

REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT MIGRATION TO WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

by Joe W. Trotter

A FOCUS ON THE Great Migration to Western Pennsylvania offers an opportunity for us to reflect on strategies for dealing with crises in the African-American community today. We are troubled by the loss of jobs in the industrial sector over the past two decades and the resulting deterioration of our communities, the spread of violence, and the debilitating impact of drugs. For these reasons, we can look at the Great Migration as a response to an even greater crisis in African-American life — i.e., the rise of Jim Crow, disfranchisement, lynchings, and racial segregation in the late 19th and early 20th century American South. While a greater appreciation for the past cannot offer immediate solutions, it can highlight the numerous difficulties that African-Americans faced and the viable responses they fashioned, and their survival in heart, body, and mind.

The Great Migration to Western Pennsylvania had deep roots in the work, culture, and community experiences of southern blacks. After the Civil War, nearly 4 million slaves gained their freedom in the South. It was perhaps the most optimistic moment in African-American history. Yet, in less than 25 years, African-Americans faced the onset of a new white supremacist regime. During the 1880s and 1890s, the number of recorded lynchings reached an average of about 100 per year. By the early 1900s, African-Americans faced systematic exclusion from voting, segregation in the institutional life, and growing economic exploitation.

The sharecropping system dominated the economic sphere. According to Booker T. Washington, sharecropping was a system of debt that resembled slavery. As he put it, sharecropping robbed African-Americans of their independence and made them feel “lost and bewildered.” African-American sharecroppers were by no means passive. Facing the tightening grip of segregation, they adopted migration as a major strategy for changing their lives. They gradually moved into southern, and then northern cities.

The migrants came in two waves. During the first, between 1890 and 1910, an estimated 300,000 blacks moved north; some came to Pittsburgh and other industrial towns along the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers. Pittsburgh’s black population rose from only 6,000 or so in 1880 to over 26,600 in 1910. The surrounding towns of Homestead, Braddock, Duquesne, and McKeesport also saw increases in their black populations. Most of these early migrants came from the upper South and border states (Virginia, Tennessee, Maryland, and North Carolina). This pre-World War I generation included men such as Jefferson Jackson from King George County, Va.; James Claggett from Mt. Zion, Md.; and William Marbley from Beilton, W. Va. These men found employment respectively at the Duquesne Steel Company, the Carnegie Steel Company, and the Clairton Steel Company, which became part of the U. S. Steel Corporation in 1904.

Early black iron and steel employees worked in a broad range of occupations. As historian Dennis Dickerson notes, not all were confined to jobs such as custodians and common laborers. Some

were relatively well-educated and gained prestigious and skilled jobs. John Harley, a black graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, became a draftsman at the Crucible Steel Company. Another black graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, William Dennon, joined the engineering department at the Farrell plant of U. S. Steel. William Nelson Page, another early black migrant, served as private secretary to W. G. Glyde, general manager of sales for Carnegie Steel.

At the Black Diamond Steel Works in Pittsburgh, African-Americans held such important skilled positions as plumber, engineer, die grinder, and puddler. At the Clark Mills in Pittsburgh, about 30 percent of the firm's 110 black employees worked in skilled jobs — as rollers, roughers, finishers, puddlers, millwrights, and heaters. By 1910, skilled workers made up about 27 percent of Pittsburgh's black iron and steel work force. Indeed, for a short period, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe had fewer of their numbers in skilled jobs than African-Americans.

Despite significant progress in the pre-World War I era, however, the number of black employees remained small. By 1910, Pittsburgh's iron and steel mills employed nearly 30,000 workers. African-Americans comprised only about 3 percent of the total. American-born whites made up 29 percent of the total, while immigrants comprised 68 percent.

World War I ushered in the second wave of black migration, as blacks moved into northern cities in growing numbers. An estimated 500,000 blacks left the South between 1916 and 1920, and during the 1920s, another 800,000 to 1 million southern blacks moved to northern cities. Unlike the pre-war migration, however, most of the new migrants came from the boll weevil-infested cotton regions of the deep South. Between about 1915 and 1930, the number of black farm workers in Georgia dropped by nearly 30 percent (about 122,500 to less than 87,000). South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi experienced similar declines.

