

"We Tho[ugh]t State Street Would Be Heaven Itself": Charles Johnson interviews with Black Migrants

Introduction

The National Urban League started in New York City in New York City specifically to aid recent black southerners moving into city neighborhoods like Harlem and Hell's Kitchen, as well as the growing boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. The Urban League helped black southerners find employment and housing, and provided healthcare and other social services. The League also instructed new arrivals in how to dress, talk, and act in "the North." The Urban League quickly opened chapters in northern cities where the African American population was rapidly growing as a result of the Great Migration¹.

Charles S. Johnson graduated from the University of Chicago with a PhD in sociology in 1917, after which, he worked as a researcher for the National Urban League. Following the Chicago Race Riot in 1919, Johnson arrived in the city to investigate what happened and why. Johnson interviewed nearly one hundred black migrants living on the Southside of Chicago as part of his investigation. He published his report, *The Negro in the City: A Study of Race Relations*, in 1922. *The Negro in the City* remains a pioneering sociological study, especially Johnson's research on the 1919 riots. Below are Johnson's notes from some of his interviews.²

Primary Source

R.S. Horton, wife and daughter.

Proprietor Hattiesburg Barber Shop 35th st near Rhodes³. Came to Chicago in January 1917. For 19 years he had been awaiting what he would regard the right time to move. 19 years ago he had occasion to learn something of the North thru a brother who came up and wrote back. His particular interest and grievance was in politics. It was not so much that he couldn't vote there that made him "mad" but the fact that colored people not only could vote in the North, but in Chicago could elect whom they wished. Learned much of this thru the Defender. In his barber shop he did "some dangerous talking himself" when he saw that it was coming time for Negroes to learn. Would buy 40 and 50 copies of the Defender and sell them without profit just for the sake of distributing the news of a "fearless paper". Didn't need to move for money, because he was making as much there as he could make in Chicago. Went over to New Orleans one day to the graduating exercises of his daughter at Straight University⁴. While waiting around worked in a barber shop. Labor agents came in presenting this argument.

¹ The National Urban League still exists. The [Columbus chapter of the National Urban League](#) is right around the corner from campus at 788 Mt. Vernon Street.

² Charles S. Johnson, "[Chicago Study, Migration Interviews](#)," [1917], Box 86, Series 6, Records of the National Urban League records, Library of Congress. Believed to be in the public domain.

³ Address of Horton's barbershop, named after his hometown in Mississippi.

⁴ Straight University was an HBCU in New Orleans from 1868 until it closed in 1934.

Besides that there were free trains. He declined the free transportation. When he went back to Hattiesburg he was more dissatisfied than ever. His friends leaving, he began to encourage the movement. He was a deacon in the Church. He and pastor in exciting argument in deacons meeting. The pastor discouraged the movement. He pointed out the fact that people had stopped coming to Church because they did not want to be discouraged. Finally he got up a club of about 40 and left. Telling them that he had gone on to “prepare a place for them”, etc. Has heard from the pastor since establishing himself here. The Hattiesburg settlement has offered to bring him up to shepherd them. He has agreed to come (Rev. Perkins, Pastor First Baptist Church).

Religious significance attached to movement.

Firmly believes this an act of God. Told the labor agent that he was an instrument in Gods hands. The fact that the movement was universal was what overwhelmed him. God was stirring them up. Had been praying for that time to come. The “Northern fever” a term used to indicate those who intend come north. When such a person is hailed this is the expected answer— “Yes and only the waters of Lake Michigan can cure me.”

Mr. Hunter, mother, wife, 6 children from Meridian, Miss.

