities of higher wages in the industrial city. The pattern of life among rural blacks in the South after Reconstruction, the particular aspirations they brought with them to the North, and their opinions of Pittsburgh as a new home and as a place of work produced a unique variation on the country-to-city theme. In this experience, it was the life-sustaining jobs — both those which

¹ Assistant curator of the West Virginia Collection at the University of West Virginia Library in Morgantown, Mr. Gottlieb presented a version of this article as a paper at the California State College History Forum on May 1, 1976.—Editor

southern blacks left to come north and those they sought in Pittsburgh — that provided the key elements in the migrants' decisions to leave, the organization of their movement, and their encounters with urban life.

In this article, oral histories of Pittsburgh migrants allow the southern blacks' voices to be heard in the recounting of their northward movement. Not since the migration period itself have students brought the migrants' own views of their experience into analyses of this transition from rural to urban worlds. Aside from the remarkable migrant letters collected by Carter G. Woodson and edited by Emmett J. Scott, investigators have had to use mainly secondary sources. Much of the material presented in the article comes from twenty-eight tape-recorded interviews with southern-born men and women who came to Pittsburgh. The migrants' spoken accounts reveal aspects of their geographic movement that are not easily obtainable by other means. Nowhere is this more true than in the social and economic dynamics of southern rural life from which the migration sprang.

Southern blacks had been on the move long before the Great Migration began in 1916. After winning their freedom in the Civil War, blacks gained a greater ability to seek work wherever they could find it. Two clear directions of movement among southern rural blacks developed between 1865 and 1890. One was the continuation of the shift of the black population toward the southwestern area of cotton cultivation which had begun when white planters settled new territory inland from the Atlantic coast and took their slaves with them. This southwestward movement continued after 1865, as black agricultural laborers and tenant farmers sought the newer cotton lands and the higher wages paid to day laborers in Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas. The second direction was from rural areas toward the cities of the South. In the decades following the end of the Civil War many ex-slaves moved to the burgeoning centers of manufacture


3 I conducted the oral history interviews for this study over an eleven-month period — from October 1973 to August 1974. Sixteen interviews were collected for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's Pittsburgh Oral History Project, June-August 1974.

such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, Richmond, and New Orleans. Between 1870 and 1890, the average increase in black population in nine major southern cities was 74 percent.  

Blacks had also moved north before 1916. In fact, the decade of the 1890s witnessed an average increase of the black population of eight northern cities of almost 75 percent. This sudden spurt in the number of southern blacks living in northern cities was to be dwarfed by the growth during the Great Migration, yet it demonstrates in the same way as the population movement within the South that the first large, sustained black migration northward had its precedents, the importance of which will be noted later.

One of the reasons southern blacks became more geographically mobile in the last decades of the nineteenth century, one can hypothesize, was their resort to seasonal migration between rural and urban areas and between farm and nonfarm work. For the 85 percent of the southern black population which resided in rural areas in 1890, the attachment to the land in the wake of Emancipation had assumed the form of tenancy. Under various sharecropping and renting arrangements, rural southern blacks mortgaged part of a cash crop in return for the use of a landowner's acreage, tools, animals, fertilizer, and, in some cases, provisions to support the tenant family between harvests. Because the ability of black tenants to save money and to buy or improve land was obstructed on many sides, movement from one rented farm to another, or off the land altogether, naturally presented itself to the black rural population as one of the easiest solutions to their problems. But many also resorted to seasonal migration from their farms to places where they could work temporarily in domestic service, laundries, lumber, mining, dockside labor, or other lines of nonagricultural work. Money earned during forays into nonfarm labor markets might tide over the rural family which had ended a crop year in debt to its landlord. While the leading black educators and reformers advocated land ownership as the ultimate solution to the problems of blacks in the South, the increasing mobility of rural

5 U.S., Bureau of the Census, *Compendium of the Eleventh U.S. Census: 1890* (Washington, 1892), 540-73. The nine southern cities were: Richmond, Virginia; Washington, D.C.; Louisville, Kentucky; Memphis, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; Charleston, South Carolina; Houston, Texas; Birmingham, Alabama.