Western Pennsylvania, once again, was a major target of the black migration. In 1917, *Iron Age*, a key journal in the steel industry, reported trains "filled with negroes bound from the South to Pittsburgh." According to one contemporary scholar, over 18,000 blacks arrived in Pittsburgh between 1915 and 1917. Pittsburgh's black population increased from 25,600 in 1910 to 37,700 in 1920 (4.8 to 6.4 percent of the total). The black population in the mill towns of Homestead, Rankin, Braddock, and others nearly doubled. By war's end, the black population in the major steel towns of Western Pennsylvania had increased from 29,470 to nearly 50,000, an increase of about 70 percent. By 1930, over 78,000 African-Americans lived in Western Pennsylvania (about 7 percent of the total population).

Black migration to the city of Pittsburgh during this period was less intense than elsewhere. Detroit's black population increased by 611 percent; Cleveland's by 307 percent; and Chicago's by 148 percent. Nonetheless, the steel industry in Western Pennsylvania employed African-Americans in growing numbers. By 1918, black steelworkers had increased from less than 3 percent of the total to 13 percent. Over 50 percent of these employees worked at Carnegie steel plants in Allegheny County and at Jones

and Laughlin's numerous mills in the area.

During the early war years, labor agents from railroads, steel companies, and defense industries facilitated black migration to the region. In the summer of 1916, for example, the Pennsylvania Railroad launched a major campaign to recruit black labor for northern industries, including its own far-flung operations. Railroad companies provided free transportation passes to black workers, who, upon receiving employment, authorized the railroads to deduct travel expenses from their paychecks.

Northern black newspapers applauded what became known as "The Great Migration" to Western Pennsylvania and elsewhere in urban America. Some southern black newspapers reinforced the process. A West Virginia editor exclaimed, "Let millions of Negroes leave the South. It will make conditions better for those who remain." The black weekly *Chicago Defender* emerged as the most vigorous promoter of black population movement. The *Defender* repeatedly portrayed the South as the land of lynchings, disfranchisement, and economic exploitation. At the same time, the paper appealed to important elements in southern black religious culture. The *Defender* portrayed the North as the "promised land," and spoke of the migration as a "flight from Egypt," and "Crossing over Jordan." When one train load of blacks crossed the Ohio River headed north, they knelt to pray and sang the hymn: "I Done Come Out of the Land of Egypt with the Good News."

Although African-Americans often expressed their views of the Great Migration in biblical terms and received encouragement from northern black newspapers, railroad companies, and industrial labor agents, they also drew upon family and friendship networks to help in the move to Western Pennsylvania. They formed migration clubs, pooled their money, bought tickets at reduced rates, and often moved in groups. Before they made the decision to move, they gathered information and debated the pros and cons of the process. As one recent study points out, in barbershops, poolrooms, and grocery stores, in churches, lodge halls, and clubhouses, and in private homes, southern blacks discussed, debated, and decided what was good and what was bad about moving to the urban North. Historians John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael Weber note in their comparative study of ethnic and racial migration patterns to Pittsburgh that friend and kinship networks played a crucial role in the movement of southern blacks to Pittsburgh: "As a teenager Jean B. began working at a sawmill near Mobile, Alabama, while living on his parents' farm. It was at the sawmill that he heard mention of Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago. Such conversation prompted him to come north. He decided upon Pittsburgh because two friends were already there. After saving \$45, he took a train from Mobile through Cincinnati to Pittsburgh, where his friends obtained a room for him."

Black women played a major role in migration networks. As recent scholarship suggests, they were the primary "kinkeepers." According to historian Peter Gottlieb, black women sometimes chose Pittsburgh over other places and shaped patterns of black migration to the region. In 1919, one black man went to Cincin-

nati, found a job, and sent for his wife. His wife later recalled her response and the final result: "I wrote him a letter back. My older sister had come to Pittsburgh, and I took her as a mother because I had lost my mother. And I wrote him back and said, 'I don't want to stay in Cincinnati. I want to go to Pittsburgh.' Next letter I got, he had got a job in Pittsburgh and sent for me."

Southern blacks were quite aware of job opportunities in Western Pennsylvania, and that the war in Europe had blocked the flow of European immigrants to northern cities. Nearly one million immigrants annually had entered the country in the years just before America entered the war. During the war years, the annual number dropped to nearly 300,000. Moreover, some immigrants returned to their homelands to fight. Allegheny County lost nearly 20,000 immigrants during the war years. At the same time, the federal government passed the Selective Service Act of 1917 and drafted young men in rising numbers. As the draft (coupled with declining immigration) depleted the labor supply, rural southern blacks found new opportunities to make higher wages and improve their lives. In a letter to the Pittsburgh Urban League, one man wrote for himself and seven other black men: "We southern Negroes want to come to the north... they ain't giving a man nothing for what he do... they [white southerners] is trying to keep us down." Another black man from Savannah, Georgia, wrote, "I want to find a good job where I can make a living as I cannot do it here." From South Carolina, a black woman wrote to the Pittsburgh Urban League for her two sons: "[I have] two grown son[s]... we want to settle down somewhere north... wages are so cheap down here we can hardly live." A Georgia man wanted to come to Pittsburgh to "make a livelihood, and to educate my children."

African-Americans earned between \$3.50 and \$5 per eight-hour day in the steel industry. In the South, in the cities, they made no more than \$2.50 per 12-hour day. In southern agriculture, as farm laborers, African-Americans made even less, usually no more than \$1 per day. According to one recent study, even after accounting for higher rents, life in the Pittsburgh region was better for most blacks than it was in their southern homes. In their view, migration represented a path leading to upward mobility, citizenship, and a fuller recognition of their humanity. For the first time in American history, blacks entered the industrial mainstream. In doing so, they earned more than they had ever earned before, especially if they came directly from farms in the deep South. In Western Pennsylvania, they also lived in a social environment that contrasted sharply with their southern homes.

Unfortunately, as blacks entered the region in larger numbers, racism intensified and blocked their mobility. As in the South, employers, white workers, and the state all helped to keep blacks at the bottom of the economic ladder. Compared to pre-war counterparts, for example, few black steelworkers gained skilled jobs in the wake of the Great Migration. Employers classified over 90 percent — and sometimes 100 percent — of the new workers as unskilled. This pattern prevailed at Carnegie Steel (all plants), Jones and Laughlin (all plants), National Tube



A miner waits to go underground at Montour No. 4 mine. African-Americans from the South were given free transport and promises of employment in the mines when union workers went on strike in 1892 and 1895.

(all plants), Crucible Steel, and others. African-Americans took jobs that were the most dangerous, the lowest paying, and the dirtiest. They fed the blast furnaces, poured molten steel, and worked on the coke ovens. They repeatedly complained that their jobs were characterized by disproportionate exposure to debilitating heat and deadly fumes. It is no wonder that the black turnover rate was so high. At A.M. Beyer Company, for example, 1,408 black employees came and went during 1923 to maintain a regular work force of 223 blacks. Although some employers would later institute social welfare and recreational programs for black workers, they did little to improve the long-term prospects of black steelworkers.

For its part, the labor movement largely excluded blacks, misreading the significance of the Great Migration and losing an excellent opportunity to redefine the African-American experience in more explicitly class, rather than racial, terms. As a result, African-Americans sometimes served as strike-breakers and undermined the goals of the labor movement. The Great Steel Strike of 1919 is an outstanding example. The strike represented a huge challenge for organized labor. During the war years, the federal government had protected the rights of workers to bargain collectively with employers in exchange for their support of the war effort. As the war emergency passed, however, the federal government exhibited less enthusiasm for protecting the rights of workers. Moreover, the triumph of the Communist Revolution in Russia unleashed new fears of workers and led to repression of radicals and radical ideas. At the same time, the Great Migration brought racial animosities to the surface; major race riots hit such cities as Chicago and East St Louis.

Despite these very difficult times and the disappointing record of labor union discrimination, at the outset of the 1919 steel strike African-Americans were by no means uniformly hostile to organized labor. They grudgingly accepted segregated unions, using them to fight racial barriers in the labor movement as well as the discriminatory policies of employers. From the outset, the Pittsburgh Urban League urged William Z. Foster and the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers to employ black organizers. Although Foster appeared eager to organize black workers, the strike committee as a whole exhibited little interest in the black worker. Comprised of 24 international unions, the strike committee itself represented several decidedly hostile and racially exclusionary unions. The machinists and electrical workers barred African-Americans altogether, while the blacksmiths relegated blacks to auxiliary lodges under the control of white locals. Understandably, then, in this hostile and at best lukewarm racial climate, few African-American steel workers walked out with their white brothers. In the city of Pittsburgh, less than two dozen blacks joined 25,000 white workers in the 1919 Steel Strike. In other plants up and down the Monongahela River, the response was little better. At the huge Homestead, Duquesne, Clairton, and Braddock works, only a handful of blacks walked out with their white counterparts. A similar pattern prevailed in Chicago, Gary, Youngstown, and other northern centers of the steel industry.

The labor movement not only failed to fully organize the existing labor force, it also failed to protect itself against the use of new African-American workers as strike breakers. The importation of new black workers helped to defeat the steel strike. According to the Inter-Church World Movement of North America, managers skillfully utilized black strikebreakers. In a modern-day interview with David Demarest, Annie Morgan recalled how her husband continued to work during the strike: "They would go in the mill and stay in there sometimes two or three days. They could go in from the Port Perry end because ... the railroad from Port Perry ran right into the mill, you know." Black workers were often shifted from plant to plant, smuggled in at night and mixed with small contingents of white strikebreakers. As Foster put it, thousands of whites, skilled and unskilled, went on strike in their hometowns, but "sneaked away to other steel centers and worked there until the strike was over." After defeating the strike with the aid of black strike-breakers, company officials frequently referred to black workers as "strike insurance" and as a "life-saver" in times of emergency.

African-Americans not only faced restrictions at the work place, but they also faced constraints on where they could live. Real estate and company officials collaborated in the rise of all-black areas, characterized by overcrowded, dilapidated, and unsanitary conditions. Historian Dennis Dickerson notes that African-Americans found housing in carefully designated "Colored areas": Port Perry in Braddock, Castle Garden in Duquesne, Rosedale in Johnstown, and the Hill District in Pittsburgh.

As these areas became overcrowded, other all-black areas also emerged. Making matters worse, African-Americans were barred from numerous facilities designed to serve the public. Downtown restaurants routinely excluded black customers. Blacks could only receive food services in the basement of Rosenbaum Department Store. Theaters consigned black customers to the balcony. Policemen, judges, and other public officials also treated African-Americans with disdain and violated their civil rights. During the early 1920s, local chapters of Ku Klux Klan emerged in Pittsburgh, Homestead, Johnstown, and other major towns of Western Pennsylvania. At its height in 1924, the Klan claimed a membership of 125,000 in Western Pennsylvania.

In 1923, the most destructive racial conflict occurred in Johnstown, when a black migrant was charged in a shooting incident involving police. The mayor, police, and other town officials blamed the black newcomers for stirring up trouble and ordered them "to pack up" and "go back from where you came." An estimated 500 black steelworkers and their families were forced to leave the area.

But while African-Americans faced stiff racial barriers and some were forced to leave the area, most stayed. They not only stayed, but helped to build new institutions and expand their own communities in Western Pennsylvania. As historian Earl Lewis put it in another context, they helped to transform segregation into "congregation." Black churches, fraternal orders, and newspapers (especially the *Pittsburgh Courier*); organizations such as the NAACP, Urban League, and Garvey Movement; social clubs,

restaurants, and baseball teams; hotels, beauty shops, barber shops, and taverns, all proliferated. According to historian Laurence Glasco, "The migrants gave the community a new energy and creativity that quickly attracted attention. Wylie Avenue, Centre Avenue, and side streets in the Hill district 'jumped' as blacks and whites flocked to its bars and night spots."

During the era of the Great Migration, blacks not only fueled the engine of industrial expansion with their labor, but also helped to transform the region and the nation. African-Americans in Western Pennsylvania helped establish the foundation for the New Deal coalition of the 1930s and 1940s; the new Congress of Industrial Organizations; the Double V Campaign for victory at home and victory abroad during World War II; and new forms of popular culture, especially jazz and blues. In 1941, Richard Attaway opened his powerful novel on black migration to Pittsburgh, *Blood On The Forge*, with a description of the main character, Melody, a guitar player: "He never had a craving in him that he couldn't slick away on his guitar.... And maybe that's why his mother changed his name to Melody." The contributions of these southern blacks would also facilitate the rise of the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

Our times and conditions are different. The forms of disfranchisement, racial discrimination, and economic inequality have changed significantly since the Jim Crow era of the early 20th century. Yet, as we move toward the 21st century, let us remember that African-Americans endured Jim Crow and a massive migra-

tion of people with few equals in human history. Their transformation from agricultural people to urban-industrial people created new forms of popular culture and provoked a radical realignment of American political forces. They and their descendants have a great deal to teach. ☀

Sources

The author wishes to acknowledge that this essay is based partly upon lectures delivered at the Conference on the 75th Anniversary of the Great Steel Strike (Fall 1994) and at the African-American Lecture Series of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania (Spring 1995).

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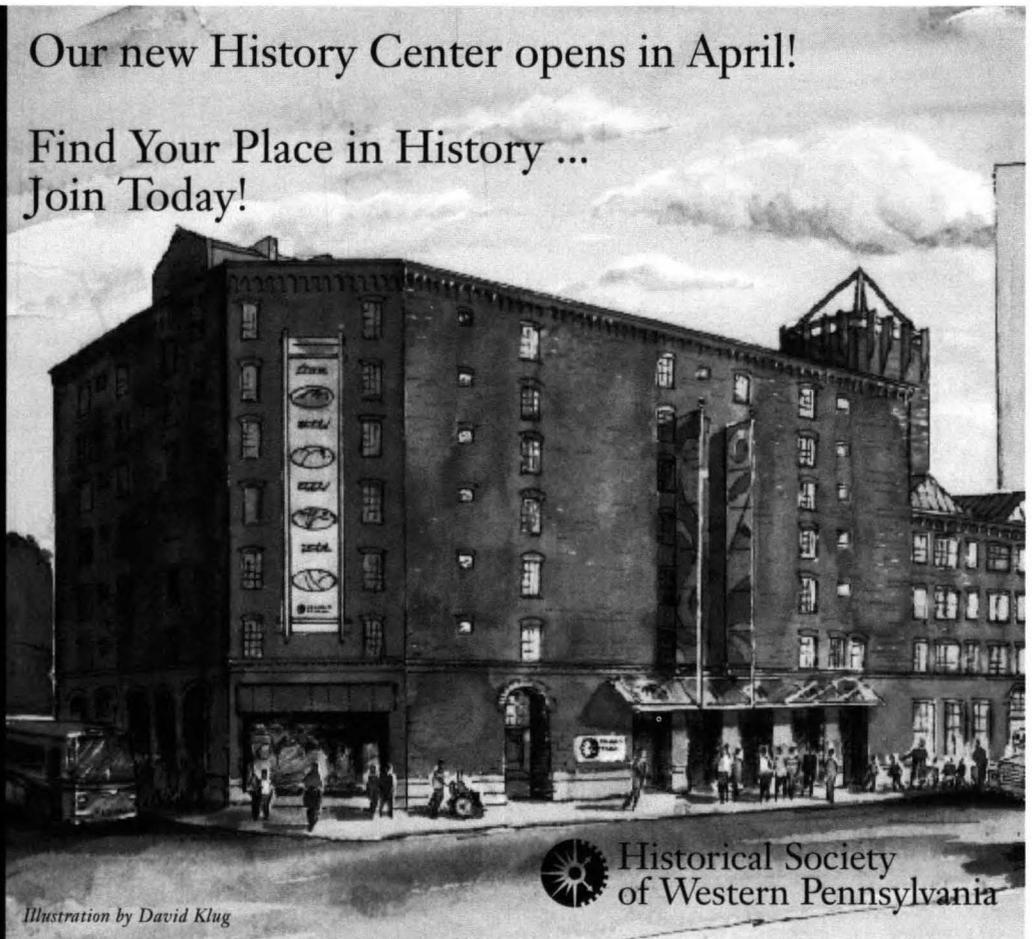
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