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THE BLACK IMMIGRANTS



The Negroes of the northern ghettos are not simply colored people or poor people. They are also the new immigrants—foreigners within their own country. Here is the story of Walter Austin of Merigold, Mississippi, and the millions like him: why they leave the South, how they go to the alien land, and what they find.

At 6:40 on the evening of March 4, 1967, Walter Austin, who had lived for almost half a century within 60 miles of the Mississippi, actually saw the river for the first time. Still wearing his four-dollar overalls, he was sitting in the back seat of an automobile, jammed in with four other members of his family, crossing a high bridge. His eyes were red with the fatigue of the last 38 sleepless hours. But he stared down through the dusk at the aluminum reflection of the greatest body of water he had ever seen, and he said the same thing that rose out of him earlier when someone told him that in New York City there is a building 102 stories high: a low, slow, "Good gracious!" The car moved across the bridge, its occupants turning to keep in sight the massive river that had been the source of life and of suffering for five generations of Austin families. And then the river was gone, and they turned forward again to look uncertainly into the darkness ahead.

It was the most momentous crossing of their lives. From that time on their experiences would be like nothing they or their

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Photographs by Matt Herron

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The Black Immigrants

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The day the Austin family is to go North, young Wendell takes one last run in the yard by the Mississippi cotton field his father worked. But Wendell will never be a sharecropper.

ancestors had ever known. That morning they had been just another impoverished Negro family working the fields on a remote Mississippi plantation. But at noon, with hardly a backward glance, they had slammed the doors of the two cars driven by a relative and a friend and headed north for a new life in the city. They carried all they could from the last hog they would ever butcher—the salted jaw, a slab of salt pork, two hams, 100 pounds of lard—stashed in the car like sacred objects. Riding with them as well was a new and confusing collection of hopes and fears.

That day the Austins—father, mother, five children aged 17 to 6, and one grandchild—added their eight lives to a flow of Americans that is one of the great unsung sagas of human history. It is an uprooting of more people in a shorter period of time than almost any peacetime migration known to man, a vast transfer that is changing America.

In a wicked moment Franklin Roosevelt once put a chill on a convention of the Daughters of the American Revolution by greeting them, "My fellow immigrants," and it is true enough that one thing all Americans share is a background of migration. The American Indians were immigrants, probably from Asia; the forebears of most white Americans came from Europe in the largest intercontinental human movement in history; the ancestors of most American Negroes were the 400,000 Africans brought into the South as slaves between 1619 and 1808. Now the descendants of these Negro immigrants are making another mass move, this time within the United States.

In this generation, some four million Negroes have left the South, most of them for six states: California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Where 50 years ago three quarters of Negro Americans were in rural areas, today three quarters are in cities. And the tide still runs strong. In 1960 there were four American cities that were 40 percent Negro; by 1970 there will be 14, and practically every city of any size will have a core of migrant Negroes, piling up, desperate. Like previous migrants, they are truly aliens, used to different customs, a different climate, essentially a different language, different everything. Their ghettos are countries within countries, in

which nearly every inhabitant feels foreign to what surrounds him. But what surrounds the city Negroes is more hostile than anything any white alien has ever encountered. For them the ghetto perimeters are closed as tightly as foreign borders.

This exodus of southern Negroes is one of the most dramatic demographic events of the mid-century, yet it is a clandestine operation. When the Negro goes, he goes suddenly and secretly, because he is afraid of the white man. Generally, the Negro is a sharecropper, living in a feudal, noncash economy—his plantation owner provides him land and credit. When the harvest is over, the plantation owner announces that, after deducting the cost of food, fuel, seed, fertilizer and other things the sharecropper has obtained on credit, the sharecropper's profit is such and such. Or, much more likely, the owner tells him he owes the plantation as much as \$100 or \$500.

To the Negro this kind of debt is so astronomical that no one, laborer or landlord, expects that it will ever be paid off in cash. Only by working off the debt can the Negro family be clear. As manual farm work gives way to huge machines, the means of paying back the debt disappears. When that happens, most plantation owners are resigned to seeing their tenants leave.

Even so, there is often a question of who gets the paid-for television or kitchen range, in light of the debt, the landlord or the departing family's friends and relatives? And the rural Negro has been taught in the harshest way never to make an important decision without the approval of his landlord. So when he moves North, the Negro usually goes unannounced, a final gesture of rebellion and fear.

The families themselves seldom know when they will go until the moment comes. Moving vans are unknown to the dirt roads of the rural South, and departure frequently depends on the car of a visiting relative. Thus the times of greatest population loss in the South are the holidays—Christmas, New Year's, Memorial Day, July 4, Labor Day, any long weekend when city relatives can make the long trip down from the North. And at funerals. The South loses more than the dead at funerals. A brother from Chicago who comes down for the ceremony, having driven the 12 hours since work let out on Friday, arrives Saturday morning before

dawn, and suddenly some of the youngsters, or the whole family, decide to go back with him.

Sometimes the mail arrives with the awaited passport: bus tickets sent by older children in the city. The next day the younger children drop out of school, and after dark that night the family heads for the station, carrying in their hands everything with which they will start their new life.

Or a mother takes the youngest children to "visit my sick aunty in the city," where she gets a job and sends the tickets back for her husband and the older children, and the next Saturday night the husband pays a neighbor \$1.50 to drive him and his children and their suitcases to the station. Morning on the plantation finds the shack abandoned, and another rural family has entered the central mass of an American metropolis.

The decision to abandon a way of life, even one you love, can seem very simple.

"Christmas morning, last Christmas morning," Walter Austin said in his deep and vibrant voice, "I got up and I cried." Weeping did not seem to go with the dark, weather-beaten face. Austin is 48, has black hair without gray and a black moustache, and wears rugged-looking overalls and rubber boots clotted with mud. "I cried, and then I thanked the Lord to be living, because I could have been gone, and I was glad to be here, and all my children well. And the children had food. It put me in debt, but they had food, special Christmas food. For Christmas I saw to it that they had fresh apples and oranges."

Over and over he returned to the subject of moving to the city where, he knew, it takes even more money than in the country.

"Yes, yes, but you need *some* money here. You need *some* money here. I can't sit here with eight children"—he kept referring to eight children, though his two oldest sons had left for the city within the last two months—"I can't have my children around me and nothing to give them to eat. I feel bad in the morning. I feel *bad* in the morning, hearing the kids get up crying because they want something to eat and I can't find enough for them to eat. Then I feel bad. Then I feel like crying."

So the easy decision is really whether to eat or not. But there is a harder question for older people

Suddenly the painful decision is made, and the Austin family flees North.

who know only their rural life and who love it. Walter Austin and his wife, Bessie, who is also 48, were born in Holmes County, Miss., but 10 years ago moved the 50 miles to Merigold, Miss., in Bolivar County.

"I don't want to leave Mississippi," Austin said. "I never been out of Mississippi except one time in my whole life, and that was only one week. Tell you the truth, up to the sixteenth day of March, 19 and 57, I never been out of Holmes County. I never been in no kind of trouble, never paid a fine, never been to court. I'll peck on wood"—he reached over the torn leatherette arm of the chair in his living room and rapped the bare wood floor of the shack with his knuckles—"I've been just plain Walter all my life."

We had spent hours talking country-versus-city, and there wasn't much doubt where he stood, given a free choice and enough food.

