

# THE TWENTIES IN POLITICAL CARTOONS

Eighteen political cartoons examining the racial issues confronting black and white Americans in the 1920s—the “race problem”—appear on the following pages. They were published in general circulation (white-owned) and African American newspapers from 1919 to 1928. [Virulent racist depictions from the period are not included in this collection.]

To analyze a political cartoon, consider its:

- ❑ **CONTENT.** First, basically describe what is drawn in the cartoon (without referring to the labels). What is depicted? What is happening?
- ❑ **CONTEXT.** Consider the timing. What is happening in national events at the time of the cartoon? Check the date: what occurred in the days and weeks before the cartoon appeared?
- ❑ **LABELS.** Read each label; look for labels that are not apparent at first, and for other written content in the cartoon.
- ❑ **SYMBOLS.** Name the symbols in the cartoons. What do they mean? How do they convey the cartoon’s meaning?
- ❑ **TITLE.** Study the title. Is it a statement, question, exclamation? Does it employ a well-known phrase, e.g., slang, song lyric, movie title, radio show, political or product slogan? How does it encapsulate and enhance the cartoonist’s point?
- ❑ **TONE.** Identify the tone of the cartoon. Is it satirical, comic, tragic, ironic, condemning, quizzical, imploring? What adjective describes the feeling of the cartoon? How do the visual elements in the drawing align with its tone?
- ❑ **POINT.** Put it all together. What is the cartoonist’s point?

## QUESTIONS

- ❑ How did general circulation and African American newspapers differ in interpreting the “race problem”?
- ❑ How did each view the role of citizens, states, and the federal government in addressing the “race problem”?
- ❑ Which cartoon would you select as the most successful in delivering its point? Why?

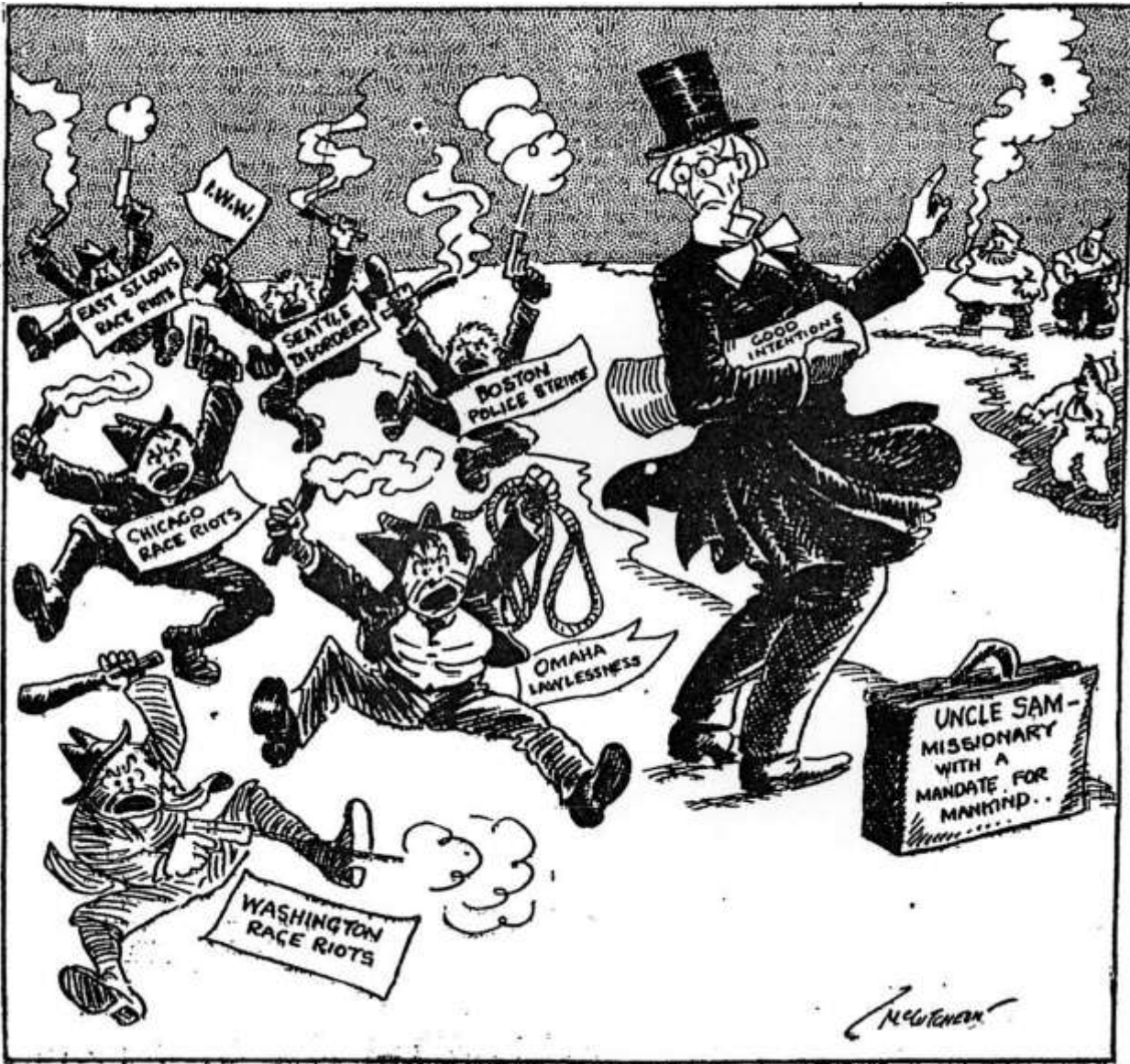
## RACE



“The U.S. Constitution Will Soon Be Bobtailed”  
*The Afro-American*, Jan. 18, 1924



“Their Christmas Tree”  
*Judge*, ca. Dec. 1922



## "The Missionary's Sons"

*Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 30, 1919

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

*I.W.W.*: International Workers of the World

*East St. Louis race riots*: May/July 1917

*Chicago race riots*: July/August 1919

*Washington [DC] race riots*: July 1919

*Boston police strike*: Sept. 1919

*Omaha lawlessness*: Sept. 1919

The three figures on the European continent are caricatures of a Russian, a Greek, and a Spaniard, probably referring to the Russian Revolution and civil war, the Greco-Turkish War, and the 1919 Barcelona workers' general strike

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## “They’re Learning”

*New York World*, September 30, 1919

Cartoonist: Rollin Kirby

*Lenine*: Vladimir Lenin, Bolshevik leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution.  
Omaha, Nebraska, race riot, Sept. 28-29, 1919.

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## “At the Other End of the Lyncher’s Rope”

*Des Moines Register*, Iowa, September 30, 1919

Cartoonist: Jay N. “Ding” Darling.

While the sketch quality of the image suggests the cartoon was not published, it did appear on the front page of the Sept. 30, 1919, edition of the *Des Moines Register*.

Reproduced by permission of the Jay N. “Ding” Darling Wildlife Society. Digital image courtesy of the University of Iowa Libraries.



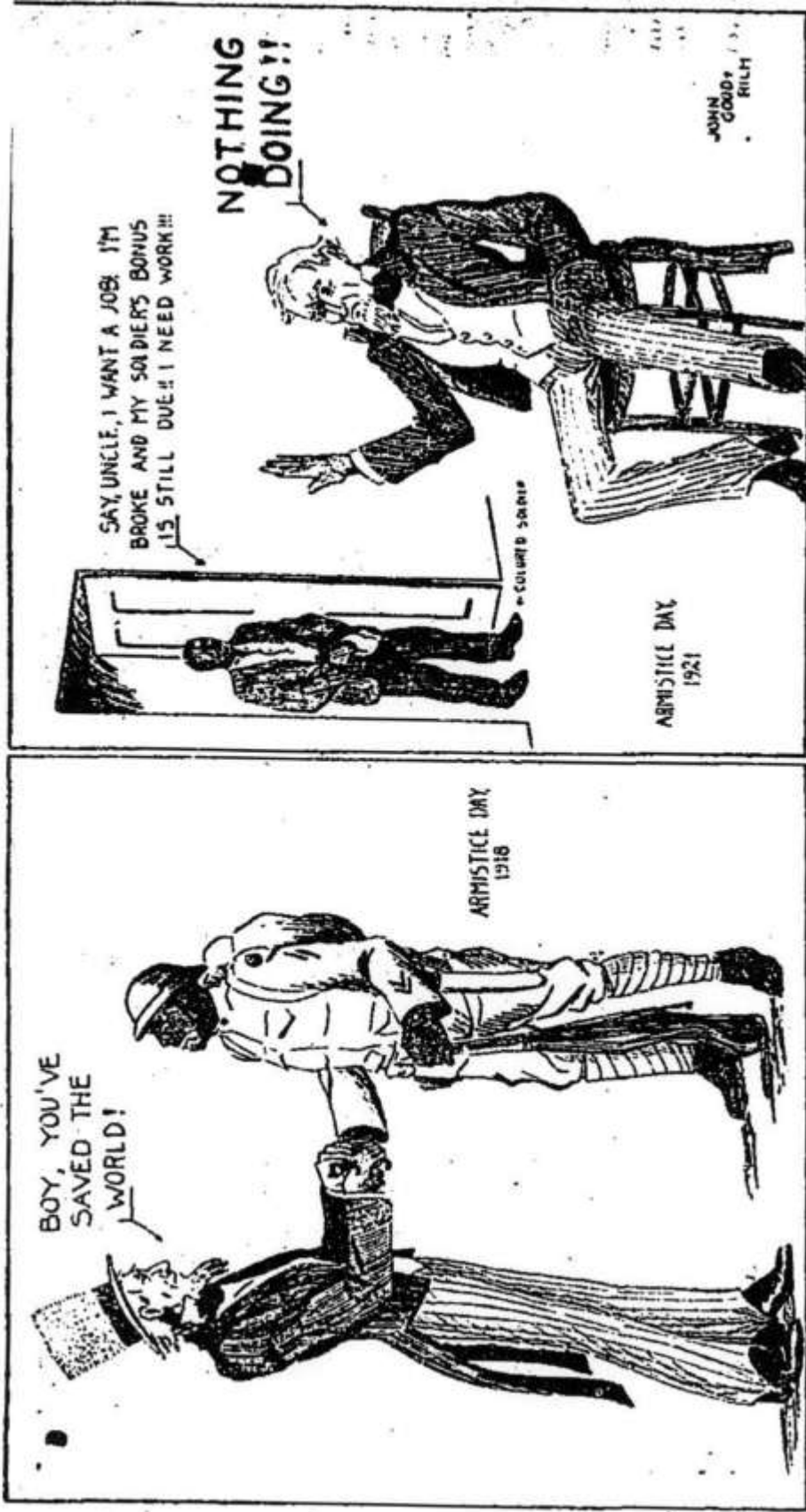
**“They Have Ears but They Hear Not”**

[Psalm 135:17]

*The Crisis*, November 1920

African American periodical. Cartoonist: Albert Alex Smith.