6 Ibid. The northern cities were New York (excluding Brooklyn), Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, and St. Louis.

families suggested that other answers were being sought.

Seasonal migration in the South might have worked this way: a young male or female member of the black rural family would leave the rented farm and travel to the nearest town or city where a job could be found. Women probably were limited to the choices of domestic work or laundering. Men, however, had options of working in primary industries like lumbering or mining, of street work in towns or cities, unskilled labor in manufacturing, section-gang work on the railroads, or agricultural day labor. Short absences from the farm were not detrimental to the family's agricultural fortunes if they occurred during a season when the crops had been "laid by" and needed little care. Consequently, though, jobs were held only briefly until work on the family's land demanded the presence of all hands.8

Seasonal migration entailed important economic consequences for southern blacks. As a device to overcome the precarious marginal position of tenant families, migration readjusted the family resources. Just as family members in their prime working years became seasonal nonfarm employees, they also became only part-time residents on the family's rented land. Only by keeping well attuned to labor demand in southern industries could rural black families continue to maintain themselves as farming units. Southern tenant farming by the late nineteenth century seemed to have been approaching the point where, in Marx's phrase, "part of the agricultural population is... on the point of passing over into an urban or manufacturing proletariat, and on the look-out for circumstances favorable to this transformation."9

If seasonal migration had been intended to provide greater stability on the land for rural southern blacks, the irony of its adoption by tenant farm families was that it seemed to commit family members to continual movement over longer and longer distances, thereby prohibiting extended periods of residence on the farm. The tendency for seasonal migration to become routine might have been the consequence of the knowledge of regional or even national labor markets becoming more widely diffused among southern rural blacks as the

8 This outline of seasonal migration dynamics is derived from Kiser, Sea Island to City, 149-50, and from the personal histories of several former black migrants, gained through interviews. In order to maintain the anonymity of former migrants, oral history interviews will be cited only by the respondent's initials and the date of the interview. J.G., Nov. 26, 1973; W.H., Oct. 25, Oct. 30, 1973; C.M., Aug. 5, 1974; C.C., Feb. 21, Mar. 1, 1976; J.B., Mar. 8, Mar. 10, 1976.

twentieth century approached. A young man who had traveled no farther from home than the nearest population center the preceding year might risk going on to the state capital the next year, if by chance jobs were harder to come by the second time around. His own experience in finding work, added to the knowledge of other work situations gained through conversations with relatives and friends who had ranged still farther afield, enabled the migrant to extend the territory covered in his search for employment. Thus, major cities in the border states could become his next destination.

In this fashion, the resort to seasonal migration by increasing numbers of rural southern blacks broke ground for the southern blacks' sudden and massive response to the wartime labor demand of northern industry. The ability of hundreds of thousands of blacks to move to northern cities in a period of twenty-four to thirty months (April 1916 to December 1918) was made possible in part by the preceding decades of seasonal migration. If this was in fact the case, the Great Migration was more continuous with the overall migratory experience of southern blacks than has previously been recognized. For the large northward population movement which began in 1916 was also characterized by brief periods of residence and seasonal fluctuations in the migrants' destinations, suggesting that what happened was in part little more than an extension of the geographical scope of earlier seasonal migration.

Evidence of a transient character in the southern black migrant population in Pittsburgh emerges from their age, marital status, and residences. Abraham Epstein, who surveyed the black migrants in Pittsburgh in 1917, found that about half were in their prime work years (ages eighteen-thirty), that the vast majority resided in boardinghouses for unmarried men, and that more than two-thirds had been in the city for less than six months. A preliminary analysis of a sample of personnel records from the A. M. Byers Company of Pittsburgh, a wrought-iron manufacturer, yields a migrant profile very similar to Epstein's. Of black workers at Byers who arrived in Pittsburgh between 1916 and 1930, 51 percent were aged twenty-one to thirty and 52 percent lived in boardinghouses. Single men had come to the city in almost equal proportions to married men (single — 47

10 Estimates of the number of southern blacks who moved north between 1916 and 1918 vary widely. See Florette Henri, Black Migration (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), 51.