"I likes to farm. I loves it. I can raise my chickens, raise my hog, I have my garden with peas and beans and potatoes and squash and cucumbers and onions and greens. You can't do that in town. You can't raise a hog in town. I'm just a home child. I just don't want to leave home unless I have to. I'll be frank with you, I like the country."

He lifted his leather cap and scratched his hair. "I know in the city you's supposed to have an education. If you got me a job in the morning and I was supposed to separate the salt from the sugar, I couldn't do it, not if they was in the same kind of bag. I couldn't do it, Cap'n, because I can't read."

His wife, with a soft face drawn with worry, and a blurry right eye blinded by a stroke seven years ago, told about a visit she made once to Chicago.

"I stayed with my husband's brother. I didn't even walk on the outside. That's all I know, what I saw from his place. I just couldn't stand that noise."

"I'd be satisfied working right here. If we had work. If I had enough to live on and be comfortable, oh, I'd stay. I'd stay."

What did she mean, "comfortable"?

"Nothing extra. You come into this world with nothing, and when you leave you can't carry anything away. I need some covers—quilts, you know—comfortable mattresses, some beds don't need to be propped up. I would like some clothes."

She thought for a moment and then worried that I might misunderstand her desire for clothes. She didn't mean for herself (she bought her last dress in 1956, her husband had never bought a suit and limited his new clothes to a four-dollar pair of overalls each year).

"I mean for the children. And nothing fancy, just not all sewed up. Not half-priced or leftovers but good common clothes, you know? Not eight-dollar dresses, just good three-dollar dresses. What I need most is extra underclothes and socks. We have enough outerclothes so the kids can wear clean things to school, but the children have to wash their underwear and socks every night so they'll be clean in the morning. If they had extra sets they wouldn't have to wash them every night."

Walter Austin looked in mock severity at the apple of his eye, his 10-year-old daughter, Bessie.

"I gets up at four o'clock every morning. At four o'clock I'm up, Sunday, Saturday, rain, sleet or snow. I put on my clothes, wash my face, go out and feed my hog, feed my chickens, and then I come back in and see if the kids has washed their clothes before they went to bed, and if they didn't, then I gets them up early so they can do it before schooltime and give their underclothes and socks a chance to dry in time. Ain't that so, Bessie?"

Bessie obviously was the most recent transgressor, and she smiled sheepishly and said to her father, "Suh?" By "early," Austin explained, he meant the backsliding child rose at 5 A.M. instead of the usual 6.

To Mrs. Austin the prospect of the city held out the deadly danger that the children would learn to drink. Walter Austin would miss his farming and would no longer experience the pride of running and repairing a large combine. But the children had different thoughts. Frances, 17, whose formal, bland expression masked a quick and taunting wit, was fatalistic—"I think things would be just the same whether I go or stay"—but she looked excited when she described how well-dressed her girl friends and relatives were when they returned from the city. David, 14, also wore an outer mask of solemnity, but his black-cloth visor cap worn at a rakish angle hinted at the adolescent itch. "I just don't want to farm. No, suh. I just don't want to be a farmer." Hearing about the city, Bessie simply glowed wordlessly. Her younger sister, Zettie Mae, 8, and brother, Wendell, 6, looked bewildered and polite.

But their parents kept reminding themselves how much better off they are now than they were in their youth. Neither of them had ever lived in so good a house as this one. It had a tight roof, the five rooms were lined with wallboard. There was a cold-water faucet in the kitchen and a privy out back (some plantation shacks lack even a privy). Three open gas grates heated the place in winter, and they had some chairs, bedsteads, and from a few good years in the early 1960's a television set and a freezer, all paid for.

"My mother's house back in Holmes County," Walter Austin said, "you could see the chickens through the floor and the blue sky through the roof. And when I was a kid, what I had to eat for the whole day was one slice of hog jaw and corn bread with flour gravy, sometimes not even that."

"Now here's David here, fourteen years old and he's in—what grade is it? Eighth—yes, the eighth grade. When I was seven years old I was trying to go to school but, Lordy, I just had to work. When I was seven years old I had to walk three miles before sunup, get a mule and feed it and then work that mule in the fields until dark, all of that for only eight dollars a month."

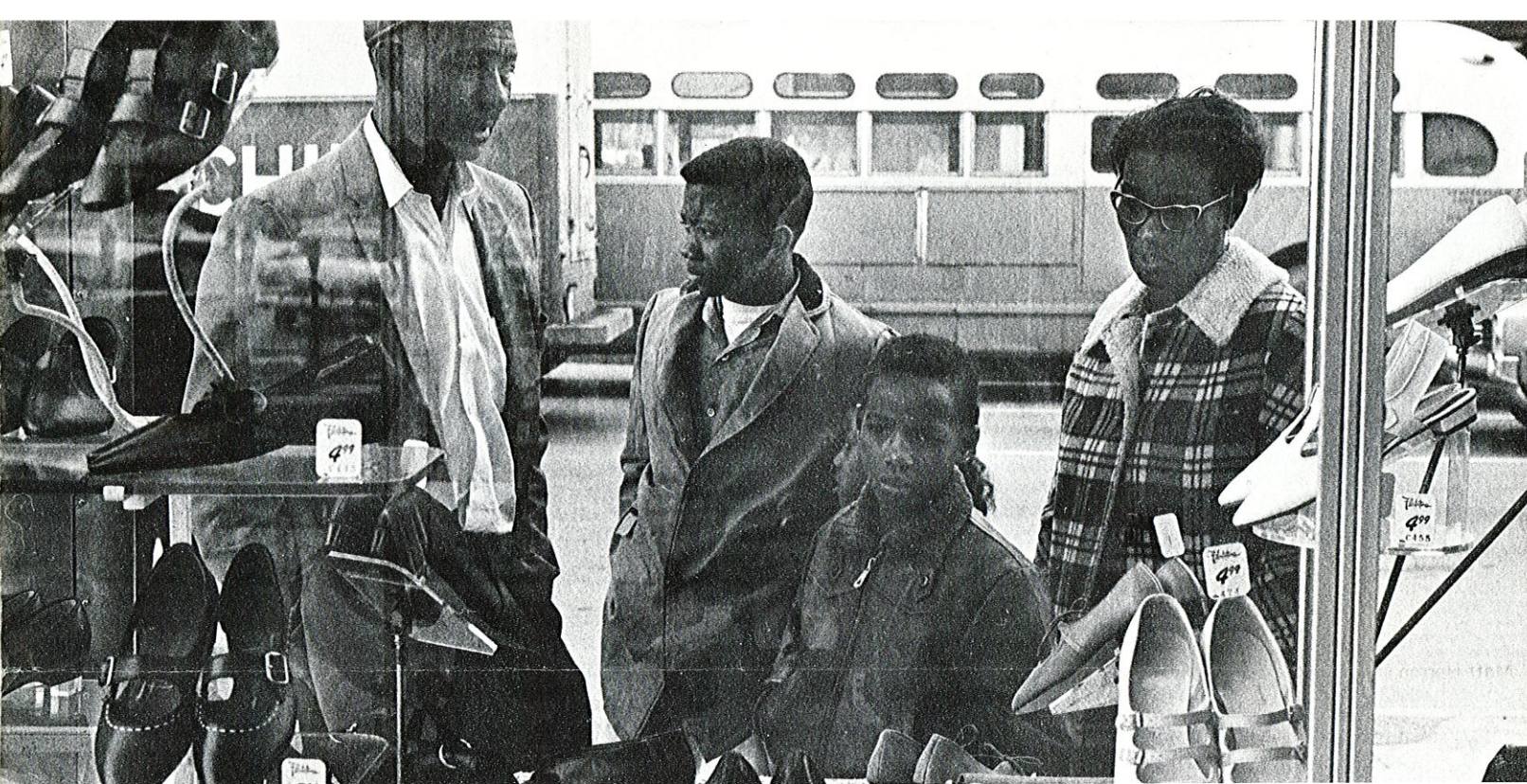
"I married Bessie, here, the only wife I've ever known, when we were both seventeen, and the day we got married we ate corn bread and flour gravy. We started with an old wood stove, a bed, a pig and a calf my mother-in-law give me."