Man came to Chicago in December. Wife in April, mother and children in July. Man a laundryman in South earning 9 dollars per week. Last year in the fall, when Mrs. Hunter, his mother, was traveling around thru States as district writer of Court of Calanthe⁵, she had occasion to go to Birmingham. There the people were leaving in large numbers for the North, mostly men. She asked why. They said, higher wages. Yet she knew that wages in Birmingham were twice as high as in Meridian. The people in her home town had been approached by agents but doubted. She herself could not believe. Went home and told her son of Birmingham and urged him to go and see for himself. He left in December, in 3 weeks he wrote home. “Everything is just like they say, if not better.” Then he sent money for his wife in April. She remained to attend to the children and to rid the selves of their property. They owned 2 houses, one valued at \$1,500, she only received \$700 for. Would not see the other.

Meanwhile excitement at home was waxing warm. Her neighbors daughter ventured North. She had been receiving at home \$2.00 per week. Worked in the Stock-yards at \$2.00 per day. Wrote home. People at first said she was merely lying. Then she paid a visit and the people were convinced. They made such remarks as, “If she can make \$2.00 per day, I can make \$3.00 because I have always been able to do more work than she” or, “If she can make \$2.00, I can at least make \$1.50.” etc. When the girl went back she promised to send for her mother within a month. She did and the people were overwhelmed. No effort is made in stating wages to explain expenses. It is merely assumed that if a person can earn those wages they can certainly live.

Meetings grew frequent, stories began to circulate, and parties began to leave. The pastors at first tried to talk against it knowing that their salary was fast sinking. This, however, only resulted in

⁵ In 1864, a group of African American women living in Dallas, Texas established a mutual-aid society called The Grand Court Order of Calanthe (Calanthe is a type of orchid). They provided small loans, and property and life insurance to African Americans who were barred from other financial institutions. The Grand Court still exists in some southern states, mostly focused on community aid programs.

drawing from the Church those who did not want to hear their movement discouraged. The Educational Conference formulated reasons for leaving. Poor Educational facilities, first among them: better wages, better treatment etc. The state attorney, Lawyer Miller agreed with them saying that if the I. C. Railroad⁶ offered him more money for his services he would go to them.

The white people in general had men going around disuading Negroes from leaving—saying that the South was the best place for them, among friends: that the Northern man is their enemy: Cold: danger of freezing.

When they say they are killing people in E. St. Louis, they answer that they are going to see⁷. One or two persons have come back and reports ill success. They answer that their failure is no sign that everybody is ill paid; that they were no good before they left. Dr. Webster, Negro physician, says, the North is no place for them.

A woman was lynched in Louisiana. Everyone began to circulate the story. Men feared for their wives and women feared for their lives.

The Chief of Police took the Chicago Defender away from her son and a number of other dealers. The people determined to have it if they must have it mailed.

When she looked around her and watched her friends leaving, she felt something like she imagined she would feel on Judgement day.

Decided that she had as well die in one place as in another. “Might as well die with an ache as die with a fever.”

The length of school term, 6 months. Salary of teacher \$30. and \$35.00.

St. Lukes Church was started in her neighborhood (35th st) more than 50 Mississippian members. Moved their quarters Sunday, Oct. 14 to South Park Ave. to accommodate increasing membership. Rev. Bryan.

⁶ Illinois Central Railroad.

⁷ East St. Louis, Illinois (a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri) was a center of industrial production during World War I and a major destination for African Americans looking for industrial work outside of the South. In 1917, white union workers at the Aluminum Ore factory voted to strike for higher wages. Management brought in hundreds of African Americans to cross the picket line, resulting in violent conflict between white strikers and black strikebreakers. In response, mobs of angry white men set fires in black neighborhoods and shot African Americans as they tried to escape the fire. For over a week in July, mobs of armed white men roamed the city killing black men, destroying back businesses and homes, and sexually assaulting black women. The police and National Guard were at best indifferent to the white mobs, and in many cases, aided white rioters. African Americans could not leave the city without meeting a white mob. Newspaper reporters who witnessed the riots reported on one particularly horrific night when white men stationed themselves throughout downtown East St. Louis and shot any black person walking in the area. The current estimate is close to 250 African Americans were killed during the riots. When the riots finally subsided, the state of Illinois charged 12 white and 25 black men with inciting the riot. In the end, nine white men and 12 black men went to jail, and the Special Report on the riots concluded that the riots were caused primarily by black men taking jobs away from white men. In other words, the Report blamed black southerners for inciting white men to violence. The East St. Louis riot remains one of the worst race riots in US history. Ida B. Wells visited East St. Louis after the riots and subsequently wrote a series of [scathing articles](#) about what really happened during the riots.