11 Abraham Epstein, The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, 1918), 11-12, 18.
percent, married — 52 percent). Although the fact that the majority of the migrant group in Pittsburgh was married indicates that heads of families as well as single family members were seeking jobs in northern industry, the data from both Epstein’s survey and the Byers records show that the more recently a married individual had come to Pittsburgh, the more likely it was that he had left his spouse and children in the South.

By sharpening the focus on the migrants in Pittsburgh, traces of seasonal movements become more distinct. The Byers records allow us to determine the months of the year when southern blacks arrived in the city. May and June were the months of heaviest immigration to Pittsburgh; over a third of the migrants working at the Byers plant who started when they arrived came to the city during those months. Nearly half came to Pittsburgh in April and May. Arrivals fluctuated over the other seasons of the year but were lowest in August and October, increasing somewhat in the early winter, then decreasing again until April. Migrants who quit their jobs — indicating that they were leaving the city — most often chose the months of October, November, and June. Departures decreased throughout the winter and early spring. Thus, over a fourteen-year period of migration to Pittsburgh, entrances to and exits from the city were not evenly spaced over a twelve-month span, but rose and fell with changes of the seasons.

Were the springtime migrants to Pittsburgh the same as the autumnal departures? The very brief periods which black migrants worked at the Byers firm suggest that often the two were the same. In a sample of migrants at Byers, 28 percent worked no more than thirty-one days, while 83 percent were employed no longer than six months. By Christmas, most of those who had come in the spring or early summer would have left the city, perhaps to return again the next April or May.

The vast majority of all southern blacks who were hired at the A. M. Byers Company clearly were not putting down roots in the black communities of Pittsburgh. It seems that, in most cases, the migrants, on arrival in Pittsburgh, did not expect to remain permanently, but came with initial plans to work only briefly before going elsewhere. Of ten people the author has interviewed who grew up on farms in the South and who migrated to the North after 1916, all had

12 A. M. Byers Collection, Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh (hereafter cited as Byers Collection, AIS).
14 Byers Collection, AIS.
engaged in seasonal migration away from their homes. They worked for a short period in Pittsburgh, left, returned to work again, departed once more, and eventually came back to settle in the city.

The work histories of former migrants who have been interviewed show how the tides of seasonal migration carried them to Pittsburgh. H.G. left his father’s farm in Georgia when he was sixteen, abandoning his goal to farm a larger piece of land than his father’s. He traveled to many cities seeking work and a suitable place to live. In 1916, he got a job at the Oliver Iron and Steel Company on Pittsburgh’s South Side, but he frequently traveled back to Georgia. Often the purpose of the visits back home was to see a woman he was courting. In 1922 he married her and returned to Pittsburgh to settle permanently and raise a family.

J.G. had a similar experience. His first wage-earning job was at a sawmill near his parents’ farm in South Carolina. He decided to work there after the boll weevil devoured his family’s income and made money from other sources necessary. After he turned twenty-one, J.G., continuing to support his parents and younger brother, moved with a group of friends from South Carolina to Wilmington, North Carolina, where they worked for two months in a fertilizer factory. He then went to Richmond, Virginia, where blacks were being recruited as laborers in the Carnegie mills at Homestead, Pennsylvania. From Homestead, J.G. sent back part of each pay he earned to his South Carolina home. He also kept money for his own travels ready at the post office, for he did not intend to stay indefinitely in Homestead.

The pattern of movement emerges in J.G.’s words:

I was a rambler. Comin’ near Christmas we jacked up, got all our money, and went home, wonderin’ whether we would come back — we didn’t know. But the boss and all of them would tell us, “Leave one pay in the mill, so when you come back you won’t lose no time.” Stay thirty days, come back and you still wouldn’t lose no time. But we couldn’t see it. . . . We got our money. When you did that, when you come back you had lost that service. . . . Every year I would get my money and go home. . . . I was a rambling man. . . . In 1928 I came back and stayed.