The family worked for 20 years on a plantation in Holmes County. At the end of that time, Austin was driving a tractor for \$4.50 a day, during the season and when weather was good. Mrs. Austin and the children did sharecropping for the same plantation, planting, chopping (weeding) and picking a cotton crop. They provided the labor and the landlord provided the land and their rent-free house. The landlord also gave them credit for their share of the cost of their seed and fertilizer and lent them \$40 a month for food until the crop was harvested and sold.

"The four kids and I," Mrs. Austin said, "that last year, did twenty-six bales. We had to keep the kids out of school to do it. But I got tired, just tired going with the crops, weighing my own cotton, tromping it, putting it on the trailer. I got so tired. As a woman, I couldn't farm no more." At that time she had seven living children, ages 19 to 4, the older ones working in the field, the younger ones brought out in boxes to play all day near the cotton rows. Two infants died early, and a daugh-

Top: With no cotton fields to romp in, Wendell now plays in a back alley in Springfield, in a Negro ghetto he may spend his whole life trying vainly to escape. At right, Frances works as a presser in a Springfield laundry which likes to hire the industrious Negro migrants. Already she earns more than her father ever did as a sharecropper.





Newly arrived in Springfield, Ill., the biggest city they have ever seen, the Austins encounter a tempting new standard of living—and all the pressures and confusions of urban life.

ter later died of leukemia at the age of 16. "And all we got for that year and twenty-six bales of cotton was a hundred and fifty dollars. The four kids and I, from May to October. When I told the boss man I just couldn't sharecrop with the four kids no more, he told us we'd have to move. That's when we come down here."

(The average price farmers received for cotton in 1956 was \$152 a bale, so the Austins' half share apparently was \$1,976, minus \$480 lent for food and their share of seed and fertilizer; neither they nor anyone they knew ever saw an accounting.)

Walter's brother heard of an empty house in Bolivar County, and they moved, and though they loved Holmes County better than anyplace else on earth, they considered themselves much improved. People had a little bit more. In Holmes, median income for the rural Negro family was \$895 a year; in Bolivar it was \$1,198. The Austins didn't know that, but they sensed it, and they sensed that their new plantation owner and agent were more benign. And the house was better.

Life was not easy, of course. They had more children. Their daughter, Jean, had leukemia and spent the last six weeks of her life in University Hospital in Jackson, 100 miles away, where her father lived, penniless, in a chair in her room, fed by compassionate nurses. After she died, he returned home to find that his daughter, Bessie, had been born, and his wife was back in another hospital with the shock that blinded her right eye. But, then, life had never been easy, and their family kept its strong bonds and Walter Austin his mastery within the family.

The world of the Austins in Mississippi was simultaneously enormous and tiny. Their little home was a dot in the Mississippi delta, a flat ocean of land made from the silt of centuries of flooding, land as rich as any on earth. Square mile after square mile of cotton fields stretch out, in the winter a rusty sea with here and there a scrap of windblown paper snagged on a dry stalk like a whitecap. The huge landscape is punctuated by an occasional small town, a cotton gin, a stand of oaks, and the clusters of Negro shacks in the fields. Like most southern rural Negroes, the Austins lived on a dirt road without a name, in a house without a number. But though the view seems endless, their

neighbors were few, their life concentrated around their own family.

"Watch for a burned-out house on the highway," a relative instructed me, "turn left and go in three miles and look for a brown house with a tan 1959 Chevy that's broke down."

I was lucky to have met the Austins before they decided to move and to be with them when they changed their minds, for their experience told much about the thoughts and emotions of families facing the great migration. Before he knew he would go, Walter Austin had uppermost in his mind the improvements he had seen since his youth and all the things he liked in the country and feared in the city. He was genuinely undecided. The plantation owner had told him there would be no guaranteed work the next year because their cotton acreage was being rented to a big agricultural operator. But the owner held out the possibility of a job in a machine shop in a nearby town, or, at least, some days of casual labor in the fields.

The pressure increased, especially during the winter, when work ceases in the delta fields. Merchants knew at once that Austin had been put in the doubtful category. Where credit for food, bottled gas and doctors had once been immediate, everyone wanted cash. Families around them were going away. Ten years earlier 50 families worked and lived on that plantation. Now there were six. Within the last year the two houses on either side of the Austins had been vacated and torn down, and the skies of the delta now were regularly streaked with smoke from empty shanties being burned down to clear the ground for growing. The smoke got thicker after a one-dollar-an-hour wages-and-hours law for agricultural workers began last winter. When motorists stopped one day to watch a spectacular fire consuming a plantation shack, the agent in charge called out, "Wages and hours got that one."

Yet the Austins hung on. He was a good worker. His plantation agent, within the limits of feudalistic white supremacy, was a decent man. Each day Austin rose at 4, went to the plantation headquarters at 7. If there was work, he returned after dark, \$10-minus-debts the richer. If there was no work, as was most often the case, he went home and worked in his yard and garden.

Mrs. Austin rose at 5:30 to start breakfast of

sausage and corn bread, if they had it. The children rose at 6 and got ready for the 7:20 school bus, if they all had shoes. After school they played with the children of the few remaining neighbors, did homework, had supper of greens and salt pork, and were in bed around 8.

The end of the week was different. On a typical Saturday, David lighted a fire in the backyard under an ancient iron pot and heated water for the washing. Frances did the wash in a round, wringer-style washing machine on the back stoop and hung it on the "clothesline"—two strands, one old electrical cable, the other old barbed wire. David helped his father clean up the backyard. The hog grunted, and Walter Austin rubbed its head with his glove—"Baby, you want your breakfast?"—and told David to fetch the slops. Instantly at the trough were the pig, three puppies, two cats, four kittens and two roosters.

The three younger children, bundled in bright donated clothes, played hopscotch on packed earth at the end of some cotton rows, tiny scarlet figures under a huge sky, chased by their puppies, Frisco, Fuzzy and Alaska.

In the evening they look at television. "I cain't read," Walter Austin explained, "so I have to get the news and weather on the TV."

And they sang, Bessie leading and her mother and the others following. They coaxed David to do his imitation of a local preacher. His father called gaily to his children in the living room, using the private names he dreams up at their birth, and he alone uses: "Preacher" for Wendell, "Chicken" for Zettie Mae, "Barbie" for Bessie, "Ben" for David, and "Root" for Frances.

"Ben," he said, "Let's hear the one, 'Your God and My Love.'"

