

LAND OF HOPE

Chicago,
Black Southerners,
and the
Great Migration

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To Howard Grossman and Adele Grossman

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"Tell Me about the Place"

Each Saturday the Chicago *Defender* arrived at Robert Horton's barber shop in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, carrying news of life north of the Mason-Dixon line. Habitues of the shop—many of whom had come in from surrounding rural areas for the day—not only purchased the black newspaper from Horton, but often discussed its contents, which in 1916 began to focus increasingly on the growing movement of black southerners to northern cities. Although the *Defender* provided most of his impressions about life in the North, Horton also occasionally received letters from a brother who had moved to Chicago in 1898. During a visit to New Orleans in 1916, Horton encountered in a barber shop a labor agent recruiting for northern industry. Despite dissatisfaction with the limitations he confronted in the South, he declined the agent's offer of free transportation. He continued to think about the increasingly inescapable question of migration and soon afterwards decided to move to Chicago, but he determined not to make the journey alone. The apparently popular barber discussed the proposition with others, and between fall 1916 and January 1917 he recruited nearly forty men and women to join his family in a migration club, which secured a group discount on the Illinois Central Railroad. Soon after his arrival in Chicago, he opened the Hattiesburg Barber Shop, which became a gathering place for migrants from Mississippi.¹

Having occupied a central position in Hattiesburg's black community as a businessman and Baptist deacon, Horton became the recipient of numerous letters of inquiry about conditions in Chicago. He, in turn, passed along these names and addresses to a boardinghouse keeper who had earlier housed lodgers in Hattiesburg. She had migrated in October 1916, one month after her husband had quit his railroad job and gone to Chicago. She wrote letters offering rooms to

people upon arrival, and her home apparently served as an initial stopping place for scores of migrants from southeastern Mississippi.²

From Chicago, Horton and other deacons of Hattiesburg's First Baptist Church stayed in touch with their pastor, who had opposed migration. With his congregation slipping away, Reverend Perkins finally agreed in late 1917 to come North to "shepherd them" again. Reverend Harmon, one of his colleagues in Hattiesburg, had needed less urging; he arrived in November 1916. In four months he earned enough to return South for his wife, four children, and "some" of his congregation. By late 1917, three Hattiesburg ministers had reunited with their congregations in Chicago.³

Once settled in Chicago, many of these Mississippians sent for family and wrote to relatives and friends. The siphoning process continued almost endlessly, drawing on family and kinship networks that would now extend not only across the South, but between regions as well.⁴ Transferring families and communities northward, these migrants ensured continuity in their lives as well as in the Great Migration itself.

The experience of this group from Hattiesburg might not have been entirely typical, but it does suggest some of the salient elements in the dynamic of migration. Contrary to the images drawn by contemporary observers—images which have shaped much of the work of subsequent analysts of the movement—the Great Migration lacked neither organizational forms nor leaders. The movement did indeed grow largely from the initiative of individuals who resisted the warnings and pleas of most of the educators, businessmen, professionals, and editors who constituted the recognized leadership of the black South and who generally discouraged migration northward. But its vitality drew upon an infrastructure, a network held together by social institutions, leaders, and individual initiative. This network stimulated, facilitated, and helped to shape the migration process at all stages, from the dissemination of information through the black South to the settlement of black southerners in northern cities. An examination of the dynamic of migration between the South and one northern city—Chicago—suggests how a grass-roots social movement developed despite the opposition of an entrenched regional leadership.⁵

Before they would leave their southern homes, many migrants wanted specific and reliable information about the North. Black southerners learned about the North from a variety of sources, many of which they sought out on their own initiative. As a case study of one small South Carolina black community has suggested, many people who left for Chicago and other northern cities "consciously

formulated their emigration . . . [and] carefully planned" according to information obtained from a network that connected black communities, families, institutions, and individuals. "I like my fellow southerner am looking northward," one migrant wrote in April 1917, "but before leaving the South Id like to know just wher I am goin and what Im to do if posible." Southern blacks had chased chimeras before—to Florida, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, Arkansas, and Texas—and had heard about the hard conditions faced by westward migrants to Kansas and Oklahoma. It was clear to many that migration involved risks. One Jackson, Mississippi, woman remembered that a friend, drawn to the Delta by "white agents and white folks niggers" had returned seven years later looking "like a haunt." This time people were more cautious. "I do not wish to come there hoodwinked not knowing where to go or what to do," wrote a New Orleans man to the Chicago Urban League, "so I Solicite your help in this matter." An Anniston, Alabama, migrant put it more succinctly: "I should not like to com in that secson with out no enfremation."⁶

By 1917, an information network had developed through which prospective migrants could learn what jobs were available in the North, how much could be earned, what life was like, what schooling was offered, and virtually anything else they wanted to know before leaving. The emergence of new sources of information during the second decade of the twentieth century has, with some justification, received attention mainly as a "cause" of the Great Migration. But the migrants' participation in this network also suggests one of the ways in which the Great Migration represented a forceful attempt by black southerners to seize control over their future. By forging links with Chicago's black community, prospective migrants facilitated and shaped not only the migration process, but their adaptation to new homes as well.

News of what one prospective migrant referred to as the "great work going on in the north" flowed south through a variety of channels.⁷ Labor agents attracted workers' attention with stories of high wages and better living conditions in the North. Men working in railroad yards and trains transmitted information along the tracks. To those who believed only what they saw in print, northern black newspapers—especially the Chicago *Defender*—provided glowing images of the North alongside lurid reports of southern oppression. Letters and visits from previous migrants combined specific information with welcome advice from trusted relatives and friends. Discussion of the North, initiated by news from endless combinations of these sources, came to dominate conversation in homes, churches, barber shops, and poolrooms, along with outdoor gathering places and other focal points of southern black communities.

Although a vague chronology would focus on labor agents at the beginning of the process and on the *Defender* and letters in subsequent stages, it was the interaction of various forms of communication that suggests the concept of a network. By themselves, labor agents would have had little enduring impact, had their pitch not been relayed through the black South along more indigenous lines of communication. Many people listened to the agents skeptically, waiting for confirmation from more trusted sources before embarking. Rumors circulated widely, but also commanded only limited authority. Trainmen were early sources of such stories; they also carried the *Defender*, which developed a growing following in the black South in the 1910s. Had they not reinforced each other, neither the thousands of letters from previous migrants nor the *Defender* would have been as influential as they were. At the same time, kinship networks facilitated visiting, circulated letters and copies of the *Defender*, and brought news of the labor agents. If trainmen, agents, and newspapers spread the message across a broad expanse of territory, the letters and visits provided an essential depth to the information. Contemporary analysts and subsequent historians acknowledged the importance of letters, black newspapers, and other forms of communication, but mainly as causes of the Great Migration rather than as integral aspects of a network and an organizational framework that suggest the self-activating nature of the movement.

The Great Migration's origins are inseparable from specific efforts by employers to recruit black workers from the South. Connecticut tobacco growers, feeling the pinch of a tightening labor market in 1915, secured the cooperation of the National Urban League in recruiting fourteen hundred students from southern black colleges. Massive recruitment of laborers began the following year, when the Erie and Pennsylvania railroads began sending agents and special trains into northeastern Florida urging blacks to come North to work on track crews and yard gangs. The railroads, whose ranks soon grew to include the New York Central, New Haven, Delaware & Hudson, Lackawanna, Philadelphia & Reading, Illinois Central, and Great Northern, needed labor quickly and could transport workers from the Deep South over long distances at low cost. In the face of southern opposition and an inability to retain workers who had been given free transportation, however, the railroads soon drastically reduced "shipments" of black southerners.⁸

In the meantime, other northern industries, also pushing to meet the demands of the wartime economy and unable to secure white immigrant workers, soon began sending recruiters south. When

Charles Johnson toured Mississippi in late 1917, he heard how the previous year an agent "would walk briskly down the street through a group of Negroes, and without turning his head would say in a low tone: 'Anybody want to go to Chicago, see me.'" In Jackson, forty informants told him of labor agents' activities in that city. In small communities he heard about individuals who had gone to New Orleans for free passage to Chicago. Others told him of "free trains that backed up on plantations and carried away hundreds of farm hands with their families." Because northern industrialists seldom financed the transportation of the families of recruited workers, many of these stories were apparently exaggerated. But free transportation did carry some men northward, with agents distributing tickets and perhaps even providing special railroad cars. These "pass riders" operated mainly in large cities, recruiting local workers as well as visitors from outlying areas, who would often carry the message home with them before leaving. During late 1916-early 1917, news spread to many southern towns and cities that "it was possible to get passes without difficulty." Although the agents had all but disappeared by the time of Johnson's arrival in the fall of 1917, their influence lingered. They had touched a nerve among restless black southerners. The "pass rider" became a central part of migration folklore.⁹

A few agents in major southern cities were able to spark discussion and stimulate the spread of information partly because labor recruiters already occupied an important place both in southern economic history and black folklore. Southern planters and other employers had been using labor agents to secure tenants or laborers for newly developing regions since the Civil War. As recently as the first decade of the twentieth century, recruiters from labor-hungry plantations had followed the boll weevil into the Natchez, Mississippi, area and taken "carloads" of black families and their belongings into the bottom lands of the Yazoo Delta. Even during the Great Migration itself, agents from southern munitions industries recruited black workers from plantations and lumber mills.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the measures adopted to prevent such activity, the tradition of the labor agent luring blacks to some new, and supposedly better, employment was firmly established. It was not difficult for many black southerners to believe stories of labor agents' activity on behalf of a new group of employers.