The migrant itineraries could be still more complex. W.H. grew up on a farm in New Kent County, Virginia, just east of Richmond. He worked at the age of sixteen at a sawmill, and during the First World War went to Richmond to work in a munitions plant. His father, meanwhile, had left the family on the farm and had moved to

Coatesville, Pennsylvania, to get a steel-mill job. W.H. followed him there in September 1917. The moves he made from Coatesville and the time he spent in each place before his return to Homestead were: Philadelphia (two years); Cleveland-Akron (two months); Philadelphia (three months); New Kent County (two years); Homestead (six months); and Cleveland-Erie-Buffalo (two months).\(^{17}\)

If these work histories are representative of the black migrants as a group, then one can assume the migrants were rural mainly in their southern geographical origins but not in their work backgrounds and residence just before moving north. It would seem more appropriate to regard men like H.G., J.G., and W.H. as unskilled itinerant laborers, accustomed to different kinds of work, both industrial and agricultural, rather than as direct farm-to-city migrants. Their movements within the South preceding migration to the North may have functioned to transform them gradually from agricultural to industrial workers.

Testimony on the degree to which some of the migrants were already initiated into the secrets of urban labor markets when they moved north can be found in the letters from prospective migrants in the South to northern newspapers and employment agencies collected by Emmett J. Scott. Many letters open with a statement of intent and continue with the writers’ job experiences and preferences for work in the North. Most often, though, the southerners expressed a willingness to try their hands at any kind of remunerative work, and they hoped to continue in the trade or occupation most familiar to them. These correspondents demonstrated a firm grasp of the labor market situation in 1916-1917 and the expenses of travel, lodging, and basic necessities in northern cities.\(^{18}\) Taken together, the letters of inquiry contradict a popular portrayal of the migrants as an excited, jubilant crowd of rural blacks whooping their way to the Promised Land with little understanding of, nor care for, the industrial work conditions they would encounter.\(^{19}\)

The work histories of southern black migrants and their behavior in northern cities also call into question one widely accepted rendition of the northward movement in which the southerners vow never to return to Dixie. “Many migrants must have been homesick

\(^{19}\) Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York, 1941), 86-88, 92-93.
for the South, but few went back," claims Florette Henri. However, through the work histories recounted above runs the theme of the southern home the migrant has left behind. Now fading into the background as the migrant shifts from place to place in the North, now coming strongly to the fore with the advent of a holiday season or with the sudden and unexpected illness of a parent, the place of origin seldom relinquished all claims on the migrants until long after they had first departed. The migrants' families could for many years remain financially dependent on them, and regular contributions from the North were often vital even after the migrants had come to rest in a particular place. Or, in order to help out with work on the family's rented land, migrants returned home when parents and siblings could not manage.

Sentimental bonds to the childhood home were no less strong than material ones. The comparatively well-paid jobs in a northern city might justify working there, but the black migrant went back home to find a bride and a helpmate. Revivals held in the church in which the migrant had been brought up called him back, too. And all occasions when old friends and relatives — many of whom probably also had left their southern homes — might gather were times that those who had gone north could not bear to miss; birthdays, graduations, and funerals were especially important.

Attachment to the southern home assumed many forms. Seasonal migration within the South and between North and South, brief periods of work in northern industry, and frequent trips home all expressed this commitment. Whatever the particular circumstances surrounding their departure from the South and their travels to northern cities, the migrants did not often completely spurn their birthplaces for the new places of employment, no matter how happy their experience in the freer air of the North might have been. An important question bearing on the nature of black migration in this period (but one very difficult to answer) is: how many southern blacks came north, worked for a short period of time and then returned south to stay? The least which can be said with a large measure of certainty is that many black migrants were only intermittent residents in northern industrial cities, and their work there was only one phase of a year's labor.

