Black Workers and the City

By CHARLES S. JOHNSON

From bayou and island and Southern hamlet they have come—the black masses, beckoned by that "new Statue of Liberty on the landward side of New York." What strain and stress of adjustment have they met? What have they found to do in the shifting life of the city? What handicaps reappear? What new opportunities have they won?

THE glamorous city is draining the open spaces; it draws upon the human opulence of Europe; it threatens now to drain the black belt of the South. It makes no difference that New York is fast becoming unlivable, a "great shop in which people barter and sell, get rich quick and die early" —there are millions of others eager to offer themselves. The dull monotony of rural life, the high wages, the gaiety, the unoppressive anonymity, the prestige of the city with its crowds and exitement set in motion years ago a trek to New York which knew no color line. How has the Negro fared in this drift to the city?

It is a strange fact that in the cities of the North, the native born Negro population, as if in biological revolt against its environment, barely perpetuates itself. For whatever reason, there is lacking that lusty vigor of increase which has nearly trebled the Negro population as a whole. Within the past sixty years the natural increase of this old Northern stock —apart from migrations—has been negligible. And its status has been shifting. Time was when that small cluster of descendants of the benevolent old Dutch masters and of the free Negroes moved with freedom and complacent importance about the intimate fringe of the city's active life. These Negroes were the barbers, caterers, bakers, restauranteurs, coachmen—all highly elaborated personal service positions. The crafts permitted them wide freedom: they were skilled artisans. They owned businesses which were independent of Negro patronage. This group is passing, its splendor shorn. The rapid evolution of business, blind to the amenities on which they flourished, has devoured their establishments, unsupported and weak in capital resources; the incoming hordes of Europeans have edged them out of their inheritance of personal service businesses, clashed with them in competition for the rough muscle jobs and driven them back into the obscurity of individual personal service.

For forty years, moreover, there have been dribbling in from the South, the West Indies and South America, small increments of population which through imperceptible gradations have changed the whole complexion and outlook of the Negro New Yorker. New blood and diverse cultures these brought—and each a separate problem of assimilation. As the years passed the old migrants have "rubbed off the green," adopted the slang and sophistication of the city, mingled and married, and their children are now the native-born New Yorkers. For fifty years scattered families have been uniting in the hectic metropolis from every state in the union and every province of the West Indies. There have always been undigested colonies—the Sons and Daughters of North Carolina, the Virginia Society, the Southern Beneficial League—these are survivals of self-conscious, intimate bodies. But the mass is in the melting pot of the city.

There were in New York City in 1920, by the census count, 152,467 Negroes. Of these 39,233 are reported as born in New York State, 30,436 in foreign countries, principally the West Indies, and 78,242 in other states, principally the South. Since 1920 about 50,000 more Southerners have been added to the population, bulging the narrow strip of Harlem in which it had lived and spilling over the old boundaries. There are no less than 25,000 Virginians in New York City, more than 20,000 North and South Carolinians, and 10,000 Georgians. Every Southern state has contributed its quota to a heterogenity which matches that of cosmopolitan New York. If the present Negro New Yorker were analyzed he would be found to be composed of one part native, one part West Indian and about three parts Southern. If the tests of the army psychologists could work with the precision and certainty with which they are accredited, the Negroes who make up the present population of New York City would be declared to represent different races, for the differences between South and North by actual measurement are greater than the differences between whites and Negroes.

II

THE city creates its own types. The Jew, for example, is by every aptitude and economic attachment a city dweller. Modern students of human behavior are discovering in his neurotic constitution, now assumed as a clearly recognizable racial characteristic, a definite connection not only with the emotional strain of peculiar racial status but also with the terrific pressure of city life.

The Negro by tradition, and probably by temperament, represents the exact contrast. His metier is agriculture. To this economy his mental and social habits have been adjusted. No elaborate equipment is necessary for the work of the farm. Life is organized on a simple plan looking to a minimum of wants and a rigid economy of means. The incomplex gestures of unskilled manual labor and even domestic service; the broad, dully sensitive touch of body and hands trained to groom and nurse the soil, develop distinctive physical habits and a musculature appropriate to simple processes. Add to this groundwork of occupational habits the social structure in which the Southern rural Negro is cast, his inhibitions, repressions and cultural poverty, and the present city Negro becomes more intelligible. It is a motley group which is now in the ascendency in the city. The picturesqueness of the South, the memory of pain, the warped lives, the ghostly shadows of fear, crudeness, ignorance and

unsophistication, are laid upon the surface of the city in a curious pattern.

The students of human behavior who with such quick comprehension attribute the nervousness of the Jew and the growing nervous disorders of city dwellers in general to the tension of city life overlook the play of tremendous factors in the life of the Negroes who are transplanted from one culture to another.