The parties or clubs were most active in July 1917. 20 to 60 the usual number. Mr. Bowman had a party of 200 and was refused. First demanded that he deposit \$1,000 for use of 2 cars. He did; then they said there were no cars.

The shortage of crops brought hard times. The boll weevil⁸ caused the crop panic could not be stopped. Credit and advances were refused. There was really nothing to do. Letters to her from her friends in the South report that everything is dull. Can see no one but strangers. Country people moving in.

The total present income of family of 3 adult workers is \$7.00 per day. Everybody's going and I'm going too.

We people from Mississippi stick together - I guess its because they have made us stick together down there.

(3612 Rhodes) Man from Hattiesburg in September. Woman from Hattiesburg in October.

Keep boarders here. Kept boarders at home. Their first boarders here were old ones at home. They came up because they had been promised privileges. Husband a railroad man at home. Working here at Indiana Harbor.

She writes to friends at home telling of Chicago and offering a place to stop. At one time she had two houses. Mr. Horton also gives her names and address to persons who write him, planning to leave the South. Has a record of 698 persons who have come to her during November, December and January from Laurel, Hattiesburg and Meridian. They usually live with her until a place can be secured in the near vicinity. In one house of 7 rooms she had 21 men. 5 or 6 came in on every train.

Mrs. Lynch, husband, 7 children, 1 boarder, from Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Husband, 2 grown sons and 1 boarder and wife came in Jan. Wife and children followed in May. Husband been employed at Stockyards⁹—two sons in foundry at Gary, girl at stockyards for short while. Wages at home \$1.25 per day. Husband now in hospital. Boarder working with Gas Company.

⁸ The boll weevil is a beetle that feeds on cotton buds and flowers. Between the 1892 and 1932, dozens of boll weevil infestations spread throughout the South, destroying the entire cotton harvest for the season. Not just individual cotton harvests, but all of the cotton planted in the Mississippi Delta, for example. Not only did the boll weevil outbreaks leave individual cotton growers without any annual income, it also lowered property values and made sharecroppers and tenant farmers more dependent on white landowners. Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and immediately implemented new programs to offset the suffering caused by the Great Depression. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1932 provided states with new pesticides and techniques to curb the boll weevil population, although many southern states refused federal funding, claiming it was too much federal interference. In truth, southern democrats resisted any program that provided aid, employment, or relief to African Americans, even at their own peril. After World War II, the Department of Agriculture developed a program to eradicate the boll weevil, although southern democrats continued to resist federal assistance that benefitted African Americans.

⁹ The Union Stockyards was next to the processing plant where Jurgis and Ona worked in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. This interview was about a decade after Sinclair published his expose.

White people don't treat them as the Chicago Defender promised that they would. It was November 1916 that her husband first heard from agent of people leaving New Orleans. No interest at first. Finally when some of the men with whom he was working left, he decided to make the venture himself. He wrote back that Chicago was the place for them and they joined him in a few months. They could hardly wait for the money for transportation. The paper was "just stirring things up so we thot State Street would be heaven itself." Came in party of 80. Has not had any trouble in the South. Her daughter worked out in service under excellent conditions. When she worked over time was sent home in a carriage. Here she is thrown in bad company at the stockyards. She doesn't like the North. People here, "don't love God." and, "aint sociable." This accounts for the close association of Mississippi people on Rhodes and in this community. Just can't keep well here; knows that they will contract pneumonia when winter comes. 120 Persons from their home have died since coming here. Thinks expenses outrageous. Too many people.