Because of the objectives which the migrants sought by their seasonal movements, work in northern cities could only be temporary.

20 Henri, Black Migration, 130.
Before long, the southerners would be traveling to another northern city where a different industry or employer might offer higher wages, or they would turn their backs on the North to return home. In any case, the job itself was not, and was not expected to be, an anchor for the migrants in the North, nor was it to provide over a period of years steady income with which to raise a family, educate children, buy a home, or to join a church, fraternal society, or other community organization. Instead, jobs in northern cities were entered by many migrants primarily to gain only a limited amount of money. The new black workers intended to spend at least part of their earnings from industrial work in the areas from which they had moved.

Let us review briefly the length of time southern black migrants worked at the A. M. Byers plant in Pittsburgh. Of those who quit their jobs at Byers and left Pittsburgh, 11.3 percent worked from one to fourteen days. Seventeen percent worked from fifteen to thirty-one days. Thirty-two percent kept their jobs from one to three months; 22.6 percent from three to six months; and 13 percent for twelve months or more. That is, about one-quarter of the southern blacks who quit work and left town labored one month or less, and three-fifths of them (60.4 percent) stayed no longer than three months.

Employers and supervisors were quick to misinterpret the high turnover rates among black migrants in northern industries. The tendencies to lay off frequently and make many trips out of the northern city were ascribed to "racial characteristics" of laziness, intemperance, lack of perseverance, and other reasons. Comparing black workers to other ethnic working-class groups in Chicago, one employment manager commented, "The colored are indolent; they go to sleep waiting for a job. They spend their money on railroad fare; I think they would go home if a [pet] dog died." 21

But it was precisely because industrial work was temporary that it was valued highly by the migrants. Jobs paying relatively high wages were the vital link in the process of seasonal migration, providing in the short term the needed increment to the migrant family's income.

The crucial phase in the migration of any particular southern black, therefore, was the search for work in the northern city. If successful in finding a job relatively quickly, the migrant would have exhausted less of his resources, would be earning money sooner, and

would be saving more of his pay. Thus, whenever possible, southern blacks moved where they believed work could be most easily secured. We have already seen how some sent letters of inquiry to northern employment agencies and industrial firms, trying to ascertain their chances for success prior to leaving the South. Relatives or friends already residing in a particular city might have been able to aid migrants in finding a job, but even for those without organizational or family resources to help them, a knowledge of where men were being hired and which employers had good reputations was not hard to come by. The boardinghouses, poolrooms, taverns, and street corners became informal clearinghouses for employment information during the periods of heavy in-migration to northern manufacturing centers. Actually getting hired, on the other hand, remained the task of the individual migrant. It was at the employment office that seasonal migrants placed their stakes.

The following is, in its outlines, a typical migrant experience in finding work. This storyteller, unlike many migrants, was a devout Christian; his efforts to get a job probably have been related many times over and have in the process taken on a quality of drama and suspense only the master narrator can bestow. But such a confrontation between the southern migrant on one side, single-mindedly set on finding work, and the scrutinizing employment agent at the factory gates on the other side, must have been altogether commonplace in the experiences of many southern blacks during the migration period.

I had $2.50 left—that's all I had. . . .

I got on that #55 car and went just as straight to the Westinghouse as I ever did, [to] the employment office. Me and him went in there, and there was eighty-some men standing in line. Me and him was the only colored in the line. Well, we were in the rear. And they turned them down like that . . . hired one white fellow, a machinist. Didn't need no help. All right.

When I got close to the man by the door, he looked and saw me. "Stand aside," [he said]. I stepped aside. Man, I'd been standing up there and I'd seen them turning them folks down like that! I knowed there was no chance for me, and how I prayed. I just believed I was going to work. So I walked up to the desk.

He looked at me, says, "What do you want?" I said, "I want to go to work this morning." That man sat there pecking on his desk [with a pencil] four or five minutes, says, "I don't need no laborers." I said, "I'm not particular about laboring." "Can you write?" I told him, "Yeah, I can write."