The city Negro is only now in evolution. In the change old moorings have been abandoned, personal relations, in which "individuals are in contact at practically all points of their lives" are replaced by group relations "in which they are in contact at only one or two points of their lives." The old controls no longer operate. Whether it is apparent or not, the newcomers are forced to reorganize their lives—to enter a new status and adjust to it that eager restlessness which prompted them to leave home. It is not inconceivable that the conduct of these individuals which seems so strange and at times so primitive and reckless, is the result of just this disorientation. And the conduct so often construed as unbearable arrogance is definitely nothing more than a compensation for the lack of self-respect, which fate through the medium of the social system of the South has denied them. The naive reaction of a migrant, as expressed in a letter to his friend in the South, illustrates the point:

> Dear Partner: . . . I am all fixed now and living well. I don't have to work hard. Don't have to mister every little boy comes along. I haven't heard a white man call a colored a nigger you know how—since I been here. I can ride in the street or steam car anywhere I get a seat. I don't care to mix with white what I mean I am not crazy about being with white folks, but if I have to pay the same fare I have learn to want the same acomidation and if you are first in a place here shoping you don't have to wait till all the white folks get thro tradeing yet amid all this I love the good old south and am praying that God may give every well wisher a chance to be a man regardless of his color. . . .

If the Negroes in Harlem show at times less courtesy toward white visitors than is required by the canons of good taste, this is bad, but understandable. It was remarked shortly after the first migration that the newcomers on boarding street cars invariably strode to the front even if there were seats in the rear. This is, perhaps, a mild example of tendencies expressed more strikingly in other directions, for with but few exceptions they are forced to sit in the rear of street cars throughout the South.

The dislocation shows itself in other ways. In the South one dominant agency of social control is the church. It is the center for "face-to-face" relations. The pastor is the leader. The role of the pastor and the social utility of the church are obvious in this letter sent home:

> Dear pastor: I find it my duty to write you my whereabouts, also family. . . . I shall send my church money in a few days. I am trying to influence our members here to do the same. I received notice printed in a R. R. car (Get right with God) O, I had nothing so striking as the above mottoe. Let me no how is our church I am so anxious to no. My wife always talking about her seat in the church want to no who occupying it. Yours in Christ.

Religion affords an outlet for the emotional energies thwarted in other directions. The psychologists will find rich material for speculation on the emotional nature of some of the Negroes set into the New York pattern in this confession:

> I got here in time to attend one of the greatest revivals in the history of my life—over 500 people join the church. We had a Holy Ghost shower. You know I like to have run wild.

In the new environment there are many and varied substitutes which answer more or less directly the myriad desires indiscriminately comprehended by the church. The complaint of the ministers that these "emancipated" souls "stray away from God" when they reach the city is perhaps warranted on the basis of the fixed status of the church in the South, but it is not an accurate interpretation of what has happened. When the old ties are broken new satisfactions are sought. Sometimes the Young Mens' Christian Association functions. This has in some cities made rivalry between the churches and the Associations. More often the demands of the young exceed the "sterilized" amusements of Christian organizations. It is not uncommon to find groups who faithfully attend church Sunday evenings and as as faithfully seek further stimulation in a cabaret afterwards. Many have been helped to find themselves, no doubt, by having their old churches and pastors reappear in the new home and resume control. But too often, as with European immigrants, the family loses control over the children who become assimilated more rapidly than their parents. Tragic evidences of this appear coldly detailed in the records of delinquency.

Living in the city means more than mental adjustment. Harlem is one of the most densely peopled spots in the world. The narrow strip between 114th and 145th Streets, Fifth and Eighth Avenues, which once held 50,000 Negroes and was regarded as crowded, now pretends to accomodate nearer 150,000. Some of the consequences of this painful overcrowding are presented in other pages of this number. Not the least important is its effect on health. The physical environment of the city registered a disconcerting toll in deaths and disease until the social agencies forsook the old dogma of the racial scientists that the physical constitution of the Negro was inherently weak, and set about controlling it. Notable advances have been made, but the glamor of the city still casts grim shadows.

III

CITIES have personalities. Their chief industries are likely to determine not only respective characters, but the type of persons they attract and hold. Detroit manufactures automobiles, Chicago slaughters cattle, Pittsburgh smelts iron and steel—these three communities draw different types of workers whose industrial habits are interlaced with correspondingly different cultural backgrounds. One might look to this factor as having significance in the selection of Negro workers and indeed in the relations of the Negro population with the community. The technical intricacy of the automobile industry, like the army intelligence tests, sifts out the heavy-handed worker who fits admirably into the economy of the steel industries where 80 per cent of the operations are unskilled. A temperamental equipment easily adapted to the knife-play and stench of killing and preserving cattle is not readily interchangeable either with the elaborated technique of the factory or the sheer muscle play and endurance required by the mill. These communities draw different types of workers. Perhaps to these subtle shades of difference may be attributed—at least in part—this fact: Chicago's industries drew from the current of northward migration a Negro increase of 154 per cent and out of the consequent fermentation grew a race riot

which took a terrific toll in life and property. Detroit's industries, just a short space removed, drew an increase of 611.3 per cent, and nothing has happened to break the rhythm of working and living relations. Moreover, in both cities the Negro population by the increase became precisely 4.1 per cent of the whole.

Similar differences between cities account for the curiously varied types of Negroes who manage to maintain themselves in New York. They defy racial classification. The Negro worker can no more become a fixed racial concept than can the white worker. Conceived in terms either of capacity or opportunity, the employment of Negroes gives rise to the most perplexing paradoxes. If it is a question of what a Negro is mentally and physically able to do, there are as many affirmations of competence as denials of it. Employers disagree. Some find Negroes equal to whites, some find them slow and stodgy; some regard them as temperamental and "snippy," some find them genial and loyal. What has not been taken into account is the difference between the Negro groups already referred to and between the stages of their orientation.

The Negro worker facing a job confronts the cankered traditions of centuries built upon racial dogma, founded upon beliefs long upset. Racial orthodoxy seems to demand that the respective status of the white and Negro races be maintained as nearly intact as the interests of industry will permit. Study the distribution of Negro workers in New York City: they are by all odds the most available class for personal service positions—"blind alley" jobs which lead to nothing beyond the merit of long and faithful service. They are the porters, waiters, messengers, elevator tenders, chauffeurs and janitors. In these jobs 24,528 Negro men, by the last census count, found employment. And this number represented nearly half of all the Negro men at work in New York. The work is not difficult, the pay is fair and in lieu of anything better they drift into it. On the other hand employers know that with the normal outlets blocked for superior Negro workers, the chances favor their getting better Negro workers than white for the wages paid. None of the Horatio Alger ascensions from messenger to manager or from porter to president need be counted into the labor turnover where Negroes are concerned. Once a porter, barring the phenomenal, always a porter.

We might take another aspect of this economic picture: Negro workers, it will be found, are freely employed in certain jobs requiring strength and bodily agility, but little skill. A good example of this is longshore work. This is irregular and fitful, combining long periods of rest with sudden and sustained physical exertion. Employment of this type also leads nowhere but to worn bodies and retirement to less arduous tasks. The largest single group of Negro workers are longshoremen. There were 5,387 in 1920: 14 per cent of all the longshoremen in the city and 9 per cent of all the Negro men at work.

Negro women are freely employed as laundresses and servants. Though they are in fierce competition with the women of other races, 24,438 or 60 per cent of all the Negro women working in New York are either laundresses or servants.

In work requiring a period of apprenticeship Negroes are rarely employed. This limits the skilled workers and the number of Negroes eligible on this basis for membership in certain trade unions. There were only 56 Negro apprentices in the 9,561 counted in the census of 1920.

In work requiring contact with the public in the capacity of salesman or representative, Negroes are infrequently employed (if they are known to be Negroes) except in Negro businesses.

In work requiring supervision over white workers they are rarely employed, though there are a few striking exceptions.

In skilled work requiring membership in unions they are employed only in small numbers, and membership is rarely encouraged unless the union is threatened. Since the apprentice-recruits for these jobs are discouraged, and the numbers sparse, the safety of the union is rarely threatened by an unorganized Negro minority. In certain responsible skilled positions, such as locomotive engineers, street car and subway motormen, Negroes are never employed.

The distinctions are irrational. A Negro worker may not be a street or subway conductor because of the possibility of public objection to contact—but he may be a ticket chopper. He may not be a money changer in a subway station because honesty is required—yet he may be entrusted, as a messenger, with thousands of dollars daily. He may not sell goods over a counter—but he may deliver the goods after they have been sold. He may be a porter in charge of a sleeping car without a conductor, but never a conductor; he may be a policeman but not a fireman; a linotyper, but not a motion picture operator; a glass annealer, but not a glass blower; a deck hand, but not a sailor. The list could be continued indefinitely.

For those who might think, however, that this reflects the range of the Negroes' industrial capacity, it is recorded that of 321 specific occupations in New York City listed in the 1920 Census, there were one or more Negroes in 316 of them. In 175 of these occupations over 50 Negroes were employed. This wide range of employment is one of the surface indications of a deeper revolution. The sudden thinning out of recruits for the bottom places in industry following the declaration of war and the restricted immigration of South European laborers, has broken during the past ten years many of the traditions which held the Negro workers with their faces to the wall. New positions in industry have been opened up and gradually Negro men, at least, are abandoning personal service for the greater pay of industrial work.