Studies of Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and other northern cities have demonstrated that industrialists in some cities sent labor agents into the South; but only a handful of Chicago companies seem to have considered such recruitment necessary.¹¹ In August 1916, Morris & Company arranged with a "white contractor" to bring seventy-five

black southerners north to work in its Chicago packinghouses. The following month, Armour & Company transferred two hundred black workers from its Alabama meat-packing facility. A few months later the *Chicago Defender* reported the activity of a packinghouse recruiter in the area of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In other industries, it is likely that the Illinois Central did some recruiting for a short period, and Commonwealth Edison obtained "small numbers" of black workers in the South to compensate for its labor shortages.¹² But despite reports of agents sending laborers to Chicago from Mobile, Birmingham, Jackson, New Orleans, and Memphis, Chicago employers appear to have done little direct "importing" of black southerners.¹³

Many of the references to and stories of labor agent activity probably referred to black southerners who served the interests of both northern employers and prospective migrants but operated within the context of traditional social networks. Closest to the contemporary definition of a labor agent were those who had already migrated North but then returned home with a few dollars from an employer willing to pay transportation for friends and relatives of a proven worker. Others were black men and women who neither worked for northern employers—directly or by contract—nor received compensation for their recruitment activities. Upon hearing of opportunities in the North, these individuals conveyed the news to friends and relatives and took the initiative in organizing group transportation. Many wrote to Chicago employers, the Chicago Urban League, or the *Defender*, seeking work and offering to bring others along. After asking for "a transportation" for himself, a Chattanooga, Tennessee, man wrote a Chicago foundry that "i can get you good mens here." People casually offered not only their own services, but those of friends, relatives, and townsmen. Although it might seem appropriate to limit the definition of a labor agent to recruiters who provided transportation, many white southerners and black recruits attached the label to anyone who promised Chicago employers that he could "bring along manny more if you want them."¹⁴ These men and women were neither the outside agitators white southerners traditionally had held responsible for black migration nor part of any broad recruiting effort organized by a northern conspiracy. They did, however, disseminate information, encourage migration, and help foster the image of a network of recruiters that could facilitate migration and adjustment to Chicago.

Outside the few major cities of the South, labor agents employed by northern industry tended to be more important as legends than as actual recruiters of labor. "If there are any agents in the south there havent been any of them to Lutchet," wrote one Louisianian seek-

ing the rumored free transportation. To such men, agents became symbols of the new freedom and opportunities beckoning from the North. A Mississippi man who met an agent while visiting New Orleans considered him "an instrument in God's hands" and passed the word to countless friends and relatives back home in Mississippi. Thousands of black southerners heard about the agents through the pages of the *Defender*, which publicized agents' successful attempts to evade southern whites' harassment. Because the *Defender* did not reveal either the names of the agents, the prospective employers, the mode of recruitment, or even the definition of a labor agent, it is difficult to discern the extent to which these stories refer to agents of northern employers or black southerners recruiting friends to travel north with them. But *Defender* readers did find additional evidence that the agents were indeed active—if not in their own community, then elsewhere. From Shreveport, a Louisianian wrote, probably to the *Defender*, "I want to get some infirmation about getting out up there I did learn that they had a man here agent for to send people up there I have never seen him yet and I want you to tell me how to get up there."¹⁵ These shadowy agents added to the excitement of the moment, reinforced other rumors, and sustained the high level of optimism regarding opportunities in the North. Often, visitors were regarded as labor agents, because of both the air of mystery surrounding them and the departures which sometimes followed their visits. Charles Johnson observed in Mississippi in 1917 that

every strange face came to be recognized as a man from the North looking for laborers and their families. If he denied it, they simply thought that he was concealing his identity from the police, and if he said nothing, his silence was regarded sufficient affirmation. Hundreds of disappointments are to be traced to the rumour that a train would leave on a certain date, (sometimes after the presence of a stranger in town). Hundreds would come to the station prepared to leave and when no agent appeared, would purchase their own tickets.¹⁶

Swindlers, posing as labor agents, took advantage of this widespread belief in the presence of recruiters. Promising jobs and cheap transportation north, they either absconded with the advance payments or reneged on promises to provide jobs, clothing, or money in Chicago. In Augusta, Georgia, one man paid two dollars to "some so call agent" who had promised to get him to Illinois. Migrants in Chicago reported that agents had promised them clothes, three months'

free rent near their work, and "unlimited privilege." Other swindlers were even more lavish. C. Cassani promised work in a Chicago-area steel mill to ten men at wages of eight dollars per day, despite their total lack of experience. By 1917, the *Defender* had received so many letters regarding men collecting money by posing as agents of railroads and northern factories that it warned its readers against such schemes. "There are a number of agents in the south that are collecting money from members of the Race who are planning to leave for the north. No one should pay any one to leave."¹⁷

Labor agents were hardly the only sources of outlandish rumors. By late 1916, a story began to circulate in Gulfport, Mississippi, that "something is going to happen to Gulfport and you don't want to stay here and get caught." Other rumors were more specific and more farfetched. The war furnished material for tales like the one warning that the Germans were marching through Texas, preparing to conquer the American South. Closer to the truth, one rumor spread "that the new work-or-fight order of the Provost Marshal meant that men would be drafted for labor and put under conditions practically amounting to peonage."¹⁸ Stories relating to jobs in the North tended to be exaggerated: Mississippians heard that Chicago packinghouses needed fifty thousand black workers and that common laborers could earn up to ten dollars per day in the North.¹⁹

Few migrants were either seduced by labor agents or deceived by imposters or unfounded rumors. Although agents recruited many of the 1915–16 pioneers, the "guiding hand of the labor agent" did not sweep northward the mass of naive, passive ciphers portrayed by many observers. Large numbers of migrants made careful decisions, based on a variety of sources, and knew more about northern conditions than they cared to reveal to whites—be they agents or locals.²⁰ They did not need labor agents to instill in them a desire to find a better life. W. T. B. Williams of Tuskegee and Charles Johnson agreed that labor agents "did little more than point the way out of the unfortunate situation" in the South. "The agents," a black Mississippian told Johnson, "simply gave definite direction to Negroes who were going north anyhow." Agents did, in many communities, spark the exodus, and in some cases, agents or rumors of agents strongly influenced migrants' choices of destinations. But they usually recruited men (seldom women) ready to go and awaiting the "clew to the job in the North."²¹ And the information agents transmitted often moved more quickly along indigenous lines of communication. These lines of communication formed a network anchored by men and women who might be termed the leaders of the Great Migration.