They are from Meridian, Mississippi. Mr. Cole came to Chicago in May. Family came in August. At home he earned 1.00 per day. Here he now makes \$3.75 a day, at Marks Mfg. Co., Indiana Harbor.

Kept reading the Defender and finally subscribed to it. Labor agents were arrested in his home town and heavily fined. He slipped away to Hattiesburg, 85 miles, and left there for Chicago. 28 in party.

Mr. and Mrs. Henderson, 3550 Rhodes

Been in Chicago one year. Came from the hills in Southern Mississippi. He was a railroad man, a fireman, for 15 years at a salary of \$125.00 per month, and knew that he could not better that by coming North. His railroad life gave him a chance to make some comparisons. Owned 100 acres of land and a house. Had been to points in North on passes issued by road. When he had over seen a difference he could never feel completed satisfied, but when he balanced the comforts of having a home and wages that could not be beat with the uncertain labor conditions of the North, he decided he would wait his chance. His discontentment had been growing on him for 15 years.

These facts forced a decision: A few years ago a Negro killed a policeman 3 miles from his home. Mob killed the Negro and destroyed 5,000 worth of Negro property around him. He began to feel the insecurity of living there. Three months before he left a white man called at the home of the Mulatto bride of a railroad man, while on a run, his friend and attempted to force an entrance with the avowed intention of "having a good time." He began to feel anxious about leaving his own wife at home. While waiting in Mobile on a run a Negro came up to him crying and begging a ride away from that town in the direction of the North. The incident was occasioned by a white transfer mans forcing this Negro transfer man to move his stand across the railroad tracks beyond reach of station, and taking that position himself. The utter helplessness of man in being forced away from means of living had effect. A friend of his had gone North and sent back 1/2 rate ticket to his wife. Station agent refused to accept it. It occurred to him that he had been working for 15 years and company was not granting him his seniority right to what he was entitled. He would have argued for them before but then the North was not so inviting in the matter of wages, to encourage him to take a chance. He contended for seniority rights and was discharged without an investigation. He carried the matter up to the Supt. In Chicago and was offered a chance at reinstatement and refused. Knowing the consequences he moved North.

Believes the hand of God is working in this movement. Familiar with biblical story of children of Grail—Wilderness and finds comparisons in the two exoduses. He makes one exception. The migrants haven't any Moses but God. It is not safe to be a Moses in his part of the state.

(Mr. & Mrs. Martin)

Husband came up in March to look over the field. Wrote back to sell everything and join him. Stated that wages were high and that for the first time in his life he had felt like a man. She showed her letter to her closet friends and became the captain of a club of 10. Owns a home in Hattiesburg. Sold her chickens, a cow and that part of her furniture for which she could get any money. Lost money in her haste. Thinks they said that wages were about \$2.10 a day. Know that her husband was making almost that amount at home but did not at the time think about the difference.

A newspaper, the name of which she did not recall, had been "stirring things up," for a good while. Her pastor talked against the movement but she paid him no heed whatever.

Man, wife and child from Laurel, Mississippi

Came in March, Mother and child in June. Husband a car repairer at home at \$1.50 per day. She sold vegetables. They own property and have bank account. Did not come here for more money. Just wanted to come after the people had stirred her up so. First heard of the movement when her husband's brother's wife brought in a letter that had been sent over from Georgia. The letter had been received from the North and was being passed around. Letter said, "For all of us to let go." The Sisters Home Mission Meeting, the B.Y.P.U. advertised it¹⁰. Letters were read before these bodies. The Defender stirred them up. They subscribed. A letter from Augusta said that 900 had left in one night. Just couldn't stand it. "You want the children to feel free in every particular. Lots of things we had to undergo. "We can get better schooling. I have it in mind that I will like this place when I get better acquainted. The bad houses and alleys at home. You got no freedom to express yourself when you want to." I'm writing a letter now trying to get a family to come.

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¹⁰ B.Y.P.U. = Baptist Young People's Union.