This can be illustrated by a few significant increases. Shortly after labor unions became active throughout the country Negro artisans threatened to disappear. In 1910 there were but 268 Negro carpenters in New York City. But in 1920 in New York the number had increased to 737. Chauffeurs who numbered 490 in 1910 were 2,195 in 1920. Ten years ago there were no known clothing workers, but now there are over 6,000. The same applies to workers in textile industries who numbered at the last count 2,685. Electricians, machinists and musicians have increased over a hundred per cent. The number of shoemakers jumped from 14 to 581, stationery firemen from 249 to 1,076, mechanics from practically none to 462 and real estate agents from 89 to 247.

One feels tempted to inquire of the "workers' friend," the unions, why those trades in which these unions are well organized have not shown equivalent increases in Negro workers. Ten years added but 18 brick masons, 81 painters, 16 plasterers and 42 plumbers.

The number of elevator (*Continued on page* 718)

The South Lingers On

By RUDOLPH FISHER

Photograph by Lewis W. Hine

EZEKIEL TAYLOR, preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, walked slowly along One Hundred and Thirty-Third Street, conspicuously alien. He was little and old and bent. A short, bushy white beard framed his shiny black face and his tieless celluloid collar. A long, greasy, green-black Prince Albert, with lapels frayed and buttons worn through to their metal hung loosely from his shoulders. His trousers were big and baggy and limp, yet not enough so to hide the dejected bend of his knees.

A little boy noted the beard and gibed, "Hey, Santa Claus! 'Tain't Chris'mas yet!" And the little boy's playmates chorused, "Haw, haw! Lookit the colored Santa Claus!"

"For of such is the kingdom of heaven," mused Ezekiel Taylor. No. The kingdom of Harlem. Children turned into mockers. Satan in the hearts of infants. Harlem—city of the devil—outpost of hell.

Darkness settled, like the gloom in the old preacher's heart; darkness an hour late, for these sinners even tinkered with God's time, substituting their "daylight-saving." Wicked, yes. But sad too, as though they were desperately warding off the inescapable night of sorrow in which they must suffer for their sins. Harlem. What a field! What numberless souls to save!—These very taunting children who knew not even the simplest of the commandments—

But he was old and alone and defeated. The world had called to his best. It had offered money, and they had gone; first the young men whom he had fathered, whom he had brought up from infancy in his little Southern church; then their wives and children, whom they eventually sent for; and finally their parents, loath to leave their shepherd and their dear, decrepit shacks, but dependent and without choice.

"Whyn't y' come to New York?" old Deacon Gassoway had insisted. "Martin and Eli and Jim Lee and his fambly's all up da' now an' doin' fine. We'll all git together an' start a chu'ch of our own, an' you'll still be pastor an' it'll be jes' same as 'twas hyeh." Full of that hope, he had come. But where were they? He had captained his little ship till it sank; he had clung to a splint and been tossed ashore; but the shore was cold, gray, hard and rock-strewn.

He had been in barren places before but God had been there too. Was Harlem then past hope? Was the connection between this place and heaven broken, so that the servant of God went hungry while little children ridiculed? Into his mind, like a reply, crept an old familiar hymn, and he found himself humming it softly:

The Lord will provide,
The Lord will provide,
In some way or 'nother,
The Lord will provide.
It may not be in your way,
It may not be in mine,
But yet in His own way
The Lord will provide.

Then suddenly, astonished, he stopped, listening. He had not been singing alone—a chorus of voices somewhere near had caught up his hymn. Its volume was gradually increasing. He looked about for a church. There was none. He covered his deaf ear so that it might not handicap his good one. The song seemed to issue from one of the private houses a little way down the street.

He approached with eager apprehension and stood wonderingly before a long flight of brownstone steps leading to an open entrance. The high first floor of the house, that to which the steps led, was brightly lighted, and the three front windows had their panes covered with colored tissue-paper designed to resemble church windows. Strongly, cheeringly the song came out to the listener:

The Lord will provide,
The Lord will provide,
In some way or 'nother,
The Lord will provide.

Ezekiel Taylor hesitated an incredulous moment, then smiling, he mounted the steps and went in.

The Reverend Shackleton Ealey had been inspired to preach the gospel by the draft laws of 1917. He remained in the profession not out of gratitude to its having kept him out of war, but because he found it a far less precarious mode of living than that devoted to poker, black-jack and dice. He was stocky and flat-faced and yellow, with many black freckles and the eyes of a dogfish. And he was clever enough not to conceal his origin, but to make capital out of his conversion from gambler to preacher and to confine himself to those less enlightened groups that thoroughly believed in the possibility of so sudden and complete a transformation.

The inflow of rural folk from the South was therefore