Central to this network were the growing number of black railroad workers. Considerable information moved southward along the same railroads that carried migrants in the opposite direction. Even before the Great Migration, eyewitness accounts of the North reached southern black communities through men working in the rail yards, on the tracks, and in the trains. Charles Liggett, who arrived in Chicago in 1903, was influenced and aided by a friend who worked as a cook for the Rock Island line. Charley Banks, who had quit farming when the boll weevil "eat up all de cotton," worked for the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, owned by the Illinois Central. He went to Chicago in 1914 as an Illinois Central employee. A 1916 migrant from southern Mississippi knew that he could not better his \$125 monthly salary as a fireman, but "his railroad life gave him a chance to make some comparisons." He "waited his chance" for labor conditions in the North to improve and left Mississippi when racial violence finally drove him past the point of tolerance.²² By 1910, 103,606 blacks worked for the railroads, and the Illinois Central hired hundreds more as strikebreakers the following year. Black men who labored on section or yard gangs often lived in small southern communities and either visited the North or heard about Chicago from the black trainmen working on any of the numerous lines passing through the nation's rail hub. Shop workers in Vicksburg, Mississippi, for example, often traveled to Chicago on "free passes," and returned telling "interesting stories."²³

Pullman porters and dining-car waiters commanded particular influence, both within the community of black railroaders and among black southerners in general. These men, many of whom lived in Chicago, spoke proudly of their home town as they traveled through the South. Bluesman Tampa Red, who came to Chicago from Florida, remembered Pullman porters referring to it as "God's country." In Mississippi, porters on the Gulf and Ship Island Railroad regularly informed eager listeners about Chicago.²⁴ But even more important than their activities as traveling civic boosters was the porters' work as publicists and distributors of the *Chicago Defender*.

Fearless, sensationalist, and militant, the *Defender* advertised the glories of Chicago so effectively that even migrants headed for other northern cities drew their general image of the urban North from its pages. Many also wrote to the newspaper for information and assistance. Founded by Robert Abbott in 1905 on capital of twenty-five cents, the "World's Greatest Weekly" grew into the largest-selling black newspaper in the United States by World War I, with two-thirds of its circulation outside Chicago. Born and raised in Georgia, Abbott had come to Chicago in 1897 after attending Hampton Institute. Although he continued to support Booker T. Washington—especially

with regard to educational policy—until the Tuskegeean's death in 1915, Abbott was no accommodationist. He refused to use the term "Negro," because of the derogatory connotation given it by whites. In the *Defender*, blacks were "the Race," and black men, "Race men." All issues were evaluated on the basis of the Race's interests. Abbott opposed "demon rum," but refused to support prohibition until enough racial barriers had been dropped to allow black brewery and saloon workers to find other employment. Abbott's editorial yardstick was consistent and simple: if it fostered discrimination or cost blacks jobs, he opposed it.²⁵

To black southerners, the *Defender* represented unapologetic black pride, dignity, and assertiveness. From its inception, it offered itself as a crusader against the white South. Abbott's first issue set the tone, denouncing "WHITE GENTLEMEN FROM GEORGIA" who had condoned a white man's murder of three blacks for committing the crime of refusing to work overtime. More viciously anti-South than any other black newspaper, it loudly denounced racial oppression below the Mason-Dixon line. Front page banner headlines, sometimes drenched in red ink, announced such injustices as,

SOUTHERN WHITE GENTLEMEN
BURN RACE BOY AT STAKE.²⁶

In reporting news of white violence against blacks in the South, *Defender* correspondents spared few of the gory details, and the editors reputedly embellished them even further. A lynching in Dyersburg, Tennessee, received the standard coverage:

Bound to an iron post by the most savage fiends in existence on the face of the globe or even in the depths of hell below, Scott stood one-half hour, while men heated pokers and soothing irons until they were white with heat and were as fiery as the flames that heated them. Scott lay flat on his face beneath the yoke of the iron post. Children on the outskirts of the mob played merrily on and their voices could be heard above the hubbub of the mob.

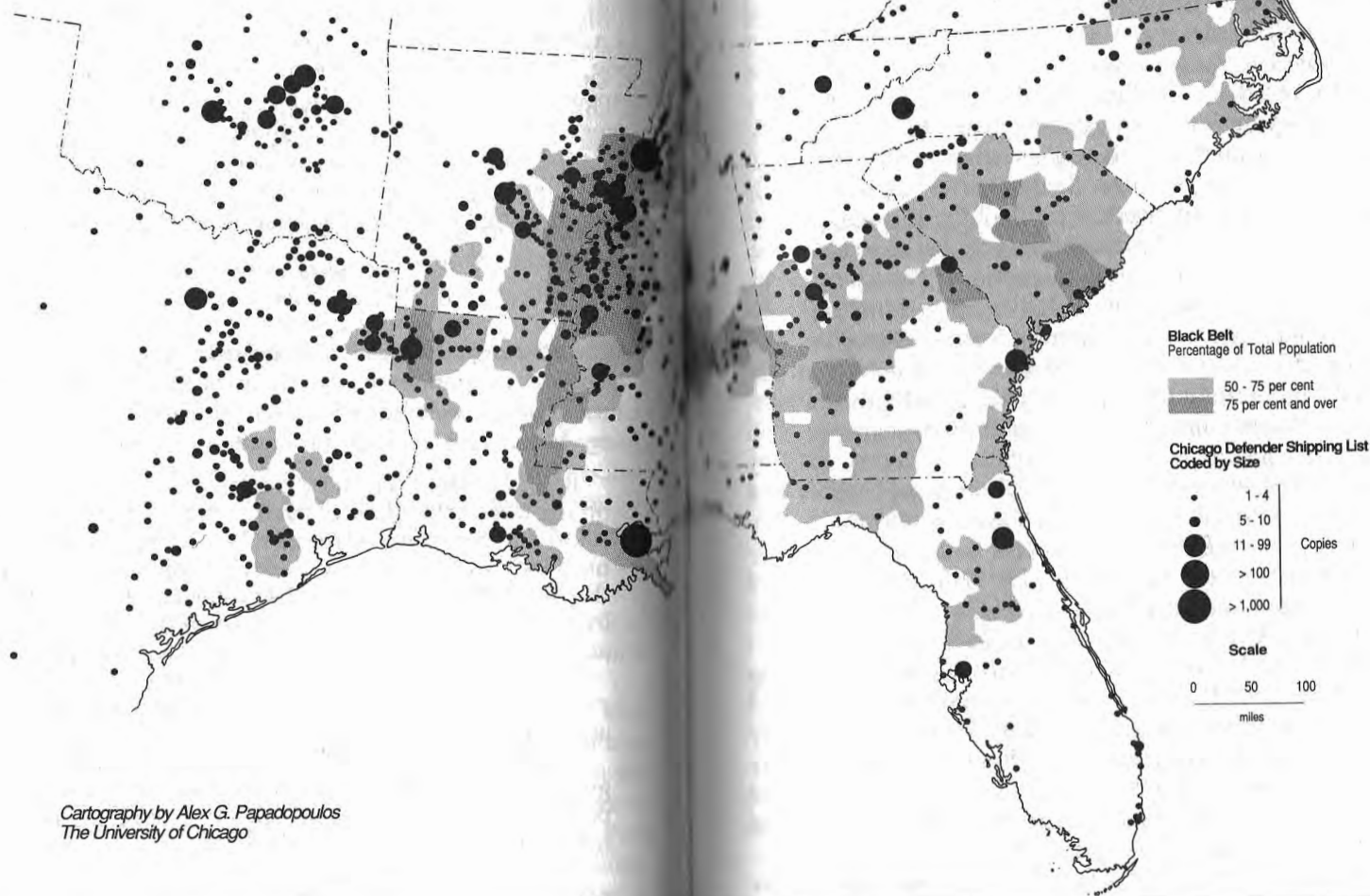
Then a red streak shot out and the holder began to bore out the prisoner's eyes. Scott moaned. The pokers were worked like an auger, that is, they were twisted round and round.

The smell of burning flesh permeated the atmosphere, a pungent, sickening odor telling those who failed to get good vantage points what their eyes could not see: Smoothing irons were searing the flesh.