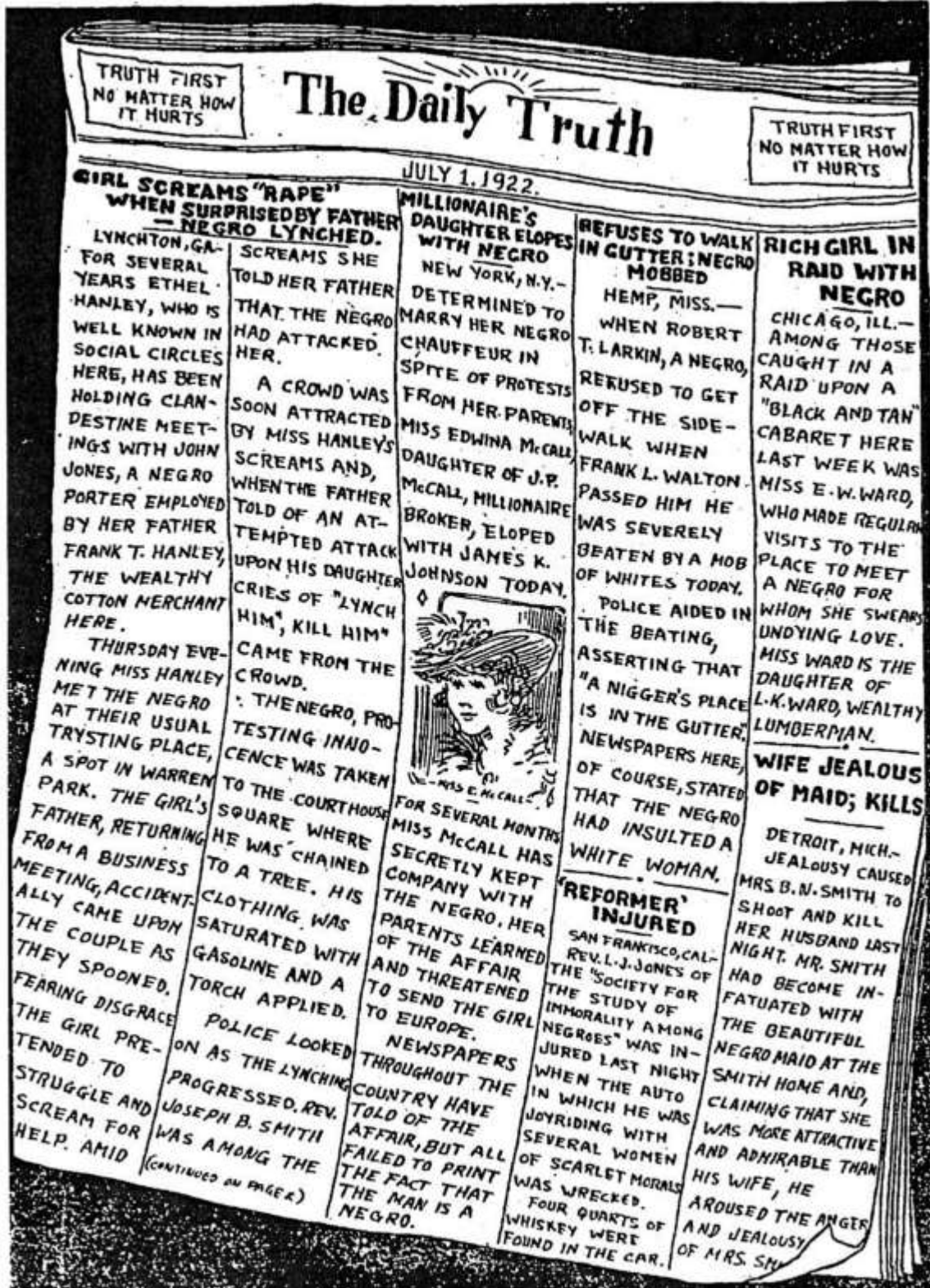
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Untitled

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, November 11, 1921  
 African American newspaper. Cartoonist: John Good [—].

Despite widespread support for a "soldier's bonus" for World War I veterans, Congress delayed legislation until 1924.  
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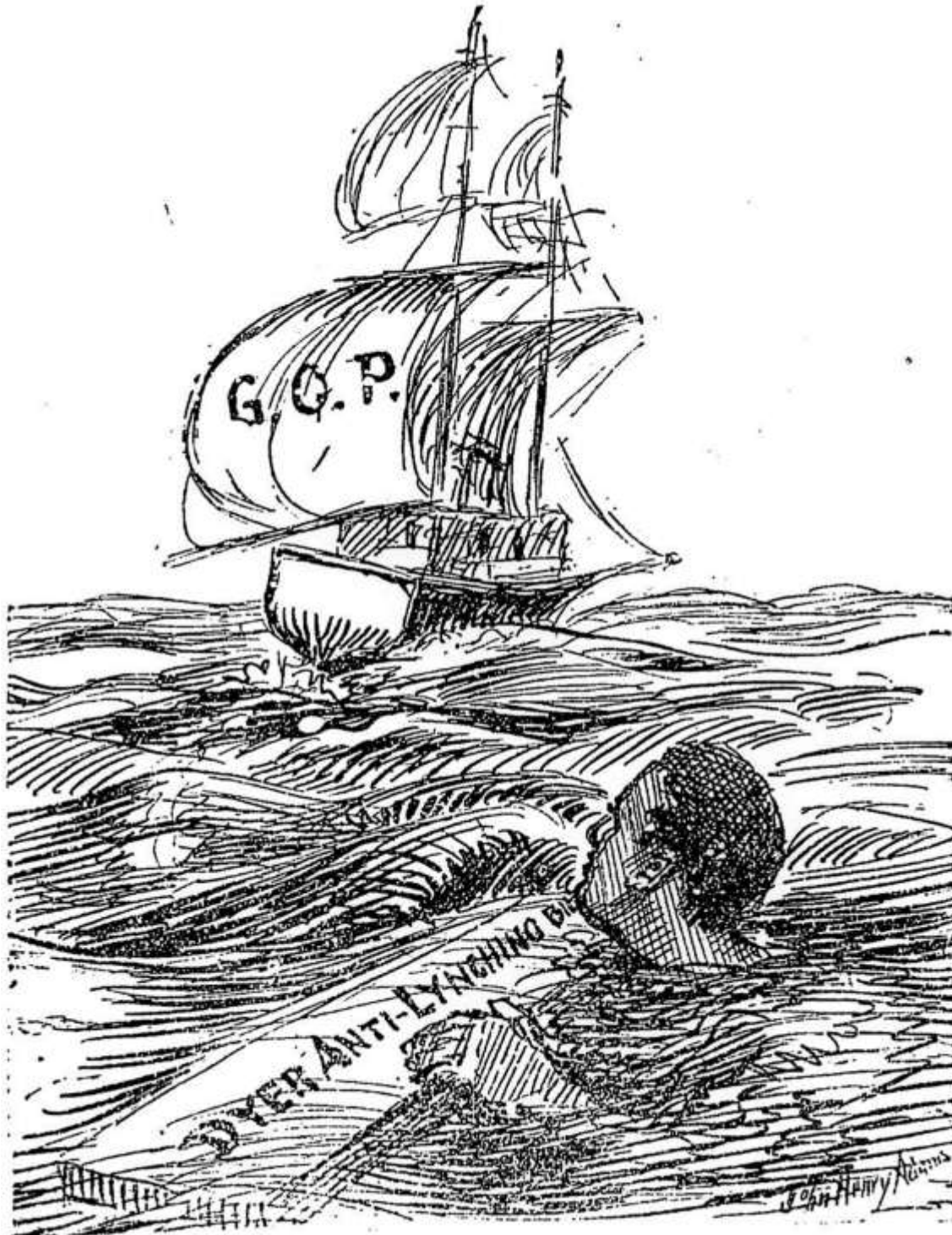


Permission request in process. Digital image courtesy of ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

**"If the Daily Press Dared Tell the Truth"**

*The Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1922

African American newspaper



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### “Cast Overboard”

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Dec. 15, 1922

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: John Henry Adams.

*G.O.P.*: Republican Party (“Grand Old Party”).

*Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill*: Republican bill introduced in the U.S. Congress in 1918 to make lynching a federal crime; passed in the House in 1922; blocked in the Senate by southern Democrats, after which the Senate Republican caucus vote, on December 2, to abandon the bill in that session of Congress.

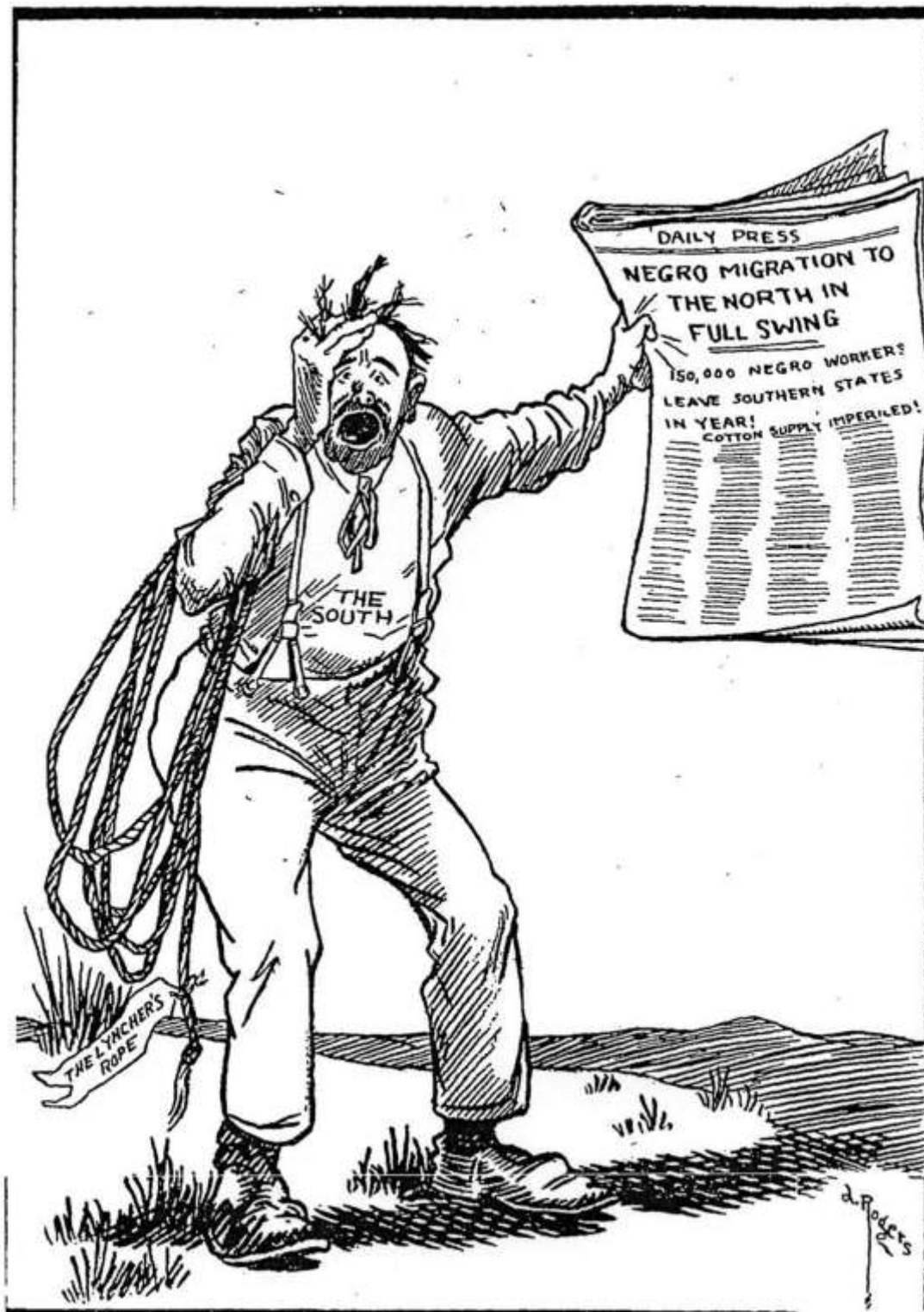


### **“Their Christmas Tree”**

*Judge*, Dec. 16, 1922

as reprinted in *The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Dec. 29, 1922

