

Field to Factory: The Great Migration

by Johnnie Douthis
Smithsonian News Service

Rufus Crew moved to Cleveland in 1927, taking a circuitous route from South Carolina to Georgia to Indiana and finally to Ohio. He stayed for a time in each state—trying to find a better way of life for his wife and eight children. Crew's arrival in Cleveland, however, did not end the family's struggle. Sometimes his children had to work to supplement the family income. But all the youngsters completed high school, and several attended college on the way to professional careers.

Crew's story is among those told in a special exhibition, "Field to Factory: Afro-American Migration 1915-1940," at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Historian Spencer Crew, the exhibit's organizer, is the grandson of Rufus Crew. He explains that his family and other black people left the South for varied reasons, but that, above all, the chance for many to escape dismal living conditions was the impetus for the massive exodus of Afro-Americans.

The exodus was called the "Great Migration," and it involved hundreds of thousands of people who headed north after the outbreak of World War I. The story about these Afro-Americans fits into other migrations, Crew says. "They were just as heroic as Western pioneers, who also desired a better life."

At the turn of the century, three-quarters of all black Americans lived in the rural South. They were a crucial source of cheap labor in the region, but black Americans seldom profited from their work. Very few owned their own homes or the land they farmed.



Hundreds of thousands of black Americans headed north after World War I. Although they left for varied reasons, above all, the chance for many to escape dismal living conditions was the impetus for this massive exodus, known as the Great Migration.

Black Southerners also had to live with "Jim Crow" laws set forth by the 1896 Supreme Court case Plessy vs. Ferguson, which provided for separate but equal facilities for blacks. In truth, the public facilities were far from equal. Schools for black children were woefully inadequate, only serving elementary school grades. Since there were few public black high schools in rural areas, parents were forced to establish and support private black high schools. Black people were also the victims of violent attacks by whites—beatings and lynchings were the crude tools of intimidation.

The Great Migration cut across the spectrum of the black population. Farmers, college graduates and servicemen headed North. Service in the military (an opportunity for young black men to show patriotism and to prove themselves good citizens) exposed the recruits to different ways of life outside the South. "After returning home," Crew says, "it was difficult for these veterans to live as before."

During World War I, as production in the industrial North increased, many companies lost their main labor source—the white male immigrant—to the armed forces. As an alternative, Northern industrialists turned to

the South. Labor recruiters (resented and threatened by Southern officials), word-of-mouth advertising, letters and newspapers—all were used to find replacement workers.

Black newspapers, such as the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier, played an important role by running articles—aimed at black Southerners—about discrimination and the advantages of living in the North. But letters from the new Northern residents proved to be the best source of information; in many instances, these messages were the deciding factor in whether or not one joined the Migration.

What made it especially tough for many to leave home was the strong support long provided Southern blacks by churches and community groups. These support systems made it possible for blacks to live a tolerable existence, despite all the injustices.



In the move to the North, it was the exceptional migrant who left the South by car. Most traveled by bus, train or on foot.

"The decision to leave was an individual one," Crew says. "It was not a decision made on the basis of who was brave but rather a matter of weighing choices. For some, it was hard to leave if the family owned property. Others may have stayed in the South to fight through the rigid segregation policies."

After making the decision, it sometimes became a dangerous task to actually carry out as local laws made it possible for migrants to be arrested.

Once on the road, segregation practices caused additional problems. As told in the "Field to Factory" exhibition, Lillian Reuben McNeary, a black woman traveling by bus from Newberry, S.C., to New York City, accidentally used a restroom reserved for white people. The other passengers feared for her life. Reuben-McNeary was reprimanded by the owner, but to the relief of the others, the rebuke was verbal, not physical.

Traveling by train presented hazards of a different kind. Afro-Americans had to ride in poorly maintained and overcrowded cars next to locomotives trailing soot and cinders that settled over the already anxious passengers.

After these indignities, what awaited the migrants once they reached the North was often the unknown. Yet adjustment was possible with the help of a friend or relative and assistance from the Urban League, church groups, Traveler's Aid Society or other local organizations that helped arrivals.



Workers pick cotton in the rural South, where Afro-Americans, once a crucial source of cheap labor, seldom profited from their hard work.

Faced with competition from migrants for jobs and the already short supply of housing, whites at times responded violently to their new neighbors. Race riots initiated by whites took place in several cities, including Chicago in 1919 and Detroit in 1925. To prevent black residents from buying or renting in certain neighborhoods, restrictive legal covenants were instituted. These prohibited owners from selling or renting their homes to anyone their neighbors found objectionable.

The Great Migration also caused some concern in the minds of Afro-Americans already settled in Northern cities. "These residents feared that the increasing black population would cause additional discrimination, and black citizens were anxious about the unsophisticated manners of the newcomers," Crew says.

Moreover, this arrival of new migrants intensified the demand for housing and increased the size of black neighborhoods. Housing there was more expensive than comparable housing in other areas, even though homes were often dilapidated and lacked adequate sanitation facilities. Because the rents were high, many tenants shared their homes with boarders or newly arrived relatives.

Yet the new residents soon made an impact on gritty urban politics. "This large black community provided a new core of support for black issues," Crew says. "The ballots cast by migrants were important for swing votes and for the election of black politicians."

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, established before the Great Migration, found added support for its activities.

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