He kept tapping on his desk. . . . Man, I was praying all the time, "Lord, don't let him say no." He said, "I'm going to give you a good job. If you're good at it, and stick with it, you can make good." 22

This story illustrates several important aspects of the migrants' attitudes and perceptions of work in the North. First the cardinal importance of the job itself to the migrant comes through in every line. In this case, the southerner was nearly broke and faced the prospect of having to borrow money simply to get through the next day. But just as evident is the fate of this individual's more fundamental motive in migration — to prepare himself for the ministry. In the comparatively well-paid work of northern industries lay the key to all the broader objectives in coming north: increasing family income; buying land in the South; supporting projects of self-improvement. With jobs as the modus vivendi in the migrant's plans, a vaunted estimation of industrial work in the North quickly became one common element in the new black worker's outlook.

To judge by other work-search stories, success in finding a job seemed to depend on a combination of the migrant's own aggressiveness, an understanding personnel officer, and an intangible factor, whether it was the migrant's intuition, providential intervention, or simple luck. In the following story, the intangible factor is absent, but the job seeker's own actions and the personnel officer's response are the keys to the happy ending.

I came to the J&L employment office . . . and when I walked into the office there, the man was saying [to the job applicants], "That's all." And I said one word. I said, "Well, everywhere I go that's what I've heard someone say—'that's all.'" And I'll never forget this fellow as long as I live . . . His name was Jack. And he said to me, "Hey, come here!" He said, "Can you stand heat?" And I said, "I can stand heat and most anything about doing a job." He said, "Can you come back to work tonight?" I said, "I sure can." 23

At times even greater assertiveness by the southern black migrant was needed. The next story shows how the new workers could push their chances of getting hired almost to the limit.

I started back to work. Saturday morning I think it was. And I got up to this [street corner] there, and something just spoke to me: "Go to J&L." I just turned and went down a little side street. When I got over there men were lined up a mile, from 25th to 26th Street. A ton of men. I just kept walking. Got up to the employment office; I was turning to go in, and you could hear them guys hollerin' over here, "Stop him! Stop him!"

The old beathouse cop on the inside said I had to wait. "Hell, I don't get in line for pay day!" He looked at me. "That's the rule." I said, "Well, I wouldn't get in line no how, and I don't have time. If I want this job here, I'm goin' on to work anyhow, I mean it. I'm not going to get in line for pay day. I'm going to be the first or second man." I believed in goin' about my business. Never late, no time.

So, the employment manager was looking over his glasses. He said to the other fellow, "Bring that fellow over here." I went over there. He said, "This guy is comin' to work. He's the kind of man we want. . . . I'm going to sign this kid up. He's going to be a man 'round J&L."

This old cop was saying, "Breaking the rules." He [the employment manager] said, "Rules is made to break." 24

These work-search stories offer another clue to the migrants' perceptions of the industrial world they were entering. The experiences related above all emphasize the general hostility the southern blacks felt in Pittsburgh. Black residents of the city seemed to them unfriendly and uncaring. Temptations of urban life beckoned to the migrant whose plans centered not on amusement but on work. The atmosphere of the employment office itself, with men standing in line, all anxious for the few jobs opening that day, apparently etched itself deeply in some migrants' memories. The difficulties of finding work and the perceived hostility may have discouraged many, convincing them that fairer prospects lay elsewhere, but for others the obstacles to getting jobs became hurdles for them to clear. That they felt opposition to their attempts to find work made the jobs all the more important to the ambitious migrants. Although thousands of recent arrivals from the South might be getting hired, to the individual migrant finding a position in Pittsburgh was a personal victory over antagonistic forces.