During the singing, the three youngest children played school with the most magnificent Christmas gift any Austin ever got, a plastic-and-chrome children's table-and-chair set from two years ago. As always, Bessie was the teacher, sitting at the table, facing Zettie Mae and Wendell in chairs.

"Wendell," she said imperiously, "spell . . ." and she said what sounded like, "gown."

Wendell, puzzled: "Gown?"

Bessie, impatiently, "Yes, 'gown.'"

Wendell, timidly, "Like, 'machine gown'?"

Bessie, outraged, "No, Wendell, no! Like,

'Yesterday they went. Now they is gown.'

Everyone laughed, though teachers know that this kind of misunderstanding is significant in explaining the difficulties in reading and learning among children whose natural tongue is not standard English.

Later there were baths, in a galvanized washtub put in Frances's room, the most private one, with a heater.

During the evenings the Austins constantly churned over their view of the future. "I wants to stay, I wants to stay," Walter Austin said. "If I could just get that machine-shop job or work in the boss man's pig farm where they works rain or shine. But how in the world am I going to feed eight kids on fifteen dollars a week?"

Periodically he'd resign himself to moving. "But after the snow is off up there. I is naked here, and up north I'm going to freeze."

None of us was prepared for what happened. One Sunday, photographer Matt Herron and I decided to visit the Austins' small church in the fields. Eight years ago 70 people would attend but now, with the migration, only 20. As we drove we were surprised to see Walter Austin and David out on the road, flagging us down. Walter Austin looked grave, his face gray with tension.

"They don't want you to go to the church because they's afraid it'll get burned down. The deacons, they ask would you please not go."

He explained that the day before, the plantation agent announced that Austin would have to move, telling him angrily, "Those white men kept coming and coming and coming to your place, and that's more than I can take. I know what they're doing. They're down here organizing a union. The state's full of them. So you better leave." Austin could take some time, the agent said, but he had to go.

The concern in Walter Austin's face was justified: To fall out of favor, angrily and catastrophically, with the boss man, especially for unauthorized dealings with outsiders, implied peril to life and limb.

The nearest public phone was six miles away. We drove to it, and Austin called a married daughter in Springfield, Ill. She was alarmed. She urged her father to come that night "before something happens, please, Daddy." But Austin's voice was calm as he spoke on the phone. "No, baby, I need a week to sell my freezer and my hog and take care of things."

We drove Walter and David Austin back to their home and went to see the plantation agent, a round-faced man in his 60's. He and his wife, the plantation bookkeeper, were civil though they were often angry. They recited our movements in the state for the last week; it is not difficult for plantation operators in Mississippi to keep track of suspicious strangers. They told us they knew we were stirring up "our people" and forming a union. Furthermore, we had violated common rules of courtesy. "You can drive down that road," he said, "and you can maybe stop at a house once. But to keep coming and coming and coming and staying after dark—that's too much."

After about an hour we persuaded

him we were not organizers, and we parted in a friendly way. In a sense, this was unusual, but what the agent did was even more so. The next day he went to Walter Austin and apologized for falsely accusing him and said he could stay. Austin says he thanked the agent, but he had decided to move, and so he told the agent that he was going through with it. "Boss Man, you was dissatisfied with Walter, so Walter's going to move."

The agent told him he didn't have to sneak off like all the others. And Walter Austin didn't.

The next Saturday morning the Austin place looked like the center of a carnival. A total of 23 neighbors and friends were in and out of the house, up on the roof dismantling the motorized television antenna (bought for \$149 four years ago and now sold for \$5), carrying out the freezer (bought for \$400 and now sold for \$50). There was gaiety and almost no sentimentality.

Walter Austin, quietly, calmly, and with humor, left no doubt who was in charge. At 7 he had gone to the agent's house, returned a ladder, a set of wrenches, and paid back \$7 the agent had lent him last fall so David could have shoes for school. Neither one said anything, but they both knew Walter Austin was leaving that day.

Austin quietly directed his son-in-law and his oldest son, who had driven down in the night from Springfield. Wandering through the yard was Walter's 29-year-old brother, who worked on the same plantation, and toward the end he said almost to himself, "I'm the only one left." When the time came, Walter and his brother looked at each other briefly, and Walter said, "Good-bye, son."

Frances and her boyfriend talked constantly, arms linked. An old parlor chair, the one with the torn leatherette covering, couldn't be taken, and they gave it to Frances's boyfriend, who carried it out. Walter said, "You get to keep the chair, Robert, but you'd like to keep Frances."

A recent plantation acquaintance tried too often to engage Walter's attention, and finally in exasperation Walter said to him politely, "Well, good-bye and come see me."

"How will I know where you'll be?" the acquaintance said too eagerly. "I don't even know where you're going."

Austin: "I'm going yonder."

Acquaintance: "Where's yonder?"

Austin, nodding northward: "Up."

Finally, Walter Austin walked through his stripped house. Gone from the living-room walls were the photographs of his children and some of his 15 grandchildren; the shadowbox of Jesus with the burned-out electric bulb; the pink plastic cross with the chrome crucifix; the small window frame containing postcards of Cherokee Indians and a table of decimal equivalents; and the too-bright picture of a romantic thatched-roof cottage surrounded by seed-catalogue flowers with the legend, GOD SHALL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS.

Walter Austin looked around and saw one remaining artifact on the faded blue wall—a calendar of the "Delta Burial Corporation, Seldom Equaled, Never Excelled," the society to which

they paid \$3.75 a month to guarantee them a decent Mississippi funeral. He hesitated a moment, then lifted the calendar off its nail and handed it to Bessie. "Barbie, in the green car."

In the kitchen he looked at the stove he had just bought on time but not made any payments on, at two lamps he had long paid for, the wringer washing machine for which he paid \$200 and owed only \$95 more, all left behind to be picked up by the dealer in town. Asked why he was leaving behind the lamps and the half-paid-for machine, he said, "I'm not looking for trouble. I'm just looking for a little peace and a little love."

And then he left, and when the car engines were started, Walter Austin never looked back.

As the cars moved rapidly northward, one could almost feel the arguments for staying sinking out of sight and the ones for going coming to the top. Before, the need for food and money had dominated conversation. Now, deeper things, long repressed, came to the surface. I asked if he had any fear of facing the strange life in the city at his age.

"Well, I guess so. But it had to come. It had to come. Back in Mississippi I was forty-eight years old, but I was still like a child. I needed the white man for protection. If the colored man had that he could keep out of lots of trouble. He could get credit. He could do lots of things, lots of things. But he just had to have that protection. If you didn't have that protection all kinds of things could happen, all kinds of things, just like could happen to a child without a daddy."

His eyes were red and tired, but he talked on.

"You'd get up every morning, and you'd ask the boss man what to do, and every morning he'd tell you, just like you was a child. When you got your pay, he'd take out of it what he wanted for what you owed. He didn't ask you. Now I had a good boss man, for Mississippi, and if I had something special now and then, I could ask him to let me have all my pay, and he'd let me have it. But usual thing, he'd take out what he wanted. He handled most of your bills."

"Now I figure in the North one man pays you, and then you got to take care of your bills yourself. I know a man can get into a mess of trouble handling his own bills, but I reckon that ought to be up to him, to learn and decide himself. But not on a Mississippi plantation. They figured I was a child."

He described the tensions and treacheries on a plantation where all are struggling for approval and survival, and helped explain the too-eager acquaintance that morning. "You always had to watch those other boys on the plantation and be careful who you trusted and who you didn't."

You knew Walter Austin had not been caught up in the civil-rights movement because he still referred to Negroes in the white supremacists' term, "boys," and called all white men "boss man" or "captain."

"If the boss man was always giving the easy jobs to a boy, and he and The Man always had their heads together,

then you better be careful with that boy, 'cause he's probably telling the boss everything he knows about you. So on the plantation you learn to be careful what you say, what you do, and who you speaks to. And if the boss man asks you about somebody else, and you don't want to be telling him no lies, you got to tell him you just don't know nothing."

The cars were still in Mississippi, but in Walter Austin's mind already "here" was North.

"Here you can be with who you wants and ride with who you wants."

The Sunday before, while we rode to the phone booth, we had to stop for gas. It was what is known in Mississippi as an "integrated car," and the white gas-station proprietor had a common reaction: He fixed a menacing, unblinking stare at Walter Austin and kept it on him as he deliberately and slowly wiped every window of the car. To a Negro this stare, whether in an integrated car or behind a voting table, is a serious threat.

As the landscape streamed by, it caught different eyes at different times. Walter Austin would turn whenever we passed a small farm on its own plot of land. When we began to pass large used-car lots, a small smile leaked onto David's solemn face. Frances watched the increasingly large neighborhoods of ranch houses with their lawns, the largest number of middle-class houses she had ever seen, and the first not associated with the plantation hierarchy. "I'd like a house like that," she said once, "with one of those checker-board tiles on the floor." Did she think she'd ever live in one? She thought about it seriously and then said, "Yes. I think I will."

Walter Austin and I joked a little over his calling me "Captain," which I had asked him not to do. At the time, two weeks earlier, he had said, "I know, but it's hard to stop. Up north you say, 'yas suh,' and they looks at you like you was crazy. But when you're brought up from the time you can talk, and your mammy makes you go back and say it every time you forgets to say 'yas suh,' then it's hard to stop all of a sudden."

Periodically, he would lapse into "captain" or "boss man" when we talked. But after we crossed the Mississippi River, he never did it again.

The cars went into the foggy night toward Springfield, Ill., with a homing instinct that affects almost every migrant. It was common during the foreign immigrations to have whole villages—from Sicily, Russia, Poland, Germany, Ireland—be transplanted to some particular American city. The same thing now happens within the country. There are counties in West Virginia from which most departing people go to Cincinnati, others from which they go to Cleveland. In Chicago there are two blocks made up largely of Holmes County Mississippians. The compass of the migrating poor is seldom fixed by a job already arranged and waiting, but by the presence of close relatives and friends.

In his youth, Walter Austin cut wood with a friend in Holmes County. During World War II the friend got a job

on the Illinois Central Railroad, and took a room in Springfield. Later he bought a couple of rooming houses there and retired. From time to time the railroad man would return to Holmes County. Once he came to attend a wedding of his cousin with Walter Austin's cousin. When the cousins were evicted from their plantation, they moved to Springfield into a flat owned by the railroad man. In 1956 Austin's sister was told by her plantation owner that her family had to move, so the sister went to Springfield where she stayed with her cousin and got a job in Kennedy's Laundry. Four years later Austin's oldest daughter, Etoyre, decided there was no future in Mississippi, so when her aunt came from Springfield for a funeral, the daughter took her older children and rode back to Springfield. She also got a job in Kennedy's Laundry and found a flat, saved some money and sent bus tickets to her husband. They both saved some more money and sent tickets for their remaining small children and a full-fare ticket for the next oldest daughter, Mae Jessie, to accompany them. So Mae Jessie did this, taking her own daughter, an infant (no fare), and leaving her other children behind with her mother. She, too, got a job in Kennedy's Laundry, found a flat, and sent down tickets for her children and one for her mother to accompany them and visit.

Last winter Mae Jessie drove down for a New Year's visit, and the oldest Austin son, Walter Jr., decided to ride back with her. Walter Jr., unmarried, got a job sorting hides. A month later, Etoyre, the other married daughter in Springfield, drove down for a visit with her parents. Walter Austin's second oldest son, Jimmy Lee, who was married and had three children, was telling his parents he just didn't see how he could get enough work to support his family in Mississippi when the sister's car unexpectedly drew up in front. Jimmy Lee rushed to the window, saw who it was and said, "Daddy, I'm gone." He drove back to Springfield and got a job washing dishes, staying with his sister. A week later he drove down with his brother-in-law and fetched his wife and children. His wife got a job in Kennedy's Laundry.

Like an endless chain, whole tribes go link by link to some city where a base has been established. When the crisis came to Walter Austin, there was never any doubt where he would go, and when he got there, there were suddenly a total of 36 Austins within a scant half mile.

It was a scene of joy and relief, at 2

o'clock of a Sunday morning, when the two cars finally arrived at their destination, and the Austins of Merigold, Miss., became the Austins of Springfield, Ill., sharecroppers no longer but city dwellers now. Standing wearily on the sidewalk, they looked up with awe at Jimmy Lee's house, a neat, white clapboard with five spacious rooms and its own bathtub and toilet. Waiting inside were the older daughters who had come North earlier, and they helped sort the newcomers and send them to nearby homes to sleep the remaining hours of the night.

That day Walter Austin's family made the rounds of the relatives' homes. At Walter's sister's there were guitars, singing and joshing. The older women put on their wigs and urged Frances to try one. Bashfully, she put one on and imitated the modeling she had seen on television. Suddenly she was changed. One moment she was the shy country girl, the next a poised young woman. She lifted off the wig and said quietly, "I'm going to get one."

The next morning Jimmy Lee's wife took Frances with her to Kennedy's Laundry and introduced her to the boss, George Boehmer. He said, "I like to hire Mississippi people. They're good workers." So 29 hours after her arrival in the city, Frances Austin, working beside white women, was feeding flatwork into a presser and earning more than her father ever did in his 41 years of labor.

That same morning Mrs. Austin and her older daughter went out looking for a flat. In Jimmy Lee's house there were seven preschool children, crying, running, fighting, all tended by a new baby sitter, Walter Austin. He was no longer in overalls. Someone had lent him a white shirt, a pair of slacks and a too-large suit jacket. He stood in the middle of the kitchen with an open carton of milk. He cried out, "Hush, child," to one girl, and tried to restrain another one who was pounding a nail file into the linoleum with a hairbrush. "Soon as they find a place for us to stay, I'm hoping to find a job. Some kind of a job." Then, milk carton still in hand, he looked with bewilderment at the children. "This is one job I do not like."

The Austins had a small start. Four days later they found a pinched five-room flat for \$65, where the whole family sleeps in just three beds and the beds are the only furniture in the place. The day after that, Walter Austin got a job that his son Jimmy Lee first had when he moved—mopping floors and washing dishes in a restaurant at \$40 a week. His 17-year-old daughter earns \$5 more than he does.

The Austins are in real need. They require medical attention, furniture, city clothes, and Walter Austin needs a job that will buy these things. But in some ways they are luckier than many migrants. For one thing, almost by chance, they followed the newer, less hopeless migratory routes from the rural South—more and more to the West and more and more to the medium-size cities. In the smaller cities the rate of growth is often better than in the huge ones, the Negro districts are distinct but lack the oppressiveness of

square miles of squalor, and in a smaller community it is easier to match available men with available jobs.

Walter Austin had just left Merigold, Miss., which has a population of 602. When he heard that his new home, Springfield, had 86,000 people, of whom 5,000 are Negroes, he opened his eyes wide and said, "Good gracious!"

In Chicago there are a million Negroes.

II

The fact that migrants move means they hope for something better. The hope lasts remarkably long, so long that it seems a miracle in such places as the ghettos of cities like Chicago. Alice Perkins has been there almost two years now; she is wiser to the struggle than the Austins, harder to the squalor, but she still hopes for something better, hopes in the diminishing optimism that time and the ghetto steadily wear away.

She is a statuesque woman of 27 with a husky voice and a sardonic expression, and she lives in a second-floor flat on Van Buren Street in the middle of Chicago's West Side ghetto. Official statistics show that in 1960, eighty percent of all dwellings in her block were substandard and 30 percent lacked normal plumbing, but you don't need statistics to get the message: rubble and garbage is spread in vacant lots, the stairways are dark and dirty. Her door is untypically painted a fresh green, and on it her husband has used gay, red Christmas tape to letter out most of his name: HARRY PERKI—. But the door, typically, is locked several different ways and shows wounds from having been forced open several different ways. Inside there are rats the size of cats, and the children sleep crossways, usually four to a bed. The younger ones are normally barefoot and half bare-bodied so that the three older children can be properly dressed for school. Yet Alice Perkins and her husband have no doubt about the decision she made in the middle of a cotton field two years ago.

That day in August, 1965, she had, as usual, got up at 5:30 in their three-room shack, washed her face in a pail in the kitchen and, without breakfast, gone out to get on the back of a truck. In the field a mile away she dragged a bag nine feet long, putting in cotton balls, the ones a machine left behind. Early in the day the plantation agent started yelling that the cotton she and the others had picked was full of burrs and sticks. At noon she walked a half mile to a store and ate 10 Saltines, five pieces of baloney and a soda pop. Back in the field, The Man kept after them. "You-all are pullin' this goddamn cotton. I'm paying you to pick it, and you're just pullin' the goddamn stuff."

Toward the end of the afternoon he was still at it, and Alice Perkins said, "I don't have to take this no more.

I'm going." She said it to herself.

She got back home that night at 6 o'clock. She had picked 84 pounds and made \$2.10 minus lunch, for 11 hours. She cooked turnip greens and a pound of salt pork for her five children and her husband, who came home after dark from driving a tractor at \$6 a day. The children went to bed, the oldest one, Beatrice, then 7, in a cot in their front room, the infant in the double bed she and her husband used, also in the front room. Her husband and two neighbors played a game of cards, pit-a-pat, also in the front room.

Without telling Harry about it, she found two pieces of lined paper and a short pencil, and she wrote a letter to her aunt in Chicago. "I can't stand it no more," she wrote, "please, Aunty, send me a ticket." She walked in the dark across the dirt road to a neighbor's house where she got an envelope and put the letter and a nickel in her rural mailbox. This was a Wednesday. Tuesday the tickets arrived. Then she told her husband she wanted to take their three youngest children and go. If she found no job in two weeks she would return. He listened quietly and said, "OK, baby."

So Alice Perkins joined the silent tide that goes by car, by bus, and still by that old reliable carrier of the cotton Negro, the Illinois Central Railroad.

On the platforms of the South they are there every day. The toothless old Negro woman in men's trousers, rubbers over slippers, a ragged coat, scarf over her head, a cardboard box tied with twine, the last tenacious root of a family gone earlier.

The neatly dressed woman in her 30's comforting her weeping teen-age daughter, "Don't cry, baby. Take care of Daddy and the kids and I'll be back when I find a place."

The young woman in her 20's, so like Alice Perkins, with three wide-eyed preschool children, hugging older people on the platform and then, as the locomotive sounds its mournful southern cry, mounting the steps with her children, her eyes moist.

The old Negro porter watches the flat countryside stream monotonously by, as he has for 32 years on this run.

"It started in 1947. This train went through the delta, and there was nothing but black faces, for years and years and years. I used to wonder, 'Where are they coming from? How can there be anybody left? My God, they must be coming right out of the ground. They got to stop sometime.'

"Well, couple of years ago it seemed to slack off. You begin to see some whites now. Used to be twenty-thirty Negroes for every white on this train. Now it's more like three-to-one."

But there are still Negroes. At Durant, the station stop nearest the heart of the delta, more country people get on with boxes and old suitcases. As the train pulls out, it leaves others behind. Through the rain-splattered window you see the lonely Negro shack with three tiny children frozen in place, one boy hanging clothes on a line, his hand stopped in the act as he stares, another boy with a water pail in his hand, and at the pump a skinny-legged girl, her arm high on the motionless pump handle as the water shrivels to a trickle—all watching the speeding per-



Fires, like this one near Merigold, Miss., symbolize the flight of Negroes to the North: When a sharecropper goes, his shack is often burned.

simmon-and-brown cars with the big picture windows bearing dry, warm people holding passports.

The passport is a yellow ticket one-and-a-half-inches long that reads, "Illinois Central R.R. Co., coach ticket, Durant, Miss., to CHICAGO, ILL. Good in coaches only, for one passage. . . ." It costs \$23.65 for adults, \$11.83 for young children, and for the people who got on in Durant with a typical family, if they earned average Negro wages, it took every cent they earned for six weeks. To collect that much money, when food is scarce, and to decide to migrate is a decision that has torn millions of families in this generation.

Alice Perkins took that other mode of the Underground Railroad—the bus. On a Wednesday before the Christmas holidays, Harry Perkins got a letter from Alice in Chicago. He had to quit school in the fifth grade and can't read (Alice went through ninth grade), so he paid a neighbor 50 cents to drive him the two miles to his mother-in-law's house where she read the letter. Tickets for him and the two older children were inside. The next day the children turned in their school books. Saturday morning Harry went to work as usual. That night he got his week's pay, \$36 minus \$10 taken out toward his debts. By now it was dark. He walked home, pulled out a footlocker he had quietly bought in Clarksdale for \$7.95 two weeks ago, put in two bedspreads, one quilt, two sheets, three pairs of pants, two shirts and three hats for the children. He paid the neighbor 50 cents again to drive him and the children to his mother-in-law's, where her son drove them to the 9:30 night bus from Clarksdale.

The children had never been to Clarksdale (population, 21,000), and when they saw it Harry Jr., 6, said, "Daddy, is this Chicago?"

On the bus was a man named Willie, brother of a friend, returning after a visit. Willie lived in Chicago and worked in a barrel factory where he thought there was an opening. Three days later Harry Perkins was stacking steel rings for \$1.55 an hour, and three days after that he was running an auto-

matic welder. He now makes \$2.00 an hour with six or seven hours' overtime for about \$100 a week.

Harry Perkins is a boyish, handsome, open-faced man who can't read but knows letters and remembers street signs and bus routes. At Christmas time he used the holiday tape to make letters on the wall over the double bed where he and his wife and their new infant sleep: ALICE.

Both of them insist on an unrelieved list of advantages Chicago has over their old life: Now they eat together at the same table because they have enough dinner plates; they have milk and fresh fruits and meats they never ate before; instead of a cold-water tub and washboard she gets the week's laundry delivered for \$9; the school doctor and dentist examine their children regularly; instead of paying a neighbor \$1 to take them shopping she can walk to a local market or take the rapid transit for 30 cents downtown; there the children often stayed out of school for lack of clothes but never here; down there Christmas meant at best a piece of simple clothing for each child, but here they have turkey and fur-lined jackets and guitars for the children.

"Look," Harry Perkins said as he sat in his tiny blue-and-pink kitchen, "for the first time in my life I own an innerspring mattress, three of them, a gas oven, a dinette, a TV, a stereo set. They treat me like a grown man. Down there the police killed colored men, two I knew just in the last couple of years we were there."

Alice Perkins shook her head slowly. "There ain't nothing I miss down there."

He nodded, "That goes for me."

Did that mean they would be happy to continue just as they are?

Alice Perkins looked surprised and said, "No, of course not."

And then she and her husband began a new recital that told the story of why families who move hopefully into the big cities then turn bitter and apathetic. Compared to the desperate poverty and endemic violence of the rural South, the city is obviously better in pay, in

food, in material goods. But as the years go by, it becomes plain that the city makes demands the family never before had to meet: more education to get ahead, better clothes to enter the better world, participation in the vague and remote territory outside the ghetto in order to succeed. Food and a tight roof are no longer the focus of life. Simple survival is no longer enough; they must meet the requirements of high-speed urban life. Typically, the families enter eager and striving and then in three or four years get stalled. The Perkinses were still ambitious.

Now, the children want a bicycle, a piano, some new clothes like the ones they see on TV in *American Bandstand*. Harry Perkins would like to get a car. Mrs. Perkins has fallen in love with sectional couches. But she then described what they want more than anything else. With her husband's solemn nod of approval, she said softly, "A better house with no rats, in a better neighborhood, you know, some space for the kids to play in their own yard, with some grass in the back and in the front."

A nice house in a nice neighborhood is the conventional American family dream, but it has a special meaning in the ghetto, where most families are enclosed in a triple prison. The first is their own home. Slum-tenement doors are locked. The knock is answered, if at all, by a voice, "Who's there? What you want?" Unless the voice is familiar and the message safe, that may be the last communication from the other side. Young children are forbidden to go out alone, and hundreds of thousands of them spend all their time, except for a few hours a week, locked inside their rooms, often with the harshest discipline to quell their restlessness. Only when they go to school is there freedom. When the three Perkins schoolchildren go, they run like rabbits released from cages. The fear is real, for outside there is the second prison: the neighborhood.

The range of movement of most slum dwellers is measured in yards and, at most, a few blocks. The density is enormous, the possibilities for play

and relaxation almost nil. A 50-by-100-foot playground operated by the Marillac settlement house near the Perkinses' flat is the only one available to 4,000 children. One result of this merciless compaction is the teen-age gang, which follows a territorial imperative that includes murder of teen-agers who intrude from other neighborhoods. For all of them are trapped in the larger prison, the ghetto itself.

In Chicago the ghetto is divided in two territories, the West Side, with more than 300,000 Negroes, and the South Side, with more than 600,000. Each is a vast black island surrounded by whites. In 1950 there were only 500,000 Negroes in the city, in about five smaller islands interspersed among white neighborhoods. But now the spaces between the islands have been abandoned by whites who moved to the suburbs. So now the West Side is almost 9 square miles of black territory, the South Side, 30 square miles. On the South Side there remain a few white ethnic neighborhoods, resentful and belligerent, and some middle- and even upper-income blocks. But the mass is black and poor, the former rows of white homes partitioned and bringing in as much as 200 per cent of their old rents. In 1950 it was possible in any given ghetto to walk five blocks to a white neighborhood; now on the South Side a man can walk ten miles almost in a straight line, and never pass a home occupied by whites.

Inside the ghetto the schools are wretched, the unemployment rate three times the outside rate, the municipal services minimal, the landscape demoralizing. The uneducated parents get stalled in their climb up the work ladder, trapped in their ghetto. They produce new generations of the defeated.

So Alice Perkins, her large brown eyes longing, says, "I want a house of my own. Out in the suburbs. Like Maywood. A friend of mine drove me out there once and, oh, I want to move to a place like Maywood."

Maywood is about nine miles out on the expressway that goes by the Perkinses' flat, an "industrial suburb" in the metropolitan sprawl. It has its own character, a pleasant place of 27,000 working-class people with small one-family houses with small lawns front and back, children on swings in the yard or skipping rope on the side walks. There are 5,000 Negroes in Maywood, and they average \$1,500 a year more than Negroes in the central city.

What are the odds of the Perkinses, or any ghetto family, making it out to a Maywood? About 1-in-11. In 1960 Chicago had 813,000 Negroes in its central city, the ghetto, and only 77,000 in the suburbs. In 1950 the ratio was about the same.

III

Elijah is a child of migrants, a child of the ghetto. He is Negro, thin, 126 pounds, five-foot-four, narrow-headed with slicked-down black hair, and he walks slightly stooped. If you didn't look closely you wouldn't pay attention to him in a group of six. But he is now 18, and has shot a few people. He has been involved in more burglaries and robberies than is wise to recall, and has had two personal friends murdered and countless others badly wounded. He

has recently emerged from jail, where he was sent for shooting another boy in the stomach.

Elijah isn't his real name, though he insisted that his real name be used.

"Lister, I want people to understand, I want people to believe that these things happen, really, man, not just to a few oddballs but every kid I knew, every kid I grew up with on the South Side of Chicago. I don't mean they all went to jail. Two kids I knew well got killed. But some never went to jail, even. But this is what they grew up with. I want to help my people, and I want other people to know what's going on."

But it would be unfair to him, to his family and to his pregnant girlfriend to use real names. They are all struggling to repair their lives.

His parents came from Mississippi in 1952, but his mother came briefly to Chicago in 1949 for Elijah to be born. So since the age of three he has been in the ghetto. His training ground has been the tenement and the massive public-housing project.

The tenements are typified by one building in the ghetto, a grimy red-brick three-story place with three carved granite archways that tell you this was once a respectable neighborhood. Today there are 18 families in the building, and except for one that arrived last year from Texas, all have been in Chicago seven years or more. There are large signs all over the outside of the building, ordering trash to be thrown in barrels. Under the signs are glaciers and foothills of garbage that harbor huge rats. The children play among them with easy familiarity. (Landlords, by law, are required to provide private trash collections, but few of them ever bother; if an intense campaign by tenants and the settlement houses puts pressure on them, some will bribe city trash crews to collect the accumulation.) The tenement hallways are uriferous, the walls covered with badly spelled obscenities ("thomas muther is a hoe"). In one corridor there is loose garbage, some feces in a corner and a raw egg broken on the floor. Out of one flat come two children less than four years old, one wearing only a dirty diaper, the other only a tiny T-shirt. Behind them comes a very old woman flailing at them with a leather strap. The children laugh and run down the corridor, one stepping in the egg, the other in the feces.

Ten of the 18 families are on welfare. Only five of the 18 families have a man as head of the household. There are 123 human beings who live in the old wreck of a building, of whom 98 are dependent children, 73 of them without a father at home. Eight of the households, despite great poverty, illness and other difficulties, have a tidy flat and a complete family. The landlord is considered better than average; the building has a market value of \$25,000, and his gross rents are \$24,000 a year.

Elijah spent the first part of his life growing up in such a building, and the rest in the other kind of ghetto dwelling, the large public-housing project. For most tenement residents, the project is a highly desired escape from what they have. Rents are lower—in Chicago they run from \$40 to \$90 a month

for modern, well-equipped flats, with space enough to avoid having children of different sexes sleeping in the same beds and the same rooms. There are no rats. So just as the old tenements are better than the leaky three-room shacks of the South, "the projects" are deliverance from the chaos and squalor of the tenements. But after a few years in the projects their tenants begin to suffer their drawbacks, and many pray harder than ever for deliverance to the suburbs, or any place that is clean and airy and not packed with an incredible density of human beings.

Cities like Chicago turned to high-rise projects to house as many families as cheaply as possible as quickly as possible and, in many cases, to keep Negroes within the bounds of the ghetto. On a strip of land two blocks wide and less than four miles long, the Chicago Public Housing Authority built 65 buildings, 38 of them 16 stories or higher. In these buildings, in less than half a square mile, live 42,800 people. Little was done in surrounding areas to provide for the cliff-dwellers when they came out of the project. Boredom and noise are constant. In the summer the young who are still innocent wait for the event of the night—the turning on of the outside lights of the stairwells, and as each building does it a great soft wind seems to blow through the projects as thousands of watching children go, "Ah."

It is not surprising that territorial warfare and delinquency grow in such places. One wonders what would happen if a place of the same population, like Rapid City, S. Dak., instead of having its slightly more than 42,000 citizens spread over its present 16 square miles, had them all—including the sturdy, hard-working, middle-class folk—jammed into one quarter of a square mile. The people of Rapid City live 2,701 to the square mile; the project dwellers in Chicago's South Side live 170,000 to the square mile.

Elijah is the unhappy product, first of the horizontal and then of the vertical ghetto.

He is the oldest of 10 children, and he remembers that when his family came from Mississippi his father worked in the stockyards. The children kept coming, but work at the stockyards got scarcer. First there was no more lunch money, then no breakfasts. His father spent more days at home, then began to drink. When Elijah was 7, his father disappeared.

At the age of 11, Elijah joined the Cobras, a street gang that dominated his neighborhood. They fought rival gangs who intruded in their territory, or tried to date their girls, or uttered real or imagined insults. Avenging honor and protecting territory were the motivations for gang fights, the justifications for maiming and murder. Looking back and explaining it, Elijah often uses the word, "recognition."

"The poor people were the dumbest people because they didn't have any backing, they didn't push, nobody gave them any recognition. So most of us started gang fighting because of that. With the knowledge I've acquired since then it seems like I would never dream of going back to a life like that. But before I got the knowl-

edge, it seemed fine, it seemed right, it was an art. The things you did you didn't mind telling about because you were trying to get more recognition with the bunch. You would meet girls, girls you never could have otherwise, the ones who dressed nice and looked nice. When your name was mentioned, everyone's eyes and ears opened."

After he joined the gang he began skipping school, attending parties in empty flats, drinking wine, having girls, smoking marijuana. He thinks his father's absence made a difference. "When your father is there, there are things you wouldn't dare bring into the house because your father would give you a whipping. I could do lots of things I could get by with, things my father would know about because he's a man and I'm a man, stealing, drinking, girls, smoking reefers."

As he moved into his teens, Elijah became more violent. "I could see I wasn't going to become anybody. All this was hitting me at the same time as the gang fighting, and it made me even harder because I knew this, I knew I wasn't going to become anybody, and I hated the whole world then.

"I began to use the gun more frequently, and in a gang fight I'd be the first to swing, the first to shoot. I hated conditions. I hated everything. I hated people around me because they had more than I had. I hated it when the kids were supposed to go to school and only had torn or dirty pants, and after you got to school there wasn't any lunch money, and you stood outside and got laughed at, and when you got home there was hardly anything to eat there, either."

Three things made a difference in Elijah's life. He went to jail for shooting a boy and read a book whose dust jacket in the prison library caught his eye: "I Dare You to Explore the Powers of Your Mind." With the help of a prison worker he began to read and to look into his own emotions.

He got five years' probation and came out to discover that his father had returned home, dried out, and was working at a good job in construction.

And he met Jim Taylor, a Y.M.C.A. street-gang worker who lives and works with teen-agers in the tougher neighborhoods, a schoolteacher who realized he wasn't reaching his students and quit to go where they lived. With Taylor's help Elijah signed up for a Y.M.C.A. study program where he works half a day and goes to school, combining the last years of high school and the first two years of college.

This will take until 1971. His work during that time will be with street gangs. "You've got to have something for these kids to do," Elijah said. "You've got to have someone who cares about them. Not just spending a few hours like most schoolteachers and then, zip, out of the neighborhood. But really caring, man.

"And you need new prizes, new rewards. Now it's the kid who fights the hardest, drinks the most, has the most girls, kills best. I'd like to make the big man, the one who's top of his class, and give him a special prize, a real good prize that would make people open up their eyes and ears. It would help. I know it would."

Elijah speaks with a combination of

the soft Mississippi accent of his parents and the hip talk of the ghetto. He has studied and thought a great deal lately about the Negro American in the ghetto.

"When the Negro is born in the South, he grows up with hatred for the white man, but in the South they kill him if he shows it. So he comes to Chicago, and he lives here on the South Side, and he takes out his hatred on other Negroes. You get born with hatred because you see the white man in his Cadillac, and you see your father walking. The hate is in you, and when someone attacks you, the hate is going to come out, no matter if it comes out against your own people."

Elijah and his fellow migrants are mysteries. In the face of endless defeat, first on the farms and now in the ghetto, they have recurring hope. It is often expressed in riots and demonstrations, but it is there. The newest arrivals continue to work hard at the lowest pay in the expectation that it will lead to something better. The history books claim that the American genius has been to collect ethnic minorities at the bottom and then let them disperse up through the surrounding society. But the American Negro continues to be more densely packed, more hemmed in, and more confined to the bottom than any other migrant minority. And yet he continues to hope.

Elijah had been standing at a window through which I could hear the level roar of boisterous children, their sounds echoing between the 16-story buildings. He turned around, his brow wrinkled with concentration, and said with passion:

"The thing is that you grow up and, you know, you know, man . . ." He paused and said slowly and quietly, "No-body cares! Mothers are screaming at babies, there's no father, teachers are screaming at the students, and when the bell rings they leave the building before the kids do. And when you're dropping out of school, you know very well that they're really glad to see you go. You're glad to go, too, but you remember afterward that they were glad to see you go."

Elijah sat down, and after a time he spoke again.

"Nobody cares. Nobody. That's what you grow up with. The people on the outside, they have their own immediate problems, so they got no time for our problems. The ones here who get anywhere, they don't care about anybody else once they get up on their pedestal. They look down on their own people, and they say, 'They're fools' and then go on about their business."

And then the incredible hope and resilience:

"My kids, someday, are going to finish school—a good school. They're going to have a set of goals, to think ahead, to make sense. But most of all, they got to have environment."

Environment?

"Live in a good house in a nice neighborhood with a real school. Out of . . ." and he pointed out the window to the tenements, the projects, the street with the squeal of the police siren receding. "Out of here. Period." □