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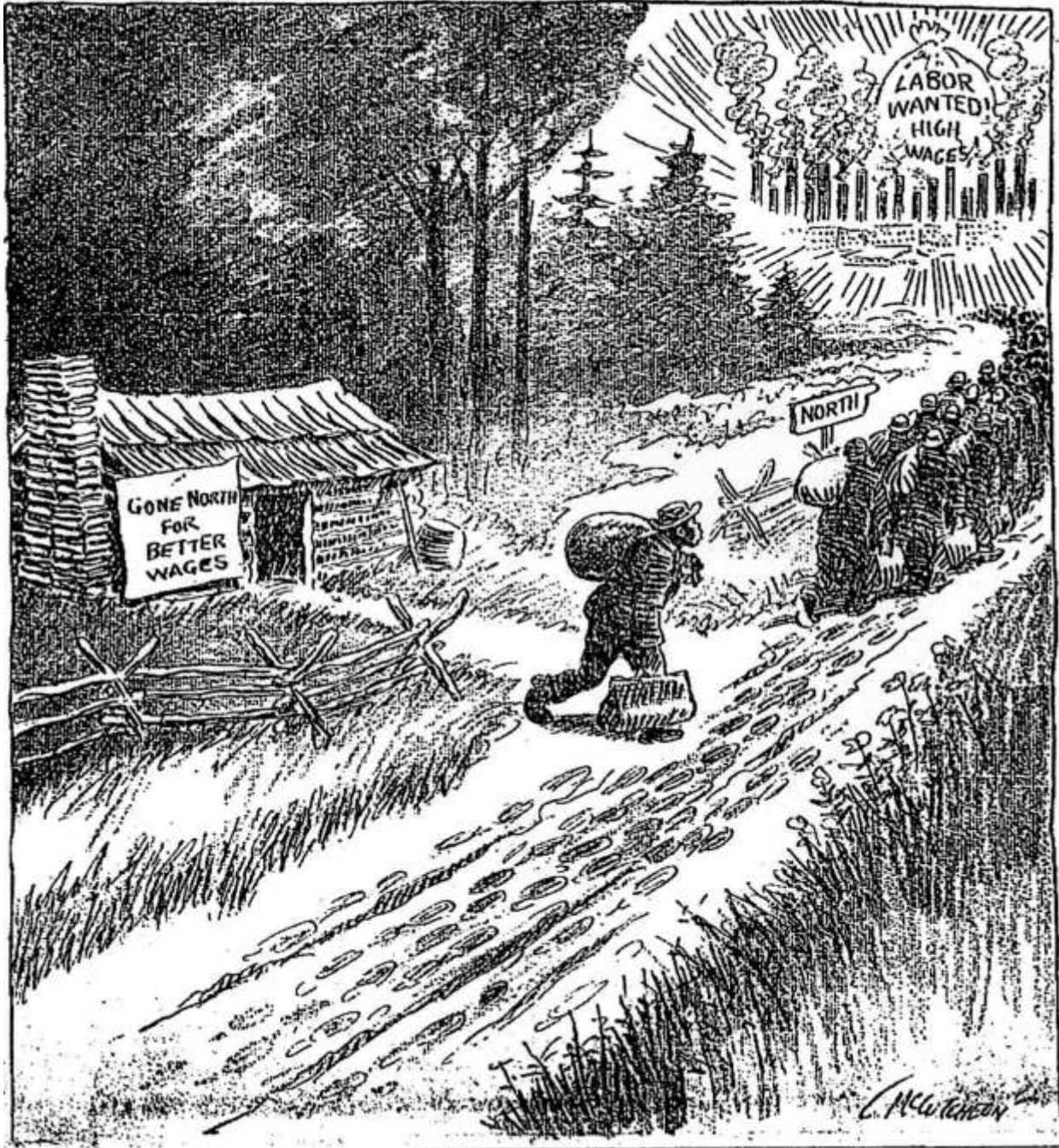


**“Great Scot! What Have I Done?”**

*The Chicago Defender*, February 17, 1923

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Leslie Rogers.

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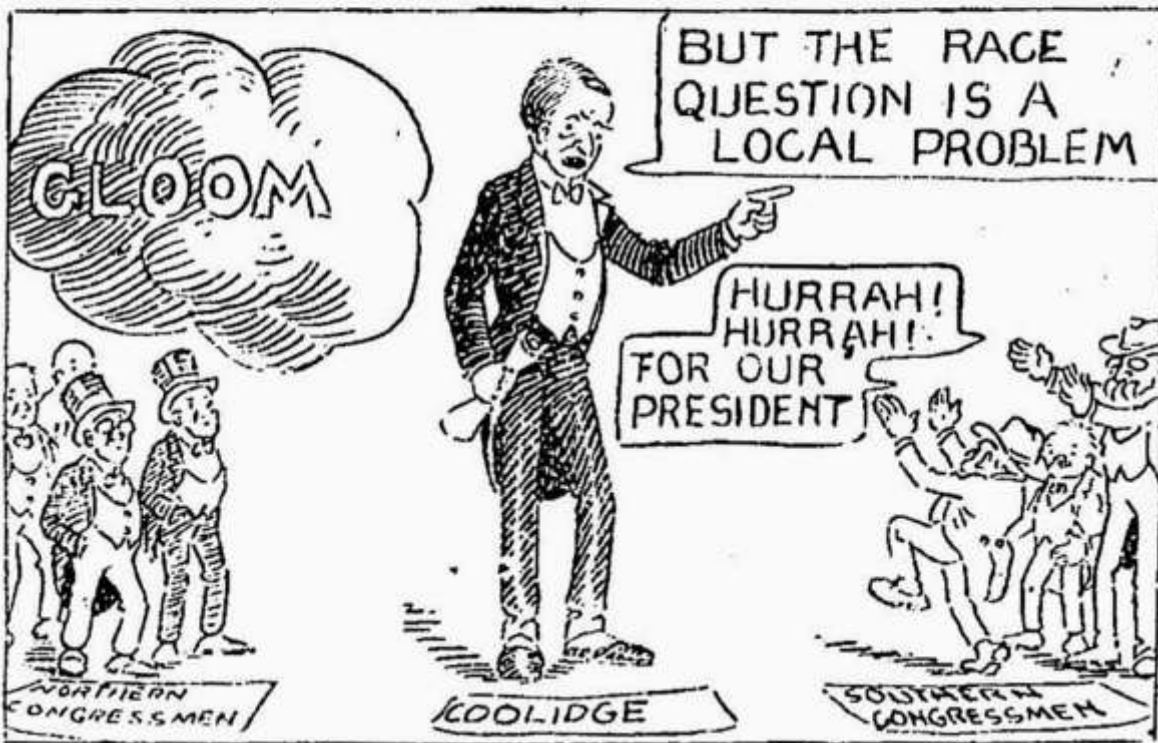


**“The South Will Soon Be Demanding  
Restriction of Migration of Its Labor”**

*Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1923

Cartoonist: John T. McCutcheon

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**“He Tries to Please Everybody”**

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Dec. 21, 1923

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Fred B. Watson.

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Reproduced by permission of The Afro-American Newspapers Archives & Research Center. Digital image courtesy of ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

## “The U.S. Constitution Will Soon Be Bobtailed”

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, January 18, 1924

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Fred B. Watson.

*14<sup>th</sup> Amendment*, ratified 1868: citizenship granted to all persons born or naturalized in the U.S. (thereby granting citizenship to all African Americans); states required to provide due process of law and “equal protection of the laws” for all U.S. citizens.

*18<sup>th</sup> Amendment*, ratified 1919: banned the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors in the U.S. (Prohibition); repealed by the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment in 1933.



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TWENTY YEARS AGO



AND TODAY

**“Too Powerful to Keep Out!”**

*The Chicago Defender*, September 13, 1924

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Leslie Rogers.

*Gompers*: president of the American Federation of Labor from its founding in 1886 to his death in December 1924.



Permission request in process. Digital image courtesy of ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

## “Smashing an Old Idol!”

*The Chicago Defender*, April 25, 1925

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Leslie Rogers.

*Antebellum*: before the end of the Civil War in 1865 [Latin: “before war”].

“Black mammy”: racial stereotype of the passive, cheerful enslaved woman who cared for the slaveholder’s children.



**“State’s Rights or State’s Wrongs?”**

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, Feb. 20, 1926

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Fred B. Watson.

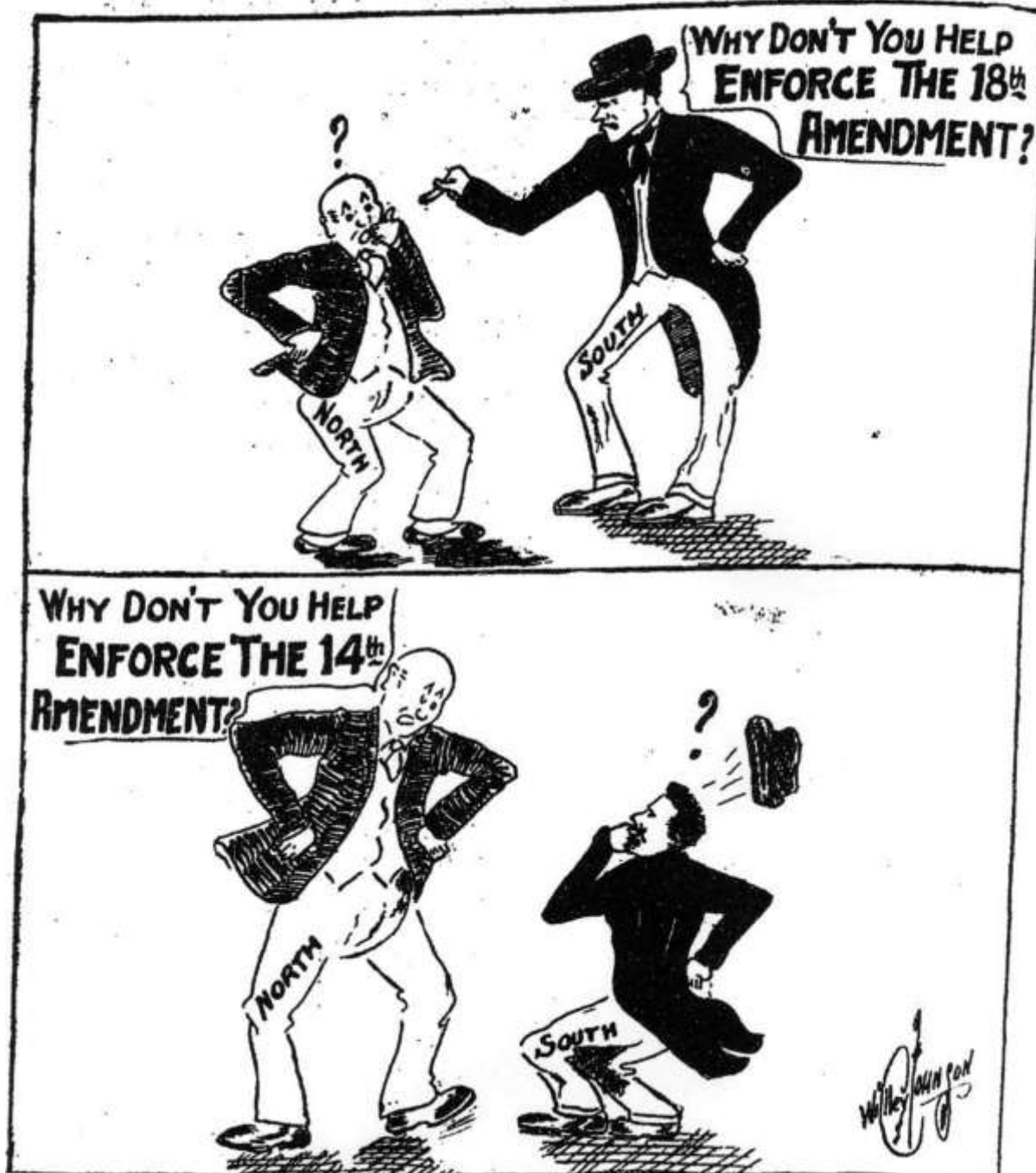
South Carolina: Benjamin Tillman, state governor (1890-1894) and U.S. Senator (1895-1918); known for his virulent support of white supremacy and states’ rights positions.