Taken as a whole, the circumstances surrounding the migration of southern blacks and their search for work imbued the jobs opened to them during World War I with a transcendent importance. Some observers of the movement of southern blacks to the North believed that the accompanying talk of freedom and justice concerned a changing attitude toward migration and work in the minds of the migrants: "There was created in the minds of the Negro rural peasants and urban wage-earners a new consciousness of the fact that they have the liberty and the opportunity to move freely from place to place. The migration . . . gave the rank and file the belief that they could move to another part of the country and succeed in gaining a foothold in its industrial life and activity." 25

This much, however, might have been said of the consciousness of southern blacks even before 1916. Seasonal migration within the South had been altering traditional attitudes toward work opportunities for some time before the really large out-migration got under way.

The Great Migration earned its reputation not because southern blacks moved north and found jobs but because they did so in unprecedented numbers, because the jobs they entered were ones by and large closed to them before, and because the timing and dimensions of the migration created intense excitement in the southern black communities. That which had been routine was given a new cast by the conditions surrounding northward movement of southern blacks from 1916 on.

The spirit which was created by the Great Migration imparted to the new black workers the sense that they had a right to the jobs opening to them in northern industry and that they were as well able to perform the work as the next man. “He [the employment agent] looked at me and said, ‘Boy, you’re pretty young. Do you know how to work?’ I said, ‘I can do anything you can do.’ Just like that. That was my strategy. You ask me can I do something, I ask you can you do it. . . . I still believe I can do anything another man can do, if I want to.”

26 The brief periods they intended to work in mills and factories and the perceived hostility of their new environment notwithstanding, black migrants understood that their restricted occupational position in northern cities was breaking down, and they approached the new positions in the work force with an almost militant attitude.

One consequence of the new black worker’s perception of his changing role in the work force was a refusal to accept working conditions which he felt were unnecessarily dangerous or undesirable. The reason why migrants quit their jobs at the Byers mill in at least two cases out of every ten concerned working conditions, foremen, or other workers. Another 20 percent of the southern blacks who quit went to other jobs which they considered better than those assigned to them at the Byers Company. Migrants who labored in the galvanizing shop complained about the acid in which finished products were immersed. Those in departments where iron pipe was tested quit because the work was “too wet.” Others left the plant because they found conditions too hot, too hard, or too heavy.

The reasons black migrants gave for leaving their jobs at Byers undoubtedly reflected objectionable conditions under which they had to work. But the complaints lodged against the firm also suggest that migrants had come to Pittsburgh with expectations higher than could be met by industrial work in the city. In the search not for any job,

but for a job with decent working conditions, the Great Migration became much more than a net redistribution of black people in the United States. It was more fundamentally a rapid elevation in the southern black migrants' aspirations and expectations. Because they brought with them from the South their own standards for industrial jobs and working conditions, the new black workers were probably not, as some authorities have claimed, the prime material for employers' paternalistic labor relations schemes. We need to reexamine with care the migrants' own ways of gauging their work experience in northern cities in order to discover the basis on which they, as a group, gradually became a permanent part of the industrial working class in America.

The manifold changes that grew out of southern black migration to Pittsburgh defy any effort to summarize them in a few sentences. On one level, we can see that northward movement expanded blacks' educational, occupational, and cultural resources. But on a deeper level, the meaning of the migration for blacks' advancement remained ambiguous. The introduction to northern industrial labor, which was the cutting edge of the migrants' transformation from a rural to an urban group, produced diverse reactions among the new black workers. Some found Pittsburgh jobs adequate to their needs for permanent homes. But many others discovered that urban labor and living conditions were not better in every respect than the way of life that they had known in the South. One migrant to Pittsburgh wrote to the pastor of his home church in words that expressed the ambivalent feelings of thousands of southern blacks in the city: "I like the money O.K. but I like the South better [sic] for my Pleasure this city is too fast for me they give you big money for what you do but they charge you big things for what you get... its [sic] largest city I ever saw... smoky city... some places look like torment or how they say it look and some places look like Paradise." 28

IN COMMEMORATION
GIFTS
IN MEMORY OF
JOSEPH G. SMITH
FROM
DR. AND MRS. PAUL M. LEWIS
KEITH DEAN F. ROWLAND
WOMEN'S CLUB OF CRAFTON