

## MOVIN' ON UP: JIM CROW AND THE GREAT BLACK MIGRATION

In 1910, while Harlem was developing into a popular black neighborhood among New York City's African-Americans, 90 percent of the black population of the United States still lived in the South, most of them in rural areas. In fact, three out of four black Americans lived on farms. If blacks in the Tenderloin thought they had it bad trying to migrate to Harlem, the Southern blacks had it even worse, contending with severe poverty, discriminatory Jim Crow laws, and frequent lynchings. These harsh living conditions, combined with the onset of World War I, and severe blows to the cotton crop, convinced many to leave the South. Between 1915 and 1930, 2 million Southern blacks migrated to the North, mostly to New York City, Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago. In 1910, New York City's black population was 91,709; by 1930, the population had more than tripled to 328,000. Because of this Great Black Migration, the Harlem Renaissance would not only be possible, but necessary.

One major cause of the Great Black Migration was the Jim Crow laws, named after a popular character in minstrel shows, a demeaning caricature portraying Southern blacks as dumb and lazy (see the chapter "Musical Fireworks": *Jazz Lights Up the Heavens of Harlem*). Certainly many Southern laws reflected the attitude that blacks were more like cartoon characters than human beings. These restrictive laws were a direct reaction to civil rights laws that

white Southerners felt were forced upon them by meddling Northern politicians. Immediately after the Civil War ended in 1865, the Republican-run federal government began actively protecting black rights through the policy of Reconstruction. As a result, they pushed passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Civil Rights Act of 1875. However, in 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down most of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, ruling that Congress did not have the constitutional power to regulate the conduct of individuals. The Democrat-run Southern legislatures took advantage by passing laws meant to chip away at any federally mandated civil rights.

The first Jim Crow law was probably the 1890 law that required segregation of all railroad cars in New Orleans. This was quickly followed throughout the South by laws restricting blacks from voting through poll taxes and literacy tests, which were not required of whites. Other laws made interracial marriage or cohabitation illegal and forced segregation of schools, restaurants, drinking fountains, and libraries. Mississippi even threatened a \$500 fine or six months' imprisonment for anyone who printed or circulated written material that argued "in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and Negroes." Blacks were also sent to prison more often than whites for petty crimes, where, through a convict-lease system, they were forced to labor for no pay. Slavery by another name. In 1863, President Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation, resulting in the eventual freeing of 4 million slaves. Fifty years later, Jim Crow laws had virtually wiped out most gains Southern black Americans had earned.

Though the Jim Crow laws were harsh, Southern blacks had even more to fear from those acting outside the law. Black farmers were sometimes driven from their land by "white-capping," in which white riders (traditionally wearing white caps to disguise themselves) threatened or attacked blacks. Hundreds of cases of white-capping were recorded, especially in Mississippi. The white-cap fashion statement became an icon of the Ku Klux Klan, which was founded in 1866, as much to fight Northern businessmen as to

harass freed blacks. President Ulysses S. Grant used the Civil Rights Act of 1871 (also known as the Ku Klux Klan Act) to shatter the Klan, but it returned again in full force in 1915, inspired in part by D. W. Griffith's classic film *Birth of a Nation*, which portrayed Klansmen as romantic heroes. This time around, the Klan went national, with millions of Americans eager to join their ranks. By 1920, the same year that the Harlem Renaissance was hitting its stride and black music and literature were being noticed on an international level, KKK membership had risen to include a massive 15 percent of eligible Americans. As African-Americans began to achieve more rights, opportunities, and success, a white backlash arose like a giant tidal wave to attempt to stop the progress.

Lynching was one popular method of stopping this progress. Between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 blacks were lynched, 79 percent in Southern communities. Causes for being lynched included everything from homicide to theft to "insult to a white person." In 1906, Atlanta, Georgia, was the site of one of the most violent race riots in history. The local press had begun publishing unsubstantiated accounts of black men assaulting white women (the one charge that seemed to have the most effect in inspiring white violence) and urging the formation of a local Ku Klux Klan. White mobs responded by roaming through black neighborhoods beating and killing blacks and destroying their homes and businesses. The black president of a theological society was pistol-whipped by the police officer he'd run to for help. The violence continued for days, forcing the militia to march in to restore peace. In the end, twenty-five to forty blacks were murdered through beatings, bullets, and lynching. Two whites died, one of them a woman who suffered a heart attack when she saw the mobs roaming outside. Walter White, in his book *A Man Called White*, recounted his experience as a thirteen-year-old black boy facing a white mob:

Father told Mother to take my sisters, the youngest of them only six, to the rear of the house, which offered more protection from stones and bullets. . . . In a very few minutes the vanguard of the mob, some of them bearing torches, ap-

heard. A voice which we recognized as that of the son of the grocer with whom we had traded for many years yelled, "That's where that nigger mail carrier ves! Let's burn it down! It's too nice for a nigger to live in!" In the eerie light ather turned his drawn face toward me. In a voice as quiet as though he were asking me to pass him the sugar at the breakfast table, he said, "Son, don't shoot until the first man puts his foot on the lawn and then—don't you miss!"

A volley of shots from family friends sent the mob scurrying away. Young Walter White came away from that night of terror a changed person: "I was sick with loathing for the hatred which had flared before me that night and come so close to making me a killer; but I was glad I was not one of those who hated; I was glad I was not one of those made sick and murderous by pride."

The effect of the riot spread beyond the confines of Atlanta. African-Americans across the country were reevaluating their approach to civil rights. They began to question the approach of the de facto leader of the civil rights movement, Booker T. Washington, who advocated a passive approach of not doing anything to anger the white masses. Clearly, the escalation and sheer savagery of the violence against blacks argued against it. Black America was searching for new, more aggressive leadership. One leader who would emerge, and be the guiding intellect of the Harlem Renaissance, was W. E. B. Du Bois, who, while on his way to the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper to protest a lynching, passed a butcher shop. Displayed in the window along with the freshly butchered meat were the severed knees of a black lynching victim. Overcome with emotion, Du Bois returned to his home. Sometime later he would express his outrage at the violence of the Atlanta riots in a poem, "Litany of Atlanta (Done at Atlanta, in the Day of Death, 1906)." But more effectively, he would express his outrage at the causes of the Atlanta riots by helping to create the Harlem Renaissance.

Meantime, the violence continued; the lynchings continued. In 1901, George Henry White, a former slave and the only African-American in the House of Representatives, introduced a bill that

would make lynching a federal crime. He argued that lynching was a form of terrorism and those who used it should be convicted of treason. As evidence, he showed that of the 109 people lynched in 1899, 87 were black. The bill was defeated. Until 1918, not one person in the South was punished for participating in a lynching. The effect of this situation was clear: "Every time a lynching takes place in a community down South," said Chicago's Urban League president T. Arnold Hall, "you can depend on it that colored people will arrive in Chicago within two weeks." Perhaps one measure of the success of the Harlem Renaissance's efforts to reinvent the image of the African-American is that lynchings became rare after the Harlem Renaissance. Still, black Americans had endured this kind of treatment for so long that many saw it as part of the cost of living. It would take a lot more pressure to finally mobilize 2 million people to leave.

## FLIGHT OF THE BOLL WEEVIL, FLIGHT OF THE BLACK FARMER

One major source of pressure was a small invader from Mexico. It can be said that some of the weight of the Renaissance was carried into Harlem on the fragile wings of a tiny insect: the boll weevil. In 1892, the boll weevil traveled up from Mexico into Texas and by 1922 had made its way to Virginia. In its wake, this tenacious beetle was destroying 8 percent of the annual cotton crop in the United States. With cotton as the mainstay of Southern agriculture, the effects on the local economy were devastating, especially to blacks, most of whose livelihoods were directly tied to agriculture. Thousands of farmers lost their livelihood and were forced to find some other way to support their families. The boll weevil invasion inspired several blues songs that became mainstays of Harlem Renaissance musicians such as Bessie Smith. Modern variations of boll weevil songs have been recorded by singers from Harry Belafonte and Teresa Brewer to the rock duo White Stripes.

Whoever recorded it, the basic sentiment of catastrophic loss was the same:

The Boll Weevil knocked on my front door,  
He said I've come to eat,  
I'm gonna starve you plum to death  
And get the shoes right off yo feet.

Some historians attribute the enduring popularity of boll weevil songs not just as a testament to disaster, but as a divine retribution visited upon the heads of the wealthy white plantation owners. God was punishing them for their long dishonorable history of mistreating African-Americans.