Maryland: Albert C. Ritchie, state governor (1920-1925): states’ rights advocate and fervent anti-Prohibition spokesman.

California: Friend Richardson, state governor (1923-1927): anti-Progressive governor during enactment of the restrictive 1924 immigration law (National Origins Act, which included the Asian Exclusion Act).

*Volsteadism*: Support of Prohibition (enforced through the 1920 Volstead Act).

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**“The Chain Is No Stronger than Its Weakest Link”**

*The New Journal and Guide*, Norfolk, Virginia, July 24, 1926

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Willey Johnson.

*14<sup>th</sup> Amendment*, ratified 1868: citizenship granted to all persons born or naturalized in the U.S. (thereby granting citizenship to all African Americans); states required to provide due process of law and “equal protection of the laws” for all U.S. citizens.

*18<sup>th</sup> Amendment*, ratified 1919: banned the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors in the U.S. (Prohibition); repealed by the 21<sup>st</sup> Amendment in 1933.

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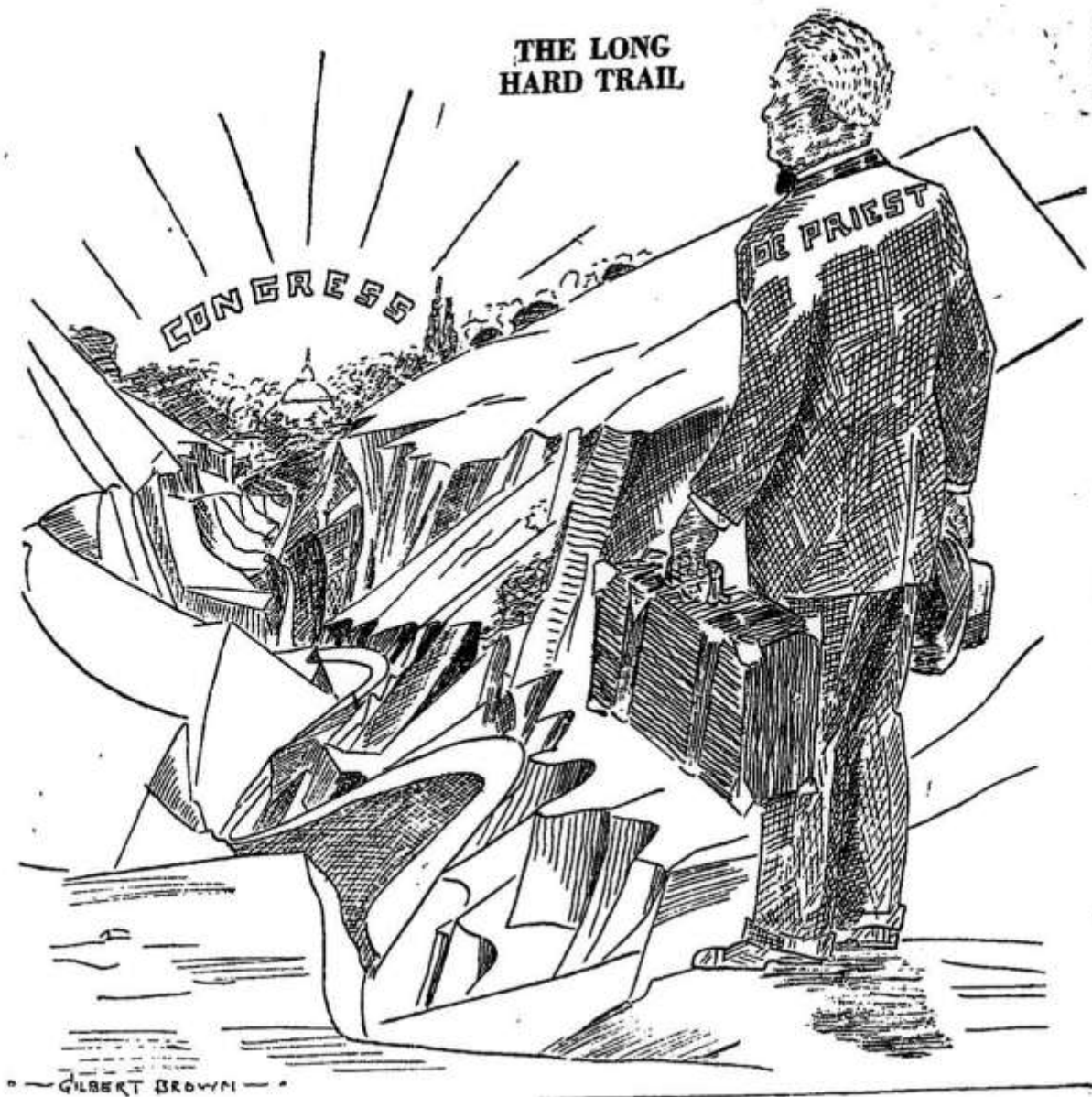


Reproduced by permission of the New Pittsburgh Courier. Digital image courtesy of ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

**“Seeing Yourself as Others See You”**

*The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 26, 1927

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Wilbert Holloway.



### “The Long Hard Trail”

*The Afro-American*, Baltimore, August 25, 1928

African American newspaper. Cartoonist: Gilbert Brown.

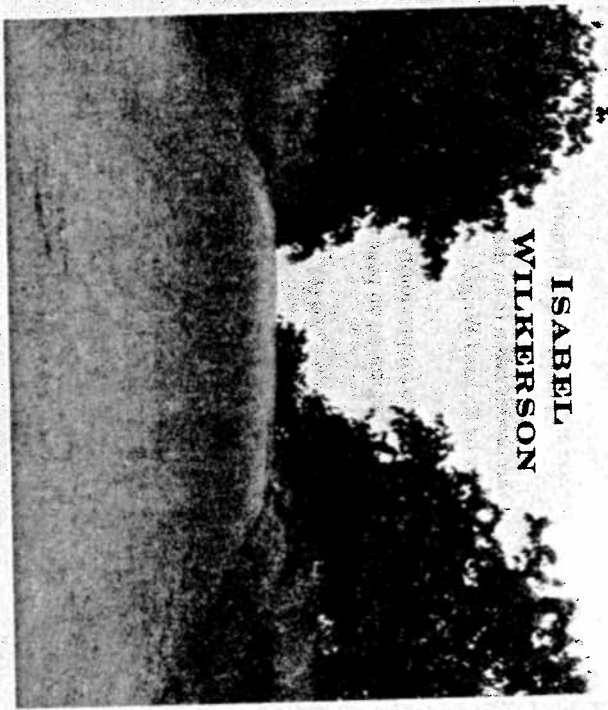
Oscar Stanton De Priest was the first African American elected to Congress in the twentieth century, serving as the representative of a Chicago district for three terms, from 1929 to 1935.

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# THE WARMTH OF OTHER SUNS

THE EPIC STORY OF  
AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION

ISABELL  
WILKERSON



2010

RANDOM HOUSE  NEW YORK

## THE APPOINTED TIME OF THEIR COMING

*Even the stork  
in the sky knows  
her appointed seasons,  
and the dove,  
the swift and the thrush  
observe the time  
of their migration.*  
—JEREMIAH 8:7

NEAR OKOLONA, MISSISSIPPI, LATE AUTUMN 1937  
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IDA MAE AND THE CHILDREN rumbled over curled ribbons of dirt road in a brother-in-law's truck from Miss Theenie's house to the train depot in Okolona. Piled high around them were all the worldly possessions they could manage to carry—the overalls and Sunday clothes, the cook pots and kerosene lamps, a Bible and the quilts that Ida Mae and Miss Theenie had sewn out of used-up remnants of the clothes they had worn out tilling the Mississippi soil. Miss Theenie had not wanted them to go and had prayed over them and with them and then watched as her second-born daughter left the rutted land of the ancestors. "May the Lord be the first one in the car," Miss Theenie had whispered about the train they were hoping to catch, "and the last out."

Heading to the depot through the dust hollows and the cotton fields

and away from the only place she had ever lived. Ida Mae did not know what would become of them or if her husband could actually pull this thing off. She did not know if Mr. Edd would let them go or stand in their way; if her husband would get anything from Mr. Edd at settlement, if they would be better off up north or, if they failed, worse off for having the nerve to try to leave—and if, in the end, they would truly make it out of Mississippi at all.

But there at the depot was her husband, the taciturn man who kept his emotions to himself, who had courted her and won her over despite Miss Theenie's objections, and who had decided that he did not want his family under the mercurial thumb of Mississippi for one more hour. He had not asked Ida Mae what she thought about leaving or whether she wanted to go. He had merely announced his decision as the head of the family, as was his way, and Ida Mae had gone along with it, as was hers.

She had not wanted to leave Miss Theenie and her sister Talma and all the people she had ever known, but her lot was with her husband, and she would go where he thought it best. Both she and Miss Theenie could take comfort in knowing that Ida Mae's sister Irene would be there to receive them in Milwaukee and that half her husband's siblings were up north in Beloit, Wisconsin, and in Chicago, and so Ida Mae would not be alone in that new land.

Mr. Edd had been a man of his word. He did not try to keep George and Ida Mae from leaving. George had gotten a few dollars from Mr. Edd and managed to secure four train tickets to Milwaukee via Chicago, having likely secured them not in Houston, where he might have been recognized, but in Okolona, where he was less likely to be noticed and where they would be leaving from.

And so the family—Ida Mae, George, Velma, James, and the little one still forming in Ida Mae's belly—boarded a train in Okolona. They were packed in with the baggage in the Jim Crow car with the other colored passengers with their babies and boxes of fried chicken and boiled eggs and their belongings overflowing from paper bags in the overhead compartment. The train pulled out of the station at last, and Ida Mae was on her way out of Chickasaw County and out of the state of Mississippi for the first time in her life.

EUSTIS, FLORIDA, APRIL 14, 1945  
 GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

GEORGE HAD NO TIME for formalities or the seeking of advice or reassurance. He had to go. There was no point in discussing it, and no one he told tried to argue him out of leaving, except for Inez, who wasn't so concerned that he was going but that he wasn't taking her with him. He hadn't had time to figure out what to do with Inez. All he knew was he had to get himself out of Lake County, Florida, before the grove owner got to him first.

All three of the men who had stirred up the commotion in the grove were heading out quick: George to New York, Charlie to Rochester, Sam to Washington, D.C. They each had to figure out where they knew somebody up north and the most direct route to wherever the people they knew were located. They did not so much choose the place as the place presented itself as the most viable option in the time they had to think about it. They did not dare travel to the train station together to allow themselves to be seen together once it was clear they had to go out.

George would be traveling fast and light—a few books, some paper a change of clothes. He got a man most people wouldn't associate him with but whom he felt he could trust, old Roscoe Colton, to drive him to the train station at Wildwood, a good forty-five minutes' drive on the two-lane gravel roads from Eustis. They rode through the groves that George had picked and that he knew the names of and were the reason he was forced to leave. But he wasn't feeling sentimental about it. He had to get out of the county first. The two of them had to make sure the didn't attract attention to themselves, didn't get stopped along the way and weren't being followed.

They went west with the sun, rambling along the southern edge of Lake Eustis, passing the county seat of Tavares, where George and Inez had gotten married at the courthouse almost exactly six years before and crossing into Sumter County between Lake Deaton and Lake Okahumpka. Roscoe Colton's truck pulled up to the depot at Wildwood, and George, tight and sober-faced, walking slow and deliberately so as not to look like the fugitive he had unwittingly become, climbed the colored steps onto the Silver Meteor, headed for New York.