Swish. Once, twice, three times a red-hot iron dug gaping places in Lation Scott's back and sides.²⁷

Black southerners knew of such events, through either word of mouth or personal knowledge. But the *Defender* demonstrated to

CHICAGO DEFENDER SHIPPING LIST



Southern circulation of the Chicago *Defender*.

them that these incidents were systematic and unremitting. Observers and historians who have discounted lynching as a stimulus to migration, noting the lack of correlation between lynching and migration statistics in southern counties, ignore the *Defender's* influence. A racial incident anywhere in the South—especially if violent—easily found its way into the *Defender*, which broadcast it nationwide. The *Defender* constantly reminded its readers of their oppression. In the series "Below the Mason Dixon Line," for example, traveling correspondents would send dispatches from a different place each week, relating the local horror stories.²⁸

Unafraid of pointing an accusing finger, the *Defender* waged a militant campaign against white southerners, fulfilling its role as the defender of black America against "the crafty paleface" of the South. Its editorials sought to make "the 'crackers' squirm under the lash" of *Defender* attacks. Columnist W. Allison Sweeney, a favorite among black southerners, specialized in what he called "breaking southerners and 'white folks' niggers' on the wheel." Sweeney's purple prose scattered invective too dangerous to express openly in the South, identifying white leaders as "looters, grafters, lazy sinecurists, general 'no-accounts,' persecutors, KILLERS OF NEGRO MEN, seducers, RAVISHERS OF NEGRO WOMEN." Reading of Theodore Bilbo's "gubernatorial carcass" in Sweeney's column, black Mississippians knew they had an outspoken and apparently fearless champion.²⁹

The *Defender's* influence in the South did not rest only on its militant message. Abbott built his wide circulation partly through his astute cultivation of black railroad men during the newspaper's struggling early years. The *Defender's* railroad column, which ran regularly as early as 1910, noted who worked on which lines and routes and related anecdotes about individual workers. Abbott also vigorously supported the struggles of Pullman porters for higher wages, claiming a major role in a 10 percent increase in early 1916. Occasionally he reminded them of what they could do for him, as well as for themselves, because the *Defender* represented their interests and buttressed their prestige in the community. "A railroad porter of Chicago feels proud of a paper that does big things, and he shows it to a friend or an acquaintance in some other clime." The *Defender* successfully attracted these men as readers, and most important, as publicity agents and distributors. Managing editor L. C. Harper later noted that the paper's wide circulation owed partly to its practice of giving Pullman porters copies to distribute to friends.³⁰

Promotion and distribution of the *Defender* drew also upon other traditional lines of communication in black America. Extensive coverage of black entertainers, for example, prompted stage performers

to enlist as the *Defender's* traveling salespeople. By 1916, the *Defender* seemed to be everywhere. In many places, readers could buy it in the church or barber shop, two major centers of socializing and discussion. In Savannah, Reverend Daniel Wright regularly sold twenty-five to fifty copies to his congregation. A South Carolina itinerant preacher carried the newspaper to sell as he traveled through the state. In Rome, Georgia, people could buy the *Defender* "at all barber-shops." New Orleans readers could purchase it on the jitney buses. By 1919, three news dealers in that city were selling one thousand copies weekly.³¹

By the time of the Great Migration, Abbott's militancy and sensationalism had combined with this vast promotion and distribution network to propel the *Defender* to the forefront of Afro-American journalism. The *Defender's* circulation, already 33,000 by early 1916, skyrocketed along with the migration. From 50,000 at the end of that year it rose to roughly 90,000 in 1917, 125,000 in 1918, and 130,000 in 1919. Abbott's biographer has suggested that it climbed as high as 180,000 in 1918 and 230,000 in 1919. Estimates during the early 1920s, some slightly exaggerated, ranged from 160,000 to 250,000. The variation in estimates notwithstanding, the *Defender* clearly pioneered a new era in Afro-American journalism, pumping a constant flow of trusted information into southern black communities.³²

The *Defender* penetrated into some of the most remote corners of the black South. Its 1919 shipping manifest, which included 1,542 towns and cities across the South, listed thousands of names on its sixty-four galley-sized pages. Raging headlines and glowing images of Chicago provoked discussion in Fry's Mill, Arkansas; Bibsland, Louisiana; Tunica, Mississippi; Yoakum, Texas; and countless other tiny communities dotting the South. In Palatka, Florida, one hundred *Defenders* were sold each week. A Hattiesburg, Mississippi, black leader marveled that "Negroes grab the *Defender* like a hungry mule grabs fodder." In nearby Laurel, "people would come for miles running over themselves, to get a *Defender*."³³ These observations were corroborated weekly, as each issue of the *Defender* contained contributions from far-flung readers.

Neither income nor literacy circumscribed the *Defender's* audience, which stretched far beyond those people able and willing to spend scarce nickels (or \$1.50 per year until 1918; \$2 thereafter) for its message. As befitting a newspaper that linked blacks from different regions, the *Defender* was generously shared within communities. "Copies were passed around until worn out," noted one observer. Abbott's biographer claimed that five people read each paper. NAACP official Walter White, conservatively estimating *Defender* southern cir-

ulation at 75,000 in 1920, noted that "this means approximately 300,000 readers who see the Chicago *Defender* each week." Countless others listened to someone read a *Defender* aloud at home, in a barber shop, or after church.³⁴

To Charles Johnson, traveling through Mississippi and Louisiana in 1917, it seemed as if everybody read the *Defender*. In Gulfport, Mississippi, "a man was regarded as 'intelligent' if he read the *Defender*." Ninety miles north, at Laurel, Johnson heard that "old men who have never known how to read, would buy it simply because it was regarded as precious." In many places the arrival of the *Defender* constituted a major weekly event. A New Orleans woman explained that she "had rather read it then to eat when Saturday comes, it is my heart's delight." With a mass appeal that reached even "the lowly class of Negroes," as one Tuskegeean lamented, the *Defender* transmitted information through the black South on a scale hitherto unknown. Not even Booker T. Washington, despite the cooperation of southern whites, had been able to communicate so easily with so many black southerners.³⁵

The *Defender* commanded this loyal following, which dramatically increased during the migration, because black southerners had confidence in it. After reading the Chicago weekly for the first time in 1917, a Texan wrote Abbott that "I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that its *some* paper." W. A. McCloud of Wadley, Georgia, considered the editor "a great and grand man and a lover of his race." Another reader wrote Abbott that "I feel that I know you personally."³⁶ Presenting material that southern white papers would not, and southern black papers usually dared not, print, the *Defender* came to be regarded as the final authority on racial matters. Most contemporary southern black newspapers were necessarily cautious of racial boundaries and often were dominated by religious and fraternal news and "stereotyped and utterly innocuous" content. Many of the more assertive journals were controlled by individuals whose political ambitions demanded moderation. Southern black editors seldom presented either harsh criticism of the South or attractive images of the North. Some were so timid as to invite accusations that they received subsidies from planters. A northern white minister perceptively noted in 1918 that in the South, "the Negro pays more attention to northern [black] press than to the southern press because of the suspicion that the local Negro press can be influenced by the white community." Blacks learned even less from white publications. "We pay no attention to what the southern white papers report," remarked one Pullman porter; "I'm waiting to get home and see what my Chicago paper has to say." Southerners

took a similar attitude. "I feel that this is the only source from which we can learn of what good Negroes are doing. The white press just will not publish anything good of us," observed one Kentuckian. A Miami, Florida, man believed rumors of the migration only after he had read of it in the *Defender*. The long-standing legends concerning the North assumed heightened authenticity in the *Defender* pages.³⁷

Alongside descriptions of lynching, torture, and everyday oppression in the South, the *Defender* counterposed articles picturing Chicago's black community as influential, moderately prosperous, and modern. Southern subscribers read heated denunciations of Jim Crow along with articles calmly describing black Chicago's elected officials or its YMCA basketball teams' games against whites (the *Defender* tended to ignore the politicians' lack of real power and de facto segregation in the YMCA and elsewhere). The exploits of Chicago's black baseball teams, local track stars Binga Dismond and Howard Drew, and especially Chicago's own Jack Johnson, set in sharp relief the *Defender's* routine depiction of the South as a place of unending toil and constant fear. While southern blacks often faced peremptory retaliation for even the slightest aggressive act, front-page photographs of black Chicago's gun-toting "Famous Eighth" infantry, "THE PRIDE OF ILLINOIS," documented the striking contrast. More pointedly, in April 1917, the *Defender* printed a photograph of a Freetown, Louisiana, one-room shack that passed as a schoolhouse. Alongside appeared the stately pillars of Chicago's modern Robert Lindblom High School. Reminding its readers that Lindblom had no color line, the *Defender* characteristically ignored the fact that few blacks could attend Lindblom, as it was located in a white neighborhood.³⁸ But the *Defender* could repeatedly point with justifiable pride to Chicago's Wendell Phillips High School, which offered Chicago black youths integrated secondary education. The editors drew these contrasts to boost Chicago as well as *Defender* circulation.

Although it would eventually both symbolize the migration spirit and play a central role in the movement, the *Defender* until mid-1916 advised black southerners to remain where they were. Like Booker T. Washington, Abbott counseled blacks to cast down their buckets in the South and recommended agricultural diversification as the road to prosperity. "The southland is rich and fertile, and it requires brains first and brawn afterward to make farming pay."³⁹

Neither Abbott's faith in the possibility of progress in the South, nor his view that "the ultimate salvation of the Afro-American in the South lies in their own strength," implied an accommodationist position.⁴⁰ Indeed, his alternative to northward migration readily convinced southern readers that the "World's Greatest Weekly" was truly

a "race paper" and that the North must be freer if editors could print such things. It advocated fighting back, "Eye for an Eye, and Tooth for a Tooth." After a Georgia lynching and mob violence in North Carolina, the *Defender* front page counseled,

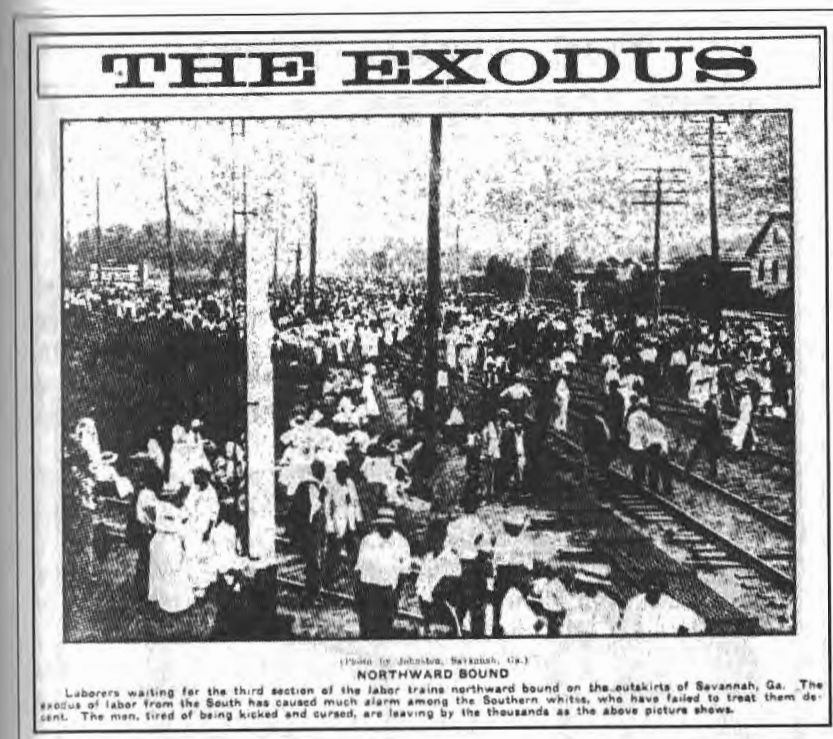
WHEN THE MOB COMES
AND YOU MUST DIE TAKE
AT LEAST ONE WITH YOU.

This advice continued into 1916. "When you are in Rome, you have to do as the Romans do"; "Call the white fiends to the door and shoot them down."⁴¹

Most important, the *Defender* told black southerners that the South offered more opportunities for employment. In the North employers could hire immigrants, and trade unions excluded blacks from skilled positions. Abbott's professed belief that "it is best for the ninety and nine of our people to remain in the southland" coincided with the reluctance with which he and other middle-class black Chicagoans greeted poor, "slow-thinking," unemployable migrants to their city.⁴²

With the sudden opening of Chicago's unskilled industrial jobs to blacks in the summer of 1916, the *Defender* began to encourage northward migration. Although reference to "steady movement of race families" out of the Deep South had appeared as early as February, the *Defender* had given the initial stirrings of migration little attention. Still cautious in mid-August, the editors now merely noted the exodus, predicted it would continue, and argued that "for the nation as a whole it will be beneficial to have the Colored people more evenly sprinkled through the different states." But by September what had been mere news a month earlier had become a crusade. A front page photograph of black men and women crowding alongside a railroad track, publicized the "exodus of labor from the South. . . . The men, tired of being kicked and cursed, are leaving by the thousands as the above picture shows." From then on, the *Defender* actively, sensation-ally, and relentlessly promoted migration.⁴³

Abbott's shifted position was consistent with his established record of measuring all issues along the yardstick of racial self-interest. The increasing demand for black laborers in the North not only obliterated the old argument that black economic opportunity lay exclusively in the South, but offered blacks as a group the chance to prove their ability to perform industrial labor. "Our problem today," argued Abbott in 1916, "is to widen our economic opportunities, to find more openings and more kinds of openings in the industrial world. Our chance is right now." At the same time, migration to northern cities



Front page photograph, *Chicago Defender*, September 2, 1916 (courtesy of the *Chicago Defender*).

would help to diminish racial prejudice by increasing racial contact. "Only by a commingling with other races will the bars be let down and the black man take his place in the limelight beside his white brother. Contact means everything."⁴⁴ The *Defender* did not mention, but Abbott no doubt recognized, that the thousands of employed black workers would bring money into Chicago's black community and that sheer numbers would increase its political clout. Not coincidentally the *Defender*, as the champion of a great racial movement and representative of black Chicago, would gain prestige and increase its circulation.

Once it endorsed the migration, the *Defender* helped to stimulate the movement, with vivid North-South contrasts, advertisements for newly available jobs, exciting images of city life, and reports of "migration fever." Articles on lynchings either lay alongside news of the spreading exodus or ended with reminders that it was foolhardy to

THE AWAKENING



After fifty years of sound napping, depending on the white southerner and his "cotton crop," the members of the Race are migrating into northland, where every kind of labor is being thrown open to them, where decent houses are obtainable for him to house his family and better schools to educate his children.

Cartoon from the *Chicago Defender*, August 19, 1916 (courtesy of the *Chicago Defender*).

remain in the South. Arguing that "anywhere in God's country is far better than the southland," the *Defender* abandoned all vestiges of its earlier positions on black progress south of the Ohio River.

Every black man for the sake of his wife and daughters especially should leave even at a financial sacrifice every spot in the

south where his worth is not appreciated enough to give him the standing of a man and a citizen in the community. We know full well that this would mean a depopulation of that section and if it were possible we would glory in its accomplishment.⁴⁵

Inviting "all to come north," the *Defender* provided concrete evidence that migration now offered the greatest opportunity for both race and individual progress. Not only did it estimate "places for 1,500,000 working men in the cities of the North," but it carried Help-Wanted advertisements directed at black southerners. Unlike earlier employment notices in the newspaper, these called for large numbers of workers and involved factory work. With such messages as "we do not pay transportation, but guarantee you a steady position," they were clearly aimed at southerners.⁴⁶

These advertisements first appeared on September 2, 1916, but then only sporadically until spring 1917, probably because few white employers knew of the *Defender's* influence. But as employers turned to the more knowledgeable Chicago Urban League for aid and advice in recruitment efforts, the advertisements increased. Throughout 1917-18, the Urban League, Chicago firms and employment agencies, and industries in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Ohio, and Minnesota sought to attract black southerners through classified advertisements in the *Defender*.⁴⁷

Readers of the *Defender* responded enthusiastically to these advertisements. Some wrote directly to employers; others wrote to either the *Defender* or the Chicago Urban League, which gained publicity from news stories as well as advertisements. Many readers assumed that the newspaper, as a spokesman for and representative of the Race, would act as an employment agent. "Being a constant reader of your paper," wrote a Georgia letter carrier willing to give up his civil service job to work as a laborer, "I thought of no one better than you to write for information." A Floridian, willing to "garntee you good and reglar service," not only wanted employment, but "some instruction how i can get there." Like the Marcel, Mississippi, man who knew Abbott to be "a real man of my color," many *Defender* readers thought that the Help-Wanted notices implied that the editor had sufficient influence with employers to secure jobs for his readers. Others, unable to find suitable advertisements, seized the initiative and inserted their own Situations-Wanted pleas for employment in the North.⁴⁸

With the *Defender* as its advertising agent, the Urban League inspired even greater confidence in the Chicago job market. Upon learning in the *Defender* of "the splendid work which you are doing in placing colored men in touch with industrial opportunities," black southerners inundated the League with requests for employment and

other assistance. Some offered to "do any kind of work for an honest living"; others thought the League "could place mens in iny job or trade they follows." Even more optimistic applicants responded to the advertisements by offering to bring five, ten, twenty, or a hundred friends along with them. The League received "thousands" of letters from hopeful southerners; most mentioned the *Defender*.⁴⁹

Besides impressing readers with the availability of jobs in the North, the *Defender* showed them that Chicago offered attractive leisure activities. One of the earliest black newspapers to include a full entertainment section, the *Defender* dazzled black southerners with its image of "the Stroll"—the strip of State Street from 26th to 39th streets. Here, blacks were supposedly treated politely by white businessmen and could hop from one night spot to the next. Such dance halls as the Pekin and the Palace Garden offered jazz, bright lights, dancing into the wee hours, and even racially mixed crowds. Black Chicago's seven movie theaters (eight by late 1917) broadcast their attractions, which included live orchestras, with large displays in the *Defender*, and southern readers must have found the quantity and variety awesome. Opening the *Defender* on October 7, 1916, for example, a southerner found that—if he lived in Chicago—he could choose from among "The Girl from Frisco," "A Lesson from Life," "The Shielding Shadow," "The Trooper of Company K" ("with an all colored cast"), "Forbidden Fruit," "God's Half Acre," "The Sins of the City," or any of thirty-eight other films. And every theater offered a different show each night. One *Defender* reader in Mississippi expected State Street to be "heaven itself."⁵⁰

In addition, the *Defender* bragged of playgrounds with "all modern equipment" and open access to all beaches along Lake Michigan (a claim accurate in a legal sense only). Baseball fans were repeatedly reminded not only that games between black teams took place nearly every day, in the "shadow of [the] White Sox," but also that Chicago's American Giants were the greatest black team in the country.⁵¹ If black southerners had heard for years of the greater freedom to enjoy oneself in the North, they now had clear evidence that it was all true.

Southern white attempts to inhibit distribution of the *Defender* only assured blacks of its reliability. When many southern communities forced distribution of the *Defender* underground in 1918, blacks responded by going to extraordinary lengths to secure their newspapers. Copies were "folded into bundles of merchandise," or passed around surreptitiously. Even when whites succeeded in preventing distribution, blacks reopened the flow of information by writing directly to Abbott, who apparently passed along many of the letters to social agencies in Chicago.⁵²

Observing that the *Defender* "voiced the unexpressed thoughts

of many," Charles Johnson noted that the weekly "provided a very good substitute for the knowledge which comes through travel." The newspaper brought hope and direction to thousands who learned more about the northern alternative to southern oppression. "I bought a Chicago Defender," wrote a Memphis man, "and after reading it and seeing the golden opportunity I decided to leave this place at once." To black southerners who "saved [copies of the *Defender*] from the first I have received" or wrote Abbott that "your paper was all we had to go by so we are depending on you for farther advise," the information offered an opportunity to change their lives.⁵³

The *Defender* did not limit itself to informing its southern readers of northern attractions and inviting them to Chicago. It also sought to convince them that the migration was a broad-based movement drawing from the entire South. In their copies of the *Defender*, Mississippians and Texans learned that Georgians were leaving in droves; rural people confirmed rumors of the depopulation of towns and cities. The restless but cautious were often stirred by the knowledge that so many others were going.

From its correspondents in scores of southern towns, the *Defender* received reports of migrants leaving the South and printed them under headlines which bragged "300 LEAVE FOR NORTH." Designed to inspire others to leave, these notices often included predictions: "There are so many leaving here that Waycross will be desolate soon." Local gossip correspondents regularly passed along news of mass or individual departures. During the winter of 1917 these items dominated the columns. "The great exodus has struck Talledega county," an Alabama agent reported in early March. A few weeks later it was an "epidemic" in Aberdeen, Mississippi. And any reader who still doubted the magnitude of movement learned from the Summit, Mississippi, column of April 7 that "twenty-four carloads passed through here last week."⁵⁴ Into the 1920s, these columns continued to be sprinkled with notices of local residents leaving for the North.

To complement these constant reminders of mass movement, the *Defender* launched a bandwagon by setting a specific date for a "Great Northern Drive"—May 15, 1917. For three months the *Defender* told its readers of an impending group departure on that date. The promotion, widely magnified into rumors of special trains with discount fares, aroused tremendous enthusiasm among *Defender* readers and their friends. Both the influence of the *Defender* and the stimulus of setting a specific date are suggested by the exceptionally large numbers arriving in northern cities during the week following May 15. Although the *Defender* misled readers who thought the "Great Northern Drive" was an organized enterprise, the promotion's impact suggests that many migrants did conceive of their actions as part of a

mass movement. For many, like S. Adams of Houston, who wanted to "get in line with the rest," being part of a "movement" was easier than acting in isolation.⁵⁵

Labeled a "black Joshua" by one historian of the Great Migration, Abbott has been credited by his biographer with having "single-handed[ly] . . . set the migration in motion."⁵⁶ Because significant migration had occurred before the *Defender* either publicized or supported the exodus, Abbott can hardly be accorded such exalted status, even if the propitious economic conditions created by World War I are taken for granted. He and his newspaper played a central role in the communications network that shaped and facilitated the Great Migration as a social movement. It voiced the discontents of black southerners, urged them to act rather than wait, informed them of opportunities, shaped images of the urban North, encouraged migration, and interpreted the exodus as a racial crusade. But it could not have had the influence it did if community leaders had not served as local correspondents and sales agents, if those who were able to read had not read it aloud, or if it had not been part of an even larger network.

Many local leaders in the black South reached conclusions similar to those expressed by Abbott and other black northerners and agreed that migration represented the best prospect for advancement. Their voices remained muffled, however, because many were afraid to speak loudly. A Newborn, Alabama, minister favored migration and wrote to the *Defender* for help for his departing parishioners. But he would not speak out in public for the movement or against the South. "As leaders," he wrote, "we are powerless for we dare not to resent such [treatment] or to show even the slightest disapproval." A railroad fireman in southern Mississippi who found biblical parallels for the migration told Charles Johnson that the movement lacked a Moses because "it is not safe to be a Moses." After hearing the same message repeatedly during his trip through the South in 1917, Charles Johnson concluded that "leaders who openly encouraged the exodus would be in personal danger." William Pickens, field secretary for the NAACP, reached the same conclusion, and when he gave to the Baltimore *Afro-American* a letter from a Mississippi minister strongly defending migration, he instructed the editors not to publish the writer's name. Aware of the dangers of openly advocating migration, many of these leaders resorted to subterfuge, indulging in the honored tradition of fooling whites by using what Johnson called "a unique method of presentation"—transmitting their message while Uncle Tomming for white consumption.⁵⁷ But whether masking their opinions with stereotyped facades or remaining silent in public, many

influential black southerners contributed to the movement's reputation for being leaderless.

There were, however, many men and women who were not afraid to lead, to prod their friends and neighbors. Usually unknown outside their communities, these people occupied central positions within the information network that facilitated the spread of migration fever. Ministers, church deacons, *Defender* agents, letter writers, and others acted as grass-roots organizers of the movement by publicizing it and coordinating departures.

The dynamic element in this network was the influence of migrants already in the North, a factor which multiplied as the migration accelerated. Like European immigrants and white southerners who moved north and west, black southerners established migration chains linking North and South by means of kin and community relationships.⁵⁸ The first to leave a town often functioned as scouts for the whole community. Relatives and friends anxiously awaited reports of "how things 'broke'" in Chicago. Those unable to write even the simplest note could ask fellow roomers to compose their letters. With the arrival of a note declaring "everything pretty," or "Home ain't nothing like this," others made preparations to depart. These pioneers became, in the words of one Department of Labor analyst, "apostles of exodus to those remaining behind."⁵⁹

Although many letters betrayed loneliness and homesickness for old friends and institutions (often the church), they did so within the context of a recitation of Chicago's attractions. Few letters expressed great disappointment, and in some cases recipients had other reports against which they could balance negative comments. Most correspondents informed friends and relatives that "Everything is just like they say, if not better." The impulse to paint glowing pictures might have sprung as much from a wish to impress the folks back home as from the desire to render an honest report. Exuberant letters were especially enticing, although they could lead to eventual disillusionment by inflating expectations. But even the man who warned his friend that "half you hear is not true," also informed him that "there some thing to see up here all the time." By reading letters from Chicago, black southerners learned about day-to-day life in the North. These messages communicated the excitement of urban life. A Hattiesburg, Mississippi, man read that his "partner" had just been to the ballpark: "I wish you could have been here to have been here to those games. I saw them and beleve me they was worth the money I pay to see them. T.S. and I went to see Sunday game witch was 7 to 2 White Sox and I saw Satday game 2 to 1 White Sox." An equally impressed woman wrote home of "one of the greatest revivals in the

history of my life—over 500 people joined the church. We had a Holy Ghost shower." Outdoor leisure, the huge churches, the bright lights of State Street—all acquired immediacy and accessibility to restless black southerners reading letters from the North.⁶⁰

Chicago letters provided concrete images of not only the attractions of the city, but also the freedom and privileges enjoyed in the North. The Ohio River had long symbolized freedom to black Americans; letters from northern cities lent contemporary substance to this tradition. A southerner might tear himself away more easily once he knew that his friend could "just begin to feel like a man" in Chicago where he "got some privilege My children are going to the same school with the whites and I don't have to umble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election and there isn't any 'yes sir' and 'no sir'—its all yes and no and Sam and Bill."⁶¹ The advantages of racial equality—unthinkable in the South—were thus presented in unmistakably attainable and personal terms. Integrated schools, respect, the franchise: if his friend could acquire such privileges, so could he.

Mail from Chicago also documented the city's material advantages. One migrant reported inducing several friends to join him by sending "letters which represented wages as being enormous." Many correspondents provided concrete evidence of Chicago's economic opportunities by enclosing cash with their letters home.⁶² *Defender* columnists in southern towns referred to migrants "sending the bacon home" from Chicago, and banks in the Deep South reported heavy deposits of drafts drawn on northern banks. Charles Johnson found many Mississippi wives, husbands, children, and parents regularly receiving substantial sums from the North in 1917. Along with encouraging migration, these remittances facilitated it by providing railroad fare or prepaid tickets.⁶³

Not content to wait, many prospective migrants injected themselves into the communications network by cultivating contacts in the North. They wrote to churches, the *Defender*, the Urban League, friends, and relatives asking for information and aid. "I want you to write me what ar you doing and what ar you making and where is your son w—— and how do you think it would soot me up there," a Nashville resident wrote to a "dear friend" in Chicago; "Do you think that I could get a job up there if I would come up there where you are." Frequently these letters would cement old ties with news of home and reminders of bonds between writer and recipient. Before begging her old friend Mary to "tell me about the place," a Macon, Georgia, woman supplied an update on church events and community gossip, mentioning twenty-two individuals in her brief letter. It is impossible to discern how assiduously migrants responded to such

letters, as some, like the man who reported receiving two per week from friends "anxious to come," could hardly answer them all.⁶⁴ But by helping migrants in Chicago to remain a part of their former communities, black southerners perpetuated old ties that now linked North and South.

More than any advertisement, agent, or publication, letters spoke to black southerners in their own language and addressed their major concerns. Like "America letters" to Europe during the half-century before World War I, these messages were circulated, read before large gatherings, and heatedly discussed.⁶⁵ A man who promised to tell his friends how he fared needed to write only one letter, which was then shared by all. A woman who received a jubilant letter from her husband in Chicago promptly showed it to her "closest friends"—ten of them. Another letter was rumored to have "enticed away over 200 persons." A letter to Georgia found its way to Mississippi where it was handed to a woman by her "husband's brother's wife." After arriving in Chicago she began to write urging others to follow. In this fashion the chain lengthened with every new migrant. In 1917, Johnson estimated that "fully one-half, or perhaps even more of those who left, did so at the solicitation of friends through correspondence."⁶⁶ This proportion probably increased as continuing migration swelled the ranks of letter-writers. Although some letters were probably part of a private correspondence—usually between family members—they also had a broad impact; that impact frequently occurred within the context of familiar patterns of group activity, including the exercise of influence by group leaders.

Less broadly influential but probably even more convincing was the information conveyed by travelers between North and South. Most of those black southerners who could offer firsthand knowledge of conditions in northern cities were likely to be prominent participants in the social affairs of their communities. Excursions to northern cities had permitted a few black southerners to see Chicago before the Great Migration. A handful of middle-class black southerners had sent their children North for schooling; the paucity and poor quality of secondary schools in the South made Chicago's Wendell Phillips High School especially attractive. As the possibilities for boarding children with relatives expanded during the migration, more families seized this opportunity. Other members of the southern black bourgeoisie gained exposure to Chicago while "summering" there. G. W. Mitchell, who lived in Chicago from 1907 through 1916, later recalled that in the period 1908–10, "excursions to the north during the summer months were in flower." Chicago's Half-Century of Negro Progress exhibition during the summer of 1915 included exhibits from most southern states and attracted perhaps as many as twenty-five

thousand out-of-town visitors. During the war visiting became easier and more frequent, as railroads stimulated passenger traffic with special excursion fares and many black southerners could now stay with family in Chicago.⁶⁷

Chicago attracted even more visitors to fraternal conventions and religious conferences, usually attended by people chosen to represent their communities or able to afford to finance their own journeys. Fraternal societies and churches, vital social institutions in the black South, played a connective role in the migration, first by drawing visitors North to see Chicago and then by providing migrants with links to institutions. Between 1912 and 1925, thousands of black Americans from communities throughout the country attended conventions in Chicago. The fifteen to twenty thousand delegates to the 1915 National Baptist Convention, representing 2,600,000 black Americans, carried home stories of the Windy City. Ministers of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, whose greatest strength lay in the South, did the same three years later. Masons, Knights Templar, and Elks all returned to southern lodges with information after large conventions in Chicago.⁶⁸

Fraternal and religious conclaves not only brought southerners to Chicago; they showed visitors the city at its best, or at least its most exciting. Special State Street carnivals highlighted meetings of the National Negro Business League in 1912 and the Masons in 1916. On the eve of the Masons' gathering, the *Defender* noted that State Street "will be ablaze with electricity, fireworks, music."⁶⁹ Showing their southern comrades a good time, black Chicagoans sent them home with images that would be described and exaggerated in lodges and churches all over the South.

Like letter writing, visiting both fueled the momentum of migration and was itself stimulated by the movement. As more jobs became available in Chicago, southern teachers and college students traveled there for summer employment. Respected and widely connected through such activities as women's clubs, farmers' clubs, organizations for boys and girls, and school improvement leagues, these teachers could easily disseminate information upon their return. More broadly, as family networks branched northward, southerners increasingly ventured forth to find out for themselves, returning home with stories to tell in church, at the barber shop, and in other gathering places.⁷⁰

Travelers southward similarly carried information through both informal and institutional connections. When Ethel Peacock graduated from Wendell Phillips High School, she decided to serve her people by teaching in a Florida country school district. Like nurses trained at Chicago's Provident Hospital, who "in turn take charge of colored

hospitals throughout the South and educate other colored nurses," she provided black southerners with striking impressions of what blacks could attain in Chicago.⁷¹ In a more transitory fashion, Rube Foster's American Giants baseball team symbolized Chicago's polish and prestige during its frequent barnstorming tours through the South.⁷²

The most influential travelers were earlier migrants who returned home to visit, looking prosperous and urbane and bursting with wondrous tales of their exploits. Although most migrants used the mail to report their progress, many could not resist returning "just to tell how well they had done in the North." Others returned to attend weddings or funerals or to visit ailing family members. Local columns in the *Defender*, filled by 1917 with such items as "Mrs. Helen Scales, Chicago is visiting relatives and friends in Corinth, [Mississippi]," suggest the frequency with which these visits occurred and were noticed in the community. That same year, Charles Johnson found that in towns and cities throughout Mississippi, returnees were heavily influencing friends and relatives. A few of them might even have been "labor agents," he noted, perceiving a "strong suggestion of truth" in the suspicion that some who returned North with thirty or forty friends had been given funds by their employers in the North. But in most cases, visiting was primarily family oriented.⁷³

Family visits provided concrete information, most likely from migrants who had been successful enough that they could flaunt their accomplishments. John Wesley Rule, a prosperous Mississippian, sold everything he owned after his son returned from Chicago in late 1916 with a considerable sum of money and the claim that in the North he "could stand up like a man and demand his rights." A decade later New Orleans teenager Mahalia Jackson "could hardly believe" her visiting uncle's stories of life in Chicago. Such information usually circulated rapidly around the community. A Meridian, Mississippi, woman, whom everyone had accused of lying in letters reporting two dollars daily earnings in the stockyards, returned home to visit. As news spread that she had been telling the truth, former skeptics began preparing to leave, certain that they were better wage earners than their former neighbor.⁷⁴ New clothes and rolls of bills entitled returnees to bragging rights while providing prospective migrants with convincing documentation of Chicago's rewards.

Chicagoans encouraged southern relatives to visit so they could see for themselves why they should leave the South. Southerners asked relatives in Chicago to visit so they could evaluate how those relatives "looked" before uprooting themselves and migrating North. Others who could not bring themselves to leave sent their children North, and by 1919 Chicago school officials were complaining of the

number of southern black children living in Chicago with aunts and uncles.⁷⁵ Homes were also opened to newly arrived relatives, thereby eliminating one concern of cautious prospective migrants. Kinship, religious, and community ties were sufficiently flexible to permit separation and were strong enough both to draw people northward and to re-form in a new locale. Once reestablished in Chicago, these families, churches, and other social institutions acted as magnets to others still back home.⁷⁶

As the migration grew, a continuous communication process mushroomed, as some family members kept closely in touch, informed each other of opportunities, and persuaded relatives to join them in Chicago. This process often started with a male venturing North alone. Free trains usually carried only men, and many who paid their own transportation traveled without families because meager funds could finance only one fare.⁷⁷ Once employed in Chicago, this scout could begin to send for the family.

Like families, churches could provide North-South links based in a traditional, stable institution. Southern ministers occasionally preached in Chicago churches and then related their impressions to their home congregations. Through such visits, denominational connections, and the *Defender*, black southerners learned of Chicago's religious institutions, and many wrote to them asking for advice. In March 1917 Chicago's Bethlehem Baptist Association, headquartered in Olivet Baptist Church, advertised in the *Defender* that it would help newcomers find jobs and housing. Black southerners' faith in the *Defender's* race consciousness, coupled with the familiarity of the church as a trusted institution, induced "hundreds" to write.⁷⁸ Grasping a connection that a letter to the Urban League or *Defender* could not draw upon, some supplicants appealed as fellow Baptists. W. M. Agnew of Aberdeen, Mississippi, addressing his plea to "Brothers," claimed "I am a Baptist member my mother has Ben the mother of the Baptist Church for 30 years."⁷⁹ Others who never wrote to Chicago churches could rely on them for initial connections by obtaining letters of transfer from their home ministers.

With migration beginning to draw away members from some southern churches, ministers prepared to follow their congregations. At an African Methodist Episcopal conference in Ensley, Alabama, in 1917, one minister reported losing fifty-two of his ninety-six members in the previous six months. "Bishop," he declared, "I just come up here to notify you that I'm getting ready to follow my flock."⁸⁰ In November of that year a pastor in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where churches had already lost a third to a half of their members, was trying to sell his property and follow his congregants to Chicago. In some cases a clergyman would visit his former deacons who, discon-

tent with their lack of status in Chicago's churches, once again felt comfortable when he conducted a service for them. The deacons would then invite the minister to stay on and start a new church (usually in a storefront) in Chicago. Once the minister decided to follow the first migrants from his church northward, other members joined the trek. Like families, churches demonstrated their resilience by separating, re-forming in Chicago, and then attracting members still in the South.⁸¹ The central actors in this process were likely to have exercised local leadership in the South, whether as deacons or as ministers.

Churches also functioned as centers of conversation and dissemination of information in the South. In this role they were supplemented by such other gathering places as poolrooms, grocery stores, and barber shops. In 1917, Charles Johnson found that the conversation in these social centers was "one of the chief stimuli" to migration. Men assembled regularly in grocery stores and barber shops, Johnson observed, to review all the instances of mistreatment and injustice which fell to their lot in the South. It was here also that letters from the North were read and fresh news on the exodus was first given out.⁸²

Robert Horton's barber shop was one such establishment, and like Horton, most of the people who dominated discussion and organizing efforts were prominent in their communities. The reader of a letter from the North or the writer of a letter to the North, offering to a northern employer or employment agency the services of anywhere from a handful to more than one hundred "good hard working men," was probably better educated than many others in the community. Although many of the letters themselves reflect a smattering of education at best, one-third of all southern blacks were still classified in 1910 as illiterate by the United States Census.⁸³ Local representatives of the *Defender* might have commanded a degree of respect based upon their link to the trusted newspaper. Those who had visited the North possessed the authority of experience, of direct knowledge.

Innumerable other links touched individual black southerners, influencing and facilitating their movement North. Jazz musicians had their own network, as Chicago musicians would bring others North—usually from New Orleans or Memphis—to join their bands. When Chicago became the home of black recording companies in the 1920s, musicians naturally gravitated there. Seasonal workers in lumber and turpentine camps, sawmills, railroad labor camps, and fertilizer plants learned of northern jobs and living conditions from older men who had traveled North or had heard stories. Young men, often at their first nonfarm employment, thus received their initial exposure to other opportunities. Business and professional men followed their

clientele, especially in communities suffering the heaviest losses.⁸⁵ Some people were drawn North by the overflowing trains passing through their towns or outside their windows. Others were stirred by poems and songs. "Bound for the Promised Land," "Farewell, We're Good and Gone," "Northward Bound," and "The Land of Hope" made the rounds of black communities in the Deep South, drawing on the importance of oral tradition in communication within the group.⁸⁵

The most active organizers of migratory activity, however, formed new organizations—migration clubs. Created to take advantage of railroad group rates, the clubs constituted the organizational expression of the movement. Often based in existing social cliques, they served also to stimulate migration by permitting the migrant to be part of a group effort, thus easing the trauma of separation, the long journey, and perhaps resettlement as well. Most club leaders appear to have been men and women who owned property or businesses.⁸⁶

At first, the clubs developed as a complement to the activities of labor agents. Where labor agents had been active in providing free passes, clubs often consisted of the families of men who had been recruited. Where agents' activities had been curtailed by white authorities, the clubs organized those who had not been among the lucky few to secure free passage. Some leaders reportedly told recruits that they had been authorized by a labor agent to form a "Tourist Club"; but characteristically, nobody ever actually reported seeing the agent, and it is likely that a few of these club leaders probably took advantage of the labor-agent folklore to sway those who were reluctant to leave without some indication that a job awaited them. Most clubs were formed at the instigation of a "captain"; few captains found that anyone had to be persuaded.⁸⁷

To form a club, a man or woman would usually discuss the prospect with friends and neighbors and then arrange a convenient departure date. In many cases the leader would also contact friends in the North to receive the group. The size of clubs varied. In Jackson, Mississippi, most included forty to seventy-five members; in Hattiesburg, membership ranged from ten to eighty. Because the minimum number required for group railroad discounts was ten, nine members were sometimes compelled to contribute to the fare of an impecunious tenth associate; this practice further suggests the importance of group ties binding together club members. And, because of the sizable sums involved, the leader had to be someone trustworthy.⁸⁸

Assembling large groups, making arrangements, and handling substantial amounts of other people's money, these club leaders tended to be individuals with status in their community. An Ellisville,

Whether those who showed friends and neighbors Chicago letters and organized migration clubs were locally influential (as Charles Johnson concluded during his Mississippi survey in 1917) or just people who wanted to give others a chance to get in on a good thing, they were not the Washingtonian educators or business leaders who had been traditionally regarded as representatives of the black South. The number of women involved is especially striking, given the overwhelmingly male character of the recognized regional leadership. Abetted temporarily by the labor agents, these individuals organized and promoted the Great Migration. The movement drew upon individual initiative, but it did not emerge full-blown among a disorganized, leaderless mass. Northern leaders provided information and assistance. A few prominent black southerners encouraged the exodus, even if not always loudly. Most important, local activists—*Defender* agents, club organizers, and others who played major roles in the operation of the network—provided the movement with grassroots leadership. For the numerous migrants affiliated with clubs or other groups, the decision to leave was facilitated by the knowledge that they were not going alone. Indeed, sermons, community discussion and debate, and a "general feeling that it must be [the] best thing since everybody was doing it," established the social context within which most made the decision to migrate.⁹⁰ Black southerners ignored the threats and admonitions of whites, as well as the reservations and objections expressed by traditional leaders, and organized themselves and their neighbors to facilitate their journeys. Living in a society that sought to render them as dependent and powerless as possible, they acquired a new source of power over their lives—information that a better alternative not only existed but beckoned. They used the information and the network to plan and execute the process of their migration North, as well as to determine their destination.