## WORLD WAR I: FIGHT, NOT FLIGHT

The final, and some believe the most significant, cause of the Great Black Migration was World War I (1914-18). America's entry into the war in 1917 had a twofold effect: first, it created an enormous demand for manufactured war material; second, it cut off industrial America's chief source of cheap labor: European immigrants. In 1914, 1,218,480 European immigrants arrived willing to work for little pay; by 1918, the war had choked off that supply to 110,618. In addition, 4 million young, able-bodied men were removed from the American workplace and sent to fight, thereby creating an even larger labor shortage. Industrial America, mostly located in the North, had to look elsewhere for laborers who met their two major criteria: able-bodied and cheap. They looked to the South.

The Great Black Migration wasn't caused just by people escaping, some were being actively recruited. Representatives from Northern companies came South to extol the virtues of moving North. The average wage for black workers in the South was far below what was being offered in the North. Southern black steel-

workers made only \$2.50 per day, while in the North they made \$4.50 a day. And if that wasn't enough incentive, recruiters were helped in this task by black newspapers, particularly the *Chicago Defender*, the largest and most influential black-owned newspaper in the country (for whom Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes was a columnist). The weekly's subscription was 125,000, but two-thirds of the readers lived outside Chicago. The paper relentlessly portrayed the North as a Promised Land of true freedom. Acclaimed Harlem Renaissance writer Richard Wright (1908-60), whose novel *Native Son* (1940) explores the issues of racism he faced while growing up in Mississippi, recalled the siren song of the North that wafted from the pages of newspapers like the *Defender*: "The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt or seen; it had no relation to what actually existed. Yet by imagining a place where everything is possible, it kept hope alive inside of me."

So effective was the *Defender's* campaign of hope in siphoning off black workers from the South that the paper was banned in many Southern towns. Desperate white employers sometimes actually boarded trains carrying black workers to the North and attempted to violently drag them off. But what these workers were leaving behind was much worse than a beating, and the trains rolled north, one after another, day after day.

The war had inadvertently provided an economic opportunity for Southern blacks at a time when they had run out of options. But there was another, more personal, effect of World War I. Black soldiers came back expecting more from their country. Four hundred thousand of them had just fought a war for democracy, and they wanted to experience the full fruits of that democracy themselves. Certainly they were owed it. After all, they had distinguished themselves as heroes on the battlefields of France, returning with an inordinate amount of honors. The 370th Infantry won 21 American Distinguished Service Crosses and 68 French War Crosses; the 369th Infantry, called the Hell Fighters by the French, were given the Croix de Guerre for gallantry; 171 black

soldiers were awarded the French Legion of Honor. Also, the first American soldier awarded the French Croix de Guerre with star and palm was black sergeant Henry Johnson.

While World War I nudged into motion the Great Black Migration, it gave an angry shove to the Harlem Renaissance, providing it with passionate momentum. That momentum came not just from the pride of what black soldiers had proven to white America, but outrage at how white America responded to those accomplishments. At first, most black leaders had supported the war. W. E. B. Du Bois advocated a "close ranks" policy, suggesting that once the common enemy abroad was defeated, blacks could return to the task at hand: improving life for blacks in this country: "This is a crisis of the world. . . . We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all the darker races for equality, freedom, and democracy. . . . Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens."

But many white Americans did not want a black shoulder standing with theirs. While the South was pleased to draft blacks into the army, they didn't want them at the local training camps. Black soldiers were routinely discriminated against or outright attacked in Southern towns near boot camps. The discrimination continued even in battle. The French admiration for African-American soldiers was vigorously discouraged by the American military, which, in 1918, sent a memo to the French military titled "Secret Information Concerning the Black American Troops." The memo warned the French not to praise black soldiers too highly because that would "deeply wound" white American soldiers. It also suggested that French officers "not eat with [black soldiers], must not shake hands with them or seek to talk with them or meet with them outside the requirements of military service." This attitude ignored that black troops were killed at a higher rate than white soldiers: 14.4 percent for blacks; 6.3 percent for whites. This had a devastating effect on the morale of the black

soldiers fighting so hard in Europe. During one particularly brutal battle in 1918, one Harlem soldier contemplated the irony of his situation, writing in his diary:

I seem to feel that the Germans (who have done so much to destroy the high ideals for which we have fought so hard and were willing to sacrifice so much), after the coming peace, will enjoy more privileges and will have the door of opportunity opened to [them] more heartily than to the American Negro, whose patriotism is above question, and who has given his life's blood on every field of honor, in order to keep the flag which stands for such noble ideals from touching the ground.