MONROE, LOUISIANA, THE MONDAY AFTER EASTER 1953

ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

IN THE DARK HOURS OF THE MORNING, Pershing Foster pulled away from his father and brother, the house on Louise Anne Avenue, and his caged existence in the caste-bound, isolated South. The night clouds crawled eastward, the sky itself floating in the opposite direction from him in the damp, cool air. He pointed his Buick Roadmaster to the west, away from Monroe, and settled into the tufted bench seat for the nearly two thousand miles of road ahead of him, the distance that now stood between him and California, between Jim Crow and freedom.

He was setting out on a course that was well trodden by 1953. In the years before Pershing's migration, many hundreds of people from Monroe and thousands more from the rest of Louisiana had joined the river to California. Mantan Moreland, a minor Hollywood figure who made a name for himself as the fumbling manservant and loyal incompetent of black-and-white comedies and Charlie Chan capers, left Monroe for Los Angeles during the Depression. It spread around New Town that he had been on his way to shining shoes in West Monroe and passed a tree with a colored man hanging from it. He left that day and headed to California.

A toddler named Huey Newton was spirited from Monroe to Oakland with his sharecropper parents in 1943. His father had barely escaped a lynching in Louisiana for talking back to his white overseers. Huey Newton would become perhaps the most militant of the disillusioned offspring of the Great Migration. He founded the Black Panther Party in 1966 and reveled in discomfiting the white establishment with his black beret, rifle, and black power rhetoric.

Another boy from Monroe who migrated with his parents to Oakland took an entirely different path. He would go on to become one of the greatest basketball players of all time. Bill Russell was born in Monroe in 1934 and watched his parents suffer one indignity after another. His father once went to a gas station only to be told he would have to wait for the white people to get their gas first. He waited and waited, and, when his turn seemed never to come, he started to pull off. The owner came up, put a shotgun to his head, and told him he was not to leave until all the white people had been served.

"Boy, don't you ever do what you just started to do, my son," the owner said.

As for Russell's mother, a policeman once grabbed her on the street and ordered her to go and take off the suit she was wearing. He said that she had no business dressing like a white woman and that he'd arrest her if he ever saw her like that again. Bill Russell watched his mother sit at the kitchen table in tears over the straits they were in.

Soon afterward, his parents packed up the family and moved to Oakland, where a colony of people from Monroe had fled. Russell was nine years old. He would get to go to better schools, win a scholarship to the University of San Francisco, and lead his team, the Dons, to two NCAA championships, a first for an integrated basketball team, collegiate or professional. He would join the Celtics in 1956 and lead Boston to eleven championships in his thirteen seasons. He would become perhaps the greatest defensive player in NBA history and the first black coach in the NBA. There is no way to know what might have happened to Bill Russell had his parents not migrated. What is known is that his family had few resources and that he would not have been allowed into any white college in Louisiana in the early 1950s, and thus would not have been in a position to be recruited to the NBA. The consequences of his absence from the game would now be unimaginable to followers of the sport.

In Pershing's own circle, a funeral director named John Dunlap went to Oakland. Pershing's boyhood friend Jimmy Marshall had been out in Los Angeles since the war. A friend named Liminary Jordan moved out to L.A. in 1950. By the time Pershing turned the corner of Desiard Street for good, more than 462,000 colored people, many of them from Louisiana and Texas, were already out in California, most of them people he never knew but who had joined the march before him.

World War II had set off a virtual stampede. In all of California, there had been only 124,306 colored people in 1940, before the United States entered the war. But during the rest of that decade, the population almost quadrupled—337,866 more hopeful souls flooded into California for the shipyard jobs and the defense industry jobs and the ancillary jobs that came with the wartime and postwar economy. More colored people migrated to California in the 1940s than had come in all the previous decades put together. And so, heading out as he was in 1953, Pershing left with the feeling that the Great Migration had passed him by that he was playing catch-up with a tide that had already rolled away. He drove with a sense of urgency, not knowing that he was, in fact, righ

in the middle of a wave that was more than fifteen years from ebbing. Another 340,000 colored people would go to California in the fifties, the decade he left Louisiana. Another quarter million would follow in the sixties.

For now, he imagined there was a whole world just waiting for him to get there, people living the high life in Los Angeles and building businesses in Oakland. He had no idea which city he would end up in. He was partial to Los Angeles, based on what he knew of it from the movies he had seen at the Paramount, but there were more people from Monroe in Oakland. He decided not to worry about that now. He would visit them both and decide once he got there. The thing he knew for sure was he was going to California.

He drove west and slightly south in the direction of Houston, where he would visit a Dr. Anthony Beale and knew he could be assured of a place to rest for the night. The sun rose behind him in his rearview mirror. He drove alone with only the radio to keep him company, stations moving in and out like guests at a party. As soon as he got used to one, another would break in and take its place, often the new one not nearly so engaging as the last.

He had nothing but time, time to think, and, as he drove, he knew this was the time to shed his southern self for good, starting with the name. *Pershing*. It was stiff and archaic and not him at all. It was for another man and time. His mother had meant well when she named him after John J. Pershing, the World War I general. It was the fall of 1918. She was growing full with her last son forming inside her, and General Pershing was pushing the Germans past the Argonne Forest when an armistice ended the Great War. The general was a household name at the time, an American hero, and she decided to add the name to the list she had in mind for her unborn child.

The baby was delivered by a midwife on Christmas Day 1918. His full name would be Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. His mother called him Pershing after the general and insisted that everyone else do the same.

A name was a serious undertaking. It was the first and maybe only thing colored parents could give a child, and they were often sentimental about it. They had a habit of recycling the names of beloved kinpeople, thus ending up with three or four Lou Dellas in one or two generations. Out of the confusion it created, children got nicknames like Boo or Pip or Sweet, which after repeated use meant nobody knew any-

body's given name until they got married or died. It left mourners at southern funerals not knowing for sure who was in the casket unless the preacher called out "Junebug" in the eulogy. *Oh, that's Junebug that died!*

Sometimes parents tried to superimpose glory on their offspring with the grandest title they could think of, or, if they were feeling especially militant, the name of a senator or president from the North. It was a way of affixing acceptability if not greatness. It forced everyone, colored and white, to call their janitor sons Admiral or General or John Quincy Adams, whether anybody, including the recipient, liked it or not. White southerners who would not call colored people Mr. or Mrs. were made to sputter out Colonel or Queen instead.

And so, growing up, he was called not by his first name, Robert, but by the more imperial-sounding Pershing. The problem was that by the time he got to grade school nobody in Monroe knew or cared much about the feats of an ancient general way off in Europe somewhere. It had no meaning to the people around him, and he was the only Pershing they knew. The colored children in New Town had a hard time pronouncing it. They called him *Percy*, *Purly*, *Persian*, *Party*, which made an ill-fitting name even less bearable and a mockery of his mother's intentions.

He was starting over now. His mother was gone. What he would be called would be up to him. In California, he would be Robert or, better yet, Bob. Bob with a martini and singy-brim hat. It was modern and hip, and it suited the new version of himself as the leading man in his own motion picture. He had tested it out in Atlanta, and it had caught on. The people in California who knew him back home would get used to it in time. *Bob*. Simple and direct and easy to remember. He rolled the word around in his mind, and he liked it.

ON THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD, OCTOBER 1937

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IDA MAE SAT UP and watched Mississippi blur past her through the film of soot on the train window. By some miracle, she and her husband

had managed to keep their secret from most of the plantation throughout the picking season and left whole branches of the family and people they had known since childhood in the dark as to what they were up to. They couldn't chance it and had no choice. "You didn't go around telling neighbors and everybody else in the farm. A lot of 'em didn't know we was gone," she said, "ill we was gone."

The two of them, along with little James and Velma, boarded a screeching metal horse on wheels, heading north and slightly west on the Mobile and Ohio Railroad, a feeder line to the main rail. They rode in the darkness on an old train called The Rebel, a mule-headed relic of the Confederate South, rattling toward something they had never seen and did not know. Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, they would have to collect their belongings and change trains in Jackson, Tennessee, to board the Illinois Central Railroad, the legendary rail system that, for a great portion of the twentieth century, carried upward of a million colored people from the Deep South up the country's central artery, across the Mason-Dixon Line, and into a new world called the Midwest. It carried so many southern blacks north that Chicago would go from 1.8 percent black at the start of the twentieth century to one-third black by the time the flow of people finally began to slow in 1970. Detroit's black population would skyrocket from 1.4 percent to 44 percent during the era of the Migration.

It would not have occurred to them that they were riding history. They were leaving as a family, not as a movement, on the one thing going north. But as it happened, the Illinois Central, along with the Atlantic Coast Line and Seaboard Air Line railroads, running between Florida and New York, and the Union Pacific, connecting Texas and California, had become the historic means of escape, the Overground Railroad for slavery's grandchildren. It hurried its passengers along the same route and under the same night sky as the Underground Railroad, the secret network of safe houses leading north that had spirited slaves to freedom the previous century.

Even before the first anxious sharecroppers boarded the Illinois Central, sometime in the early stages of World War I, the railroad had a pedigree that made it inadvertently synonymous with freedom to black southerners who could manage to secure a ticket. The Illinois Central Railroad was founded in 1850 as a connector between Chicago and Cairo, a river town at the southern tip of the state, adding steamboats down the Mississippi and ultimately rail lines to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. For a time, Mark Twain piloted the railroad's steam-

boats up and down the Mississippi, and Abraham Lincoln was a rising attorney on retainer to the railroad before his election to the White House.

The Civil War brought an end to regular passenger use, and the railroad was pressed into the service of the Union Army, funneling troops and supplies from the North to the South for the war effort. At war's end, the railroad laid or acquired tracks into the more isolated precincts of Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana and unwittingly made the North a more accessible prospect for black southerners desperate to escape. Each train route of the Illinois Central had a name of its own. The trains were called The Planter, The Creole, The Diamond, The Panama Limited, and, most famous of all, the one that Ida Mae rode, The Louisiane, later renamed The City of New Orleans, which went straight up the country's spine from the Mississippi Delta to the flat wheat prairie land and Chicago itself.

The Illinois Central brought more than merely the chance to leave. It brought parcels from the North that became accidental marketing brochures—the catalogues from Sears, Roebuck, the lovingly wrapped boxes of hand-me-downs from relatives who had made it north, and the discreetly bound copies of the *Chicago Defender*, the colored newspaper that was virulently anti-South and for that reason virtually banned in the region. Pullman porters smuggled the paper into the luggage holds during their regular runs between Chicago and the Deep South, hurling them out by the bundle at strategic points along their routes and thus spreading the word about the possibilities of the North. This makeshift distribution system helped make the *Chicago Defender* one of the most widely circulated black newspapers in the country by the end of World War I and its founder, a migrant from Georgia named Robert Sengstacke Abbott, one of the richest colored men in the country.

The Illinois Central sped past the pine woods and the cotton fields, and in time the railroad's cars were packed with the peasant caste of the South, "the huddled masses yearning to breathe free" in their own country and, save for their race and citizenry, not unlike the passengers crossing the Atlantic in steerage with the intention of never returning to the old country.

Ida Mae and her family boarded the Illinois Central in the middle of the Great Migration, during the era of the Great Migration.

flows of colored southerners during the world wars, unaware of the enormity of the thing and what it might mean beyond themselves.

ON THE SILVER METEOR, APRIL 14, 1945

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

GEORGE WAS STUFFED into a hardback seat in the baggage car on the Silver Meteor up the East Coast. He was packed in with other colored passengers breaking open their cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs and shushing their children. He didn't pay them much mind. He was still too mad thinking about why he was on that train in the first place.

"I was angry," he said later, conjuring up emotions of fifty years before. "I was angry with my people. We caused them to earn more money in one day than they ever earned in a whole week. And they would complain, 'us not lettin' them work' one or two times. It was only about two or three occasions where we didn't work because we didn't get the price we asked for. And they go to the man's house at night and complain. They made it even worse for us. They couldn't see that we were helping them till after we all scattered."

For once he was riding in the front of something, as opposed to the customary back of everything else. On the railroad, the Jim Crow car was usually the first car behind the coal-fired locomotive that belched soot, fumes, and engine noise. It was the car that would take the brunt of any collision in the event of a train wreck. It was where the luggage and colored passengers were placed, even though their train fare was no different from what white passengers in the quieter rear of the train paid for the same class of service. He and the other colored passengers just had to live with it. George gave it little thought because he was on his way out.

EAST TEXAS, APRIL 1953

ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

THE LAND WAS CHANGING now as Robert passed over into Texas, the two-lane road fringed yellow with buttercups, the pine stands giving way to cattle ranches and barbecue joints in Panola County. He passed Fish Lake Slough and Flat Fork Creek north of Timpson. The air was moist and heavy now. As he drew near to Splendor County and on to Houston, there was a drizzle in the air and fog on the ground that hid the trees behind a gray veil.

He would eventually follow the country's southern hemline along the Rio Grande. He could have taken the worn Mother Road of the Dust Bowl itinerants and young easterners in their convertibles with the wind whipping their Elvis pompadours. He could have joined Route 66 early on in Oklahoma City, due northwest of Monroe, or in Elk City, Oklahoma, or in Amarillo, Texas.

But that was not considered the most direct route to Los Angeles, and all along he had planned to stop in Houston, where he could stay with Dr. Beale, his friend from back in medical school. And as he never did anything ordinary and as he wanted to cross into another country if only by a few yards to say that he had tasted the tequila, he took a circuitous route to Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican border, which would satisfy his craving for adventure and for doing whatever he did with style and grandiosity.

He pulled into Houston and up to Dr. Beale's house feeling good about his decision and the world. The trip so far had been smooth, as of course it would be in that Buick Roadmaster. He didn't know when he had ever been so happy as the day he bought that car. It made a good impression wherever it went, which is exactly what he wanted.

"If you had seen it, you would have wanted it, too," he would say years later. "They just took chrome and splashed it on that car when they made it, the Roadmaster Buick. And it rode like a chariot. I bought it in St. Louis and drove through a housing project, and I can hear the little kids screaming now, '*Good Lord, look at that car!*'"

Dr. Beale knew he was coming and took it upon himself to show Robert around Houston. They relived their medical school days, and Dr. Beale repeated his offer to help Robert set up practice there if Robert was willing to consider it. But Robert's heart was set on California. He

was trying to get away from the South. Texas, with its segregation and cotton fields, never stood a chance. And so Robert declined the offer and, after thanking his friend for the hospitality, set off in the direction of the nearest border town, Laredo.

There he crossed the bridge over the Rio Grande into Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. He drove past the clay storefronts where they sold garlic cloves and pictures of Jesus. The music cried out from second-floor windows, and the streets felt like alleys. He slowed near the places that peddled *vinos y licores* and came to a stop near the cantinas with their gringo girlie posters and red vinyl-top bar stools off Guerrero Street.

He got there in time to sample the margaritas before nightfall and, though he enjoyed the tequila, thought it best to head back before too long. He crossed the Rio Grande again and awaited clearance at U.S. customs. He waited longer than he thought he should, which might have been trivial under normal circumstances but was an eternity to him at the time.

He had a long drive ahead of him. There were 766 miles between Laredo and a town called Lordsburg, New Mexico, where friends had assured him he'd find safe lodging. That meant he had fifteen hours of driving without sleep, and that was only if he managed to keep an ambitious pace of fifty miles an hour on those two-lane highways winding through every whistle stop en route.

Robert was anxious to get back on the road. His turn in line had finally come, and here were the border patrolmen smoking and chatting it up with each other.

"I shouldn't have to wait this long for you to check me clear," he finally said.

"If you want to cross the border, you better shut up," a patrolman said.

Night was forming and Robert needed to get on his way. He didn't have the luxury of checking into a hotel that night as long as he was in the state of Texas. He didn't need any further delay. So he did as they said. They waved him through.

He was more tired now than before. He had more than half of Texas in front of him and a couple of hours of margaritas in his veins. There were roadside motels on both sides of the highway, but he drove past them and gave them no thought. There was no point in asking for a room. They didn't take colored people, and it did no good to think about it. They might as well not have existed.

He reassured himself with the advice he'd gotten that there was a

motel in Lordsburg, New Mexico, that took in colored people. He drove over dry riverbeds and through the Stockton Plateau and came parallel to the Texas Pecos Trail near Del Rio.

He was leaving the wet green land for the dry dust land, and there were times he couldn't go any further. The eyelids grew heavy, and the road seemed to blur. He would look for a safe place, the next town maybe, a mile or ten miles or twenty miles down the road, a place not so isolated and alone but quiet enough to be still. He would have to keep himself awake until he found such a place. He would pull over into an empty filling station or a wedge in the road and shut his eyes to rest.

He wouldn't sleep in another bed until he got out of the state of Texas.

The long and thinly populated stretches were the hard gasp of the journey. Every fifty or sixty miles, you saw a crippled Hudson or Pontiac, overheated, engine trouble, out of gas. It reminded you of the treachery of it all and how lucky you were still to be moving. In west Texas, there were fewer and fewer towns, and what towns there were, were smaller and farther apart. If you got stranded, you could only sit and hope that help arrived before the next meal. There was no assurance of a telephone and no way to reach anyone in the event of an emergency. If a tire went flat or a fan belt broke or the car let out a strange crackle or groan, your fate was in the hands of the gods. You could go an hour without seeing another car on the road.

At night, when you couldn't see, you were grateful for the occasional truck wheezing up the hill ahead of you and lighting your path. You might piggyback him even though he was going slower than you would like.

There developed a code of the road among colored people making the crossing. When you got sleepy, there were places you stopped and places you didn't. You stopped at a filling station and asked if the owner minded if you parked there. If you saw a car or two stopped on the side of the road, you might pull up. Somebody else might pull up behind you and do the same.

You tried to stay awake until you found such a place. It might take fifteen minutes. It might take an hour. Before stopping, you ran your eyes over the resting car's bumper and rear windshield, checked for a Confederate flag. You would be crazy to pull up behind one of those. If you saw a pack of cars, you were wary. If you had to stop, you wanted to stop behind one car resting, someone tired and alone like yourself.

The next morning, not having been able to check into a motel, you

night stop at a gas station and slap water on your face in the restroom or gargle with ginger ale or fountain water under a colored-only sign.

It called for exquisite planning and a certain surrender to whatever lay ahead. In making the crossing two years before, Limuary Jordan, whom Robert knew back in Monroe, loaded up on bread and lunch meat at the grocery store for himself and his family. They stopped only once, at a colored motel in El Paso. They would drive their DeSoto for three full days and three full nights.

They carried with them twenty-five pounds of ice in a lard bucket as makeshift air conditioner—or for the radiator if it overheated, an affliction so many of those wheezing old jalopies were prone to suffer—along with a copy of the 121st Psalm:

*I raise my eyes toward the mountains.  
From where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
the maker of heaven and earth.  
God will not allow your foot to slip;  
your guardian does not sleep. . . .  
By day the sun cannot harm you,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will guard you from all evil,  
will always guard your life.  
The Lord will guard your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.*

Robert was not a particularly religious man, but he was a determined one. He might not have known the blessing for pilgrims making a dangerous trek, the Old Testament prayer some other migrants carried with them, but the spirit of it would follow him nonetheless, and, whether he knew it or not, he would come to need its reassurance and protection for the long, lonely journey into the desert.

ON THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL RAILROAD, OCTOBER 1937  
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

THE RAILCARS CLATTERED ALONG THE TRACKS, and Ida Mae and her family swayed with every rocking motion as the train wound north in the pitch black of night. The countryside gave way, and they passed out of Mississippi into Tennessee and away from the Pearson Plantation and the arbitrary rules they had lived under. They did not know precisely what they would do for work in the North, but they would never again drag another sack of cotton on their backs through a hot, bearing-down field.

From the overcrowded seats in the Jim Crow car, Ida Mae could not have imagined what finery filled the buffet lounges and Pullman cars where the white people sat and would not have let her mind dwell on it even if she had. While the Illinois Central and its counterparts on the East Coast and along the Rio Grande were effectively freedom trains for colored people, deliverance out of the South did not come without its own humiliations, which could eat away at the spirit if one let it. There was no guarantee, for instance, that they could get food on the long ride in either direction because the great bulk of the dining car was reserved for whites and partitioned off by an insistent green curtain.

There was rarely enough room for the many people in steeage. My father would remember trying to get from Washington to Tuskegee, Alabama, where he was a pilot during World War II, and having trouble just getting food. "I rode the train from Washington to North Carolina standing up," he said decades later, "waiting to get into the dining car." The line was several cars long, and there were only four seats in a back corner of the dining car where colored people could sit. For that reason, colored people learned to pack their own food to avoid needing what they couldn't get—cold fried chicken, hard-boiled eggs, and biscuits in a shoe box—which Ida Mae and thousands of others carried on board and which led people to call the migration trains "the Chicken Bone Special."

Still, just being on the train set them apart from the people they left behind. These great creatures on tracks were as big as buildings and longer than roads. They had grand, triumphant-sounding names—Silver Meteor, Broadway Limited—and took people to grand, triumphant-sounding places, and just a little bit of that prestige could rub off on

them, and they could walk a little taller in their overalls knowing they were going to freedom.

The train rumbled toward the western tip of Kentucky, wending north toward Illinois. There, on the stiff seats of the colored car, they sat bundled together, George, stoic and straight-backed, keeping whatever apprehensions he had to himself, Ida Mae, wide-eyed and homesick at the same time, Velma's head pressing against her arm, James wriggling in her lap, and another one restless in her belly.

ON THE SILVER METEOR,

SOMEWHERE IN THE CAROLINAS, APRIL 15, 1945

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

GEORGE HAD BEEN RIDING for close to half a day, only it was the dark hours of the morning of the day after he left Eustis, Florida. The hard, upright seats made it tough to get any sleep. He looked out the window at the blur of countryside and the train depots where they stopped to collect and deposit passengers. The train passed from South Carolina into North Carolina, and with each mile that moved him closer to New York, he began to get exhilarated.

The further north the train got, the more he started thinking about this new life ahead of him and what he had been through. "I was hoping that the conditions would be better," he said. "But I know one thing, I was sick of them gossiping, lying Negroes in Eustis, and I wasn't never coming back there no more. I was never gonna put my foot back there no more in life because they had spoiled my experience. And I was finished."

SOMEWHERE EAST OF EL PASO, APRIL 1953

ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

ROBERT CROSSED WEST TEXAS through the dry sandpaper fields, past the blur of oil drills and ranches set back from the road and the yucca plants with flower stems like fishing poles. There would appear on either side of the road a drive-in theater with pink cursive lettering or a pit stop that sold liquor and ammo.

The land was red now. Bulls grazed on the scratch land to the south. The red suede hills began a slow roll at Uvalde, and he found himself driving through cuts in the rise of the hills. Now and again, he passed over another dry river waiting for the rain to come home.

He drove parallel to the Rio Grande. The hills became washboard steppes in Hudspeth County. He was almost at El Paso, the last southern town heading west, a border town. Under the circumstances, borders could be deceptive. They are a blend of the two lands they straddle, not fully one or the other, ripe for ambiguity and premature assumptions. El Paso, the unspoken border between the Jim Crow South and the free Southwest, was no different.

Heading to California, Jim Crow was no longer the law after El Paso. The signs that said **COLORED** above the railroad doors went blank, a metaphor for crossing into a land without segregation. Colored rail passengers heading west were free to move to the seats in the white cars for the remainder of the ride to California. Apparently few ever did, too afraid to push convention, and with good reason. In border towns, freedom was arbitrary and unpredictable. Not every restaurant was open to the colored people, hotel access still dependent on local convention and the owner's whim. A colored traveler could never be sure where rejection might greet him. Thus the real border stretched farther than by law it had a right to.

Heading back from California, the South officially began in El Paso. There, Jim Crow laws took over again for any colored person crossing into the state of Texas. There began the spectacle of colored passengers moving to their places from the integrated cars to the Jim Crow cars. The colored and white signs went back up. The colored people knew to gather their things a few stops ahead and move before being told to, to spare themselves the indignity.

It was a spectacle played out in one way or the other on every train

coming into or out of the South until Jim Crow died a violent death in the 1960s. At particular stops, which had less to do with the old Mason-Dixon Line than with the psychological border claims of the South, the train cars would undergo a similar transformation.

Up and down the East Coast, the border crossing for Jim Crow was Washington, D.C., which was technically south of the Mason-Dixon Line but was effectively the honorary North, as it was the capital of the Union during the Civil War. Later, it was the first stop on the migration route up the East Coast, the place where colored southerners could escape the field or kitchen and work indoors for the government and sit where they liked on the buses and streetcars. But to blacks in the Deep South, Washington had a significance beyond perhaps any other city in the North. A colored tailor in Georgia told the author Ray Stannard Baker that he was leaving the South for Washington because he wanted "to be as near the flag as I can."

Between Alabama and Detroit, the dividing line was the Ohio River, as it had been during slavery, where, once across it, blacks were free if they only could manage to get there. Between Mississippi and Chicago, Jim Crow went out of effect in Cairo, Illinois, at the southern tip of the state. For a time in the 1920s, the ride to Chicago was interrupted after the train crossed the Ohio River into Cairo, as if the train were passing from Poland into the old Soviet Union during the Cold War. Once over the river and officially in the North, the colored cars had to be removed in a noisy and cumbersome uncoupling and the integrated cars attached in their place to adhere to the laws of Illinois. Colored passengers had to move, wait, reshuffle themselves, and haul their bags to the newly attached integrated cars. Going south, the ritual was reversed. The railroad men now had to reattach the colored-only cars and remove the integrated cars in a clamorous ordeal to meet the laws of Kentucky. Colored passengers had to gather up their things and take their second-class seats, reminded, in that instance, that they were now reentering the South. Such was the protocol of a border crossing.

Colored travelers needed to be aware of these borders whether they were riding the rails or not. The border sentiments spilled over into a general protocol that colored people had to live by. It determined whether or how easily they might find a room or food. They could look silly asking for a colored restroom in a border town that felt more northern than southern and presumptuous in a town that felt the opposite.

"How a colored man, or a white man either, for the matter, can be expected to know all the intricacies of segregation as he travels in different

parts of the country is beyond explanation," wrote Robert Russa Moton, the black scholar who succeeded Booker T. Washington as president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. "The truth of the matter is, he is expected to find out as best he can."

Usually, colored travelers wanted to avoid insult at all cost and protected themselves by assuming that segregation was the rule whenever they needed a place to eat or sleep. But heat and fatigue could make people do anything to get out of the fix of driving for days without sleep.

Around the same time that Robert was making his way across the country, a family from Beaumont, Texas, near the Louisiana border, was making the same drive. The patriarch of the family was doing the driving. With him were his wife, his grown daughter, and her three children—two boys, between eight and ten, and a girl, about five or six. They had piled into a '49 Chevrolet and were rumbling across Texas en route to California.

They had driven all day and had come into night, and they reached the border city of El Paso. The man could not drive any farther and, as this was the border and he was almost out of Texas, decided to stop and ask if the motel took colored people.

As could be expected, the answer was no. But he was tired. He had the three grandkids, the wife, and the grown daughter with him. And he was colored but was different from the majority of colored people. He had straight hair and pale skin. He looked white, and so did his wife and daughter and two of her three children.

He decided to try another motel. He had been honest, and it hadn't gotten him anywhere.

"Well, I know what to do here," the grandfather said.

This time he would not ask about a room for colored people. He would just ask for a room, like a white person would.

But the family had a problem. One of the grandchildren, a boy, about ten at the time, did not look white. His skin was brown. His hair had a tight curl. He would blow their cover. There would be no way to explain it.

For the plan to work, the motel must not know about the boy, and for that to happen, the grandfather needed the children's cooperation. They were playing in the back seat, counting the stars and pointing out the window at the Big Dipper in the sky. The grandfather needed them to be quiet and to keep their heads down. He told them to pretend to be asleep.

"Now, don't get up, don't get up," he said as he and his wife prepared

to go to the front desk. "Don't y'all raise your head up. Somebody come over here, don't raise your head up. Stay down."

The instructions were primarily meant for Jules, the ten-year-old who looked like what he was. But the grandfather told all the children in the hope that what one did, they all would do.

The children could sense his fear and were afraid to move. "You scared, somebody talking to you like that," Pat Botshekan, then the little granddaughter in the back seat, said almost half a century later.

The grandfather and his wife walked up to the front desk, and he asked for a room as a white person would. The clerk checked him in and gave him the key and pointed him in the direction of the room.

Now he had a place for the night, but he also had a problem. They had to get Jules into the room without the front desk discovering what Jules was.

They went back to the car to gather their things. The grandfather got his wife and daughter and the two children who looked white out of the car. It was late at night now, and the grandfather, tired from the drive and the stress of the moment, scrambled to sneak Jules out of the car without detection.

For the plan to work, Jules would have to do what was not natural for a ten-year-old boy. He would have to keep still and be perfectly quiet and not let his arms and legs stick out or rear up his head out of the blanket or let anybody see him. There was no time to explain why they had to hide him and not the other children, or why he was the only one who couldn't under any circumstances be seen while the others would walk in like normal. Somehow he had to understand how imperative it was that he not let a patch of his brown skin show.

Everywhere the family went, little Jules stood out from the rest of the family, and that was hard enough. Now he was being sneaked into a strange place in the middle of the night as if he were contraband.

The grandfather put the blanket over Jules, sitting in the back seat. He tucked the little boy's brown arms and legs under the blanket to make sure they didn't show. He lifted the little boy in his arms like a bag of groceries and carried him into the room. That is how they managed to get a bed for the night. But it was said that the memory stayed with Jules and that he was not quite ever the same after that.

Like most colored people making the journey, Robert could not pass for white and was not in a position to try to fool his way into a room, which

is not to suggest that all who could did. In fact, he found it sad and equally humiliating to have to deny who you were to get what you desired in the first place.

No, for him and for most people in his predicament, you were not free till you had cleared the gate. But even a border's borders are not always clear. Where is it safe to assume you are out of one country and well into another? When can you sigh a sigh of relief that you have passed from the rituals of one place into those of the other side?

Robert took nothing for granted. He assumed he was not out of the South until he was a safe distance from El Paso. He gave himself breathing room and was more cautious than most. He did not want to subject himself to the indignities of being colored any more than he had to and so would make no attempt to stop and inquire until he was all but certain he had a shot at a room.

He crossed into New Mexico and drove some more until he reached Lordsburg, some four hours past the border on those old two-lane roads.

Lordsburg was a dusty old frontier town with saloons famous for fist-fights and a Southern Pacific Railroad track paralleling Main. He would have had no reason to stop there if it didn't happen to be the only place in New Mexico he had been told that he could be assured of a place to sleep.

The rooming house in Lordsburg was part of a haphazard network of twentieth-century safe houses that sprang up all over the country, and particularly in the South, during the decades of segregation. Some were seedy motels in the red-light district of whatever city they were in. There were a handful of swanky ones, like the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. But many of them were unkept rooming houses or merely an extra bedroom in some colored family's row house in the colored district of a given town. They sprang up out of necessity as the Great Migration created a need for places where colored people could stop and rest in a world where no hotels in the South accepted colored people and those in the North and West were mercurial in their policies, many of them disallowing blacks as readily as hotels in the South.

Thus, there developed a kind of underground railroad for colored travelers, spread by word of mouth among friends and in fold-up maps and green paperback guidebooks that listed colored lodgings by state or city.

Colored travelers, hoping to plan their journeys in advance and get assurance of a room, carried the guidebooks in their glove compart-

nents like insurance cards. But the books were often out of date by the time they were printed, the accuracy of their entries based on the fortunes of "hoteliers" who may have only been renters themselves. A colored traveler had to prepare for the possibility that he might arrive at a place in the guidebook only to find that the proprietor had been gone for years and then have to take up the search for a room all over again. Still, the mere presence of the guidebooks and of word-of-mouth advice about places to stay gave a sense of order and dignity to the dispiriting prospect of driving cross-country not knowing for sure where one might lay one's head.

The rooming house in Lordsburg was forgettable and left no impression on him other than it was like all the other rooming houses that took a colored people. A bedroom with no assurance of a key, an old toilet down the hall, sheets the previous guest may have slept on. The rooming houses that catered to a colored trade usually had no competition, and their clientele had no choice.

And so neither would Robert. The only bed he knew between Houston and Lordsburg was the bench seat of the Buick. Lordsburg was the first chance in a thousand miles of road to sleep and was the only certain leap and shower before Los Angeles. He made the most of it. He was uneasy about such things as the proper shave and a well-pressed shirt, so he took his time the next day. He got a later start than he should have.

He had known that there were no guarantees for the first half of the journey, meaning the South, except for his Buick and Dr. Beale back in Houston. Now he was crossing over into the land of the free. He had known the rules in the South. He hadn't liked them, but he had executed them. "There were no hotels taking blacks then," Robert remembered years later. "No. None. So if you had a friend who would take you in, you went there, period, and you were through. And then you worried about the next stop."

He was putting that all behind him now. He drove toward Arizona, confident that this was one thing he didn't have to worry about anymore.

## CROSSING OVER

*Do you remember any good stopping places*

*in Arizona or western Texas?*

*Anything in Phoenix or El Paso?*

*And what is the best route from here to the coast?*

*I have never driven it, you know.*

—THE POET ARNA BONTemps IN A LETTER  
TO THE POET LANGSTON HUGHES BEFORE  
A CROSS-COUNTRY TRIP FROM ALABAMA  
TO CALIFORNIA

WESTERN NEW MEXICO, APRIL 1953  
ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

LATE AFTERNOON. The desert was different from anything he had seen before. Great bowl of sky. Fringe of mountain in the distance. He was soon in Arizona. The desert began playing tricks on the eyes. It seemed he was driving and standing still at the same time. Road signs began warning of dust storms. Gas stations sold bags of water for people to placate their overheated radiators. He couldn't wait to get to California.

He drove through the dry earth and yucca as heat vapor stirred at the surface. He soon entered the flat plains of the Salt River Valley. The dry land sprouted fields of sorghum and soybeans. Crop dusters flew low in the distance.

Night moved in from behind. The mountains were now crisp against the light of the falling sun.

The next big city was Phoenix, and he drove in anticipation of it. As



## TEACHERS

### Oral History: Rubie Bond, the African- American Experience in Wisconsin

A version of this lesson plan was developed by the Office of School Services as part of the Wisconsin Stories online activity guide for the secondary-level classroom. Please adapt it to fit your students' needs.

#### Background Information

The following oral history transcript is an excerpt of an interview with Rubie Bond, a resident of Beloit featured in Wisconsin Public Television's Finding a Home program. The interview from which this transcript was prepared was conducted in 1976, part of the Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Project. The project aimed to document the migration of African Americans to Beloit from the South, mostly between the late 1910s and the 1950s. The interviews contain information on employment, labor problems, education, housing segregation, the Beloit NAACP, churches, the Women's Community Club, and many other topics. The oral history tapes are preserved in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's Archives, at Beloit College, and at the Beloit Public Library. Abstracts for each interview are available, although full-text transcripts have not been prepared.

In 1917, when she was ten years old, Rubie White moved to Beloit with her parents from Pontotoc, Mississippi. Her father had been recruited to work at Fairbanks, Morse & Co., a heavy manufacturing firm and Beloit's largest employer. She married Franklin Bond in 1928. In this excerpt, Bond describes the circumstances involved in her parents decision to move to Wisconsin, the trip by train to Beloit, the role of churches in the African-American community, and her adjustment to Beloit.

Studied carefully, the oral history transcript provides a good example of how an oral historian probes for information, especially the kind of information that is rarely recorded in documentary sources. The interview with Rubie Bond also provides a good opportunity for students to compare and contrast the African-American experience with that of other ethnic groups who found homes in Wisconsin.

A set of reading and discussion questions follow the transcript of the oral history interview.

#### Document

Bond, Rubie. Interview. Tape Recording, 1976. Beloit Bicentennial Oral History Collection. Beloit College Archives, Beloit, Wisconsin.

Interview with Rubie Bond

*I'm wondering why your family decided to leave Mississippi. How was that decision made and why was it made?*

Well, the North offered better opportunities for blacks. John McCord, who was a distant cousin, came and explained about conditions, here and so my father and mother decided to come.

*What did John McCord tell them?*

Only of working conditions and the education for children, for young people, was better than what we had in Pontotoc. Those things I remember.

*Fairbanks Morse had sent him down, is that right?*

Yes. His parents lived right across the road. We had a highway that divided the farm that we lived on and where they lived. Of course, we've known him and, as I say, his father was a cousin of my

mother's.

*I've heard that recruiters were often in danger in Mississippi if they came down to get workers for northern companies. Do you recall him ever expressing any fear about this job that he was doing?*

Yes. I know that many of the blacks would leave the farms at night and walk for miles. Many of them caught the train to come North, come to Beloit at a little place called Ecru, Mississippi. Usually they would leave with just the clothes on their backs. Maybe the day before they would be in the field working and the plantation owner wouldn't even know that they planned to go and the next day he would go and the little shanty would be empty. These people would have taken off and come up here.

*Was there a fear that the plantation owner wouldn't let them go or that they couldn't leave?*

That's very true. They wouldn't. Plantation owners had much to lose. These people were illiterate and they had to depend on the plantation owner. He would give them so much flour for use during the year, cornmeal or sugar or that sort of thing and then at the end of the year you would go to settle up with him and you would always be deeply in debt to him. That was his way of keeping people. You never got out of debt with him. And that's the way it was with my dad and this fellow, Mr. Stiggel.

*So, many of the people who left were legally in debt and could have been forced to stay in Mississippi? Did you know of any instances where that happened?*

No, because they would leave at night. They would leave when the plantation owner wasn't around. Of course, they needed these workers to work the cotton fields, that sort of thing. But many of them left under those circumstances.

*What about this decision being made in your family? How was the decision arrived at and over what time span, and was there a lot of talk in the family about "Should we go north?" and that sort of thing, or was it a cut-and-dried decision? Who helped to make it? Do you have any recollections about that?*

Well, that's almost sixty years ago, and I'm sure my mother and dad discussed it fully, but so many of their friends and relatives had come North. And this Mr. Wetherall, he hated to lose my dad, but on the other hand, he felt that if he could better himself by coming, why, go. You're entitled to it. He was that type of person. I can remember him coming over to tell us goodbye the day we left.

*You seem to have had quite a different situation then from many of those who left in terms of the attitude that your boss took toward you.*

Yes, yes, the last place where my dad lived, [the owner] was very different.

*But I mean, even specifically in relation to this matter of leaving, he didn't seem to offer resistance like many of the owners did.*

No. No threats or anything like that. No.

*Were there others who had that experience? I wonder whether others left easily too, like your father apparently did--or relatively easily.*

There might have been some. I can remember my father telling me about one family that came to Beloit, the Gradys. Mr. Grady had already come to Beloit. He worked and saved money to send back for his family. The postmaster, I guess, wasn't going to let him have his money, wasn't going to let his family have it, and somebody that Mrs. Grady knew, some white person, she went to see them and they went over and advised this man that he was breaking the law. He should let her have this money to come to her husband. Things like that.

*Was it more typical for--*

To show resistance? Yes. Yes.

*You seem to be quite clear on the point that your mother would have participated in this decision.*

*Is that right?*

Well, mother and dad, they usually discussed decisions that were to be made.

*I'm wondering about the role of women. What do you remember being the role of women in making this decision and carrying on the move?*

Well, I think that probably blacks in this country would have died out if it hadn't been for the part that women played because men were, well, the attitude of many toward black men was that they were lower or worse than animals. And, it was a role that mothers played in keeping them alive and then providing them food and that sort of thing for their families because black men have had a hard time coming along.

*Would you say that was particularly true in Mississippi?*

I think all over the South. All over the South. Yes.

*I never thought of this before, but perhaps the move up North was almost more important to the man, was almost a form of liberation for the man more than for the woman. What do you recall along those lines? I know this is a very difficult thing to reach back sixty years for, but if you have any recollections along those lines.*

Not too much. I do know that many men came North and got employment and would save and send back for their families. Other than that I don't think I'm qualified to [say].

*Now, as a young girl, did you agree with this decision to move North? Did you think it was a good idea?*

Yes. I think I did. Because even as a child I think I was pretty sensitive to a lot of the inequalities that existed between blacks and whites, and I know that after we came here my mother and dad used to tell me that if I went back to Mississippi, they would hang me to the first tree.

*Did you regret leaving friends, for example, or anything like that?*

No, most of my friends had come North. I did have one friend that remained in Mississippi, and she was able to go on and get an education, and she taught.

*You know a move like that is really quite an adventure for a young person. You were how old?*

I was ten years old. That's all.

*How did the move seem to you? How did you feel about it?*

Well, I don't know. I guess I've always been one to sort of go off on the deep end, so I think it was an adventure for me. You see something different. I remember very well when the train crossed the Mississippi, I think in Memphis, Tennessee, all of this water on each side of the track. All you could do is think of "what if this train would fall in?" and I also remember seeing the soldiers. This was the beginning of World War I. And they were guarding the bridges and that sort of thing to prevent sabotage.

*What year was this?*

1917.

*What role did the church play in your early life in Mississippi?*

Well, I think the church played a very important part in the life of all blacks in Mississippi because it was religious center as well as social. That was one place that they could go and meet and discuss their problems. Relax. So just the--their big picnics and big church meetings they used to have.

I might tell about the type of house we lived in. We lived in a little three-room house. There were two big rooms with fireplace in between . . . the--fireplace on each side of the partition, and one was where we lived and the other my mother kept for company, and I remember the embroidered bedspreads and pillow shams and that sort of thing that she had in there. And the third little room

was the kitchen, where we had the old wood stove, and my sister and I would gather up the wood for cooking. Whenever they would have one of these big church meetings, usually, some minister or some delegate or somebody from the church would come to our house and they would have this one room that we were permitted to peep in once a week. But the church did, it served as a gathering place for people and they had many union meetings for example between mostly Methodist and Baptist faiths.

*What exactly do you mean by union meetings?*

I mean the two different groups would go in together for some function.

*I'm wondering now about your first impressions of Beloit. You moved almost a thousand miles north to a new community, and I'm wondering what your first impressions were.*

Well, I can remember how cold it was when we got off the train at the Northwestern Station. We came here in April, and my grandfather was supposed to have found a place for us to live. We got here and found we had no place to go, so we were carried to a place on Pleasant Street, across from the college campus. It was a big storefront then. There's a little church building there now, but that's the first place that we lived when we came to Beloit here. Two or three days after we came we had snow, and of course it was cold. Then we went to school. We started to school. A strong school and the principal's name at that time was a Mrs. Horseman, and I remember they put me back a grade because I didn't have art or music or something like that. But I was much farther ahead in mathematics and that sort of thing than my classmates were. That I remember and some of my classmates--Isaac Buckridge and Cecil Carroll and his sister, Lois, and Don Benwort were some of the classmates that I remember.

*Did you say you were ahead of your classmates? How did that happen, because you described a school in Mississippi that wasn't very good?*

That is true. But one of the things that they emphasized was reading, writing, and mathematics. Those were three important things, and we worked on those in school and as I told you before this Mr. Wetherall had given us these schoolbooks and my mother encouraged us to go ahead with these things.

*Given the opportunities that were available in the North, why did anyone decide to stay in Mississippi?*

Well, I think that it was a lack of knowledge of about what the North had to offer until these agents came there to get them to come up here to work.

*You were leaving at least a few of your relatives and friends behind. How did you feel about those people that you left behind and weren't ever going to see again?*

Well, I think it comes back to a matter of trying to exist, really, and trying to improve your own lot.

*Were there any differences that you noticed between those people who left and those people who stayed?*

No. Not really.

*Were the people who left more ambitious or anything like that?*

No. I think not, because many of those who stayed had either begun to acquire a small plot of land or something like that and there were black tradesmen, like I say, the carpenters and the masons and that sort of thing, who had been able to improve their own lot in Mississippi. And many of those stayed and some came North. Most of these people, I think, that came North at first were people who hadn't been able to acquire anything.

*I have heard it said that black people came to Beloit in very unfavorable circumstances, that they were herded on to trains and that sort of thing. What do you remember about the actual train ride from Pontotoc to Beloit?*

I don't remember a situation like that. Of course, it may have been because of the fact that we

paid our own way, you know. One thing I do recall, I think it was when we got in Illinois. See, before we came, got to Illinois, black people always rode in the front coach up near the engine of the train so they would get all the soot and dust and what have you, and then when we reached Illinois, if you wanted to change you could go anyplace on the train you wanted to. So they had this Jim Crow section that we rode on until we reached Illinois.

*Was the Jim Crow car a regular train car? How would you describe it in relation to the other cars?*

I guess you would say it was the coach. They had coaches. Deluxe sections of the train.

*Now, as far as you recall, were most of those who came up at the time you did able to pay their own way, or did most rely on Fairbanks Morse money, I guess, would be the alternative?*

Well, I think those that came along with us--husbands had already come to Beloit and saved enough to send back to their families. But many of the men, they were probably the ones that were herded on trains and brought here and they worked at Fairbanks and paid back their transportation and that sort of thing and saved up to send for their families.

*Did your dad come up before the rest of the family?*

No. We all came at the same time. We all came at the same time.

*Was that a typical situation? I think you indicated that the man often came up early.*

Yes, that was true. Many of the husbands and fathers came up first. And then they would send back for their families.

*Just to get the record straight, as far as you recall, what would have been the most common situation?*

The manner, I think, where the husband would come first.

*I'm wondering about African-American businesses in and around Beloit.*

Well, at that time, there were no blacks in any business, that is, any white business or anything like that. There were no clerks in the retail stores, not even stock boys in grocery stores and that sort of thing. Of course that changed in later years. As a matter of fact right now many grocery stores that I know black people patronize, they don't have [black] checkout girls, for example or stock boys. In the early twenties there were a few black businesses here. There was a tailor and a dry cleaning establishment, and there was a shoe repair shop that I recall.

### Discussion Questions

1. Briefly summarize the reasons why the White family moved to Wisconsin.
2. What year did Rubie White's family move to Wisconsin? What was happening in the United States at this time? Why were employment recruiters visiting Mississippi?
3. How did plantation owners exercise such a high degree of control over workers with the sharecropper system?
4. Why might skilled African Americans have decided to stay in the South?
5. How would you characterize Rubie Bond's overall attitude toward life in Wisconsin?
6. According to Bond, what were some of the differences between her education in Pontotoc and her education in Beloit?
7. Carefully study the interviewer's questions. Can you identify any strategy? Explain.
8. As you read the transcript of this oral history, consider some of the strengths and weaknesses of oral history as a source.
9. Why would a topic such as the migration of poor African Americans from the rural South to industrial cities be important to document with oral history?
10. Compare and contrast the reasons why African Americans moved to Wisconsin with those of other ethnic groups featured in the Finding a Home programs.

### Suggested Activity

1. Have students think of other topics in the recent past that would be good oral history projects. Perhaps they have friends or relatives who have interesting stories to tell. Then