Many blacks saw the return of their soldiers from war as a new beginning for African-Americans everywhere. The glorious victories and conspicuous bravery of black soldiers had proved that blacks were equals, and certainly white America would embrace this irrefutable evidence. Du Bois, in an editorial in the *Crisis*, waxed poetic about the new road ahead: "But by the God of heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land. . . . Make way for democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why."

## "RED SUMMER": THE WAR BROUGHT HOME

Yet, during the summer of 1919, when black soldiers were returning from the war, many blacks, including W. E. B. Du Bois, had cause to question their original patriotic "close ranks" stance as well as their optimism about the road ahead. A series of twenty-five major race riots broke out across the country resulting in eighty-three blacks being lynched, and many more being beaten,

shot, or burned out of their homes. So bloody were the riots that Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson referred to that summer as Red Summer. There had been race riots before, but not this many and not with such widespread devastation. Certainly something was different. Partly, it was the result of blacks returning from war, trained in combat, and less willing to accept insult or injury. The *New York Times* complained about this new black attitude: "There had been no trouble with the Negro before the war when most admitted the superiority of the white race." But blacks had a different take on the events, as expressed by the Southern black woman who wrote to the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), edited by W. E. B. Du Bois: "The Washington riot gave me a thrill that comes once in a life time . . . at last our men had stood up like men. . . . I stood up alone in my room . . . and exclaimed aloud, 'Oh I thank God, thank God.' The pent up horror, grief and humiliation of a life time—half a century—was being stripped from me."

World War I had changed the face of Europe, reshaping enemy countries into more manageable chunks. But the Great War had also changed the face of America, reshaping the way blacks felt about themselves, making them more actively resistant to being reshaped into manageable chunks by white America. Red Summer was the war brought home, and every black community was a country under siege, with whites attempting to send the clear message "Now that the war is over, everything goes back to the way it was." Harlem was one such country, and on this point, the Harlem Renaissance might just as easily have been called the Harlem Resistance. Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay responded to Red Summer with the poem "If We Must Die," a call to action to every African-American:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in the inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,

Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In Vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.

Ironically, the Great Black Migration did more to better black-white relations in the South than anything else. Finally aware at just how valuable and necessary blacks were to the Southern economy, many whites decided that the best way to stem the migration was by changing the way blacks were treated. Whites began talking to blacks and, more astounding, listening to them and their grievances. White merchants were more solicitous to their black customers, and the custom of arresting blacks for petty offenses dwindled.

Still, the migration continued. One Alabama minister's prayer suggested the migration had biblical origins: "We feel and believe that this great Exodus is God's hand and plan. In a mysterious way God is moving upon the hearts of our people to go where He has prepared for them." Northern cities swelled with Southern immigrants, who had to adapt to the ways of big-city life as well as the ways of the North, often with just as much difficulty as immigrants from foreign countries. So vast was the movement that many people got lost or separated. In 1938, Jack L. Cooper, black radio personality and the country's first African-American DJ, started a radio show called *Search for Missing Persons*, dedicated to bringing together black migrants with their lost family and friends. During the next twelve years, because of his show, twenty thousand people were reunited.

True, there was a hefty cost to the people who, through an enormous leap of faith, uprooted their families to move to a place they'd only heard about. But the possible rewards were well worth it. In 1925 Alain Locke, Howard University philosophy professor and leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote in his essay "The New Negro" that the causes of the migration to Harlem were more deliberately political than the traditional causes attributed to the mass movement:

The tide of Negro migration, northward and city-ward, is not to be fully explained as a blind flood started by the demands of war industry coupled with the shutting off of foreign migration, or by the pressure of poor crops coupled with increased social terrorism in certain sections of the South and Southwest. Neither labor demand, the boll-weevil nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor, however contributory any or all of them have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the Northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the larger and the more democratic chance—in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern.

Harlem was to be the model of this "modern" America, where blacks arrived daily to get a taste of the life they had rarely dared to demand, but only to imagine. Blacks didn't come to Harlem just to get away from something bad, they were actually choosing to rush toward something good: a place where they would form a "common consciousness," as Locke put it, adding, "In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. . . . Without pretense to their political significance, Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia."