

UNIVERSITY TIMES

Serving Faculty & Staff Since 1968

VOLUME 56
ISSUE 20: JUNE 4, 2024

History professor's website focuses on Black migration to Pittsburgh

Tuesday, June 4, 2024

By **MARTY LEVINE**

A new website from a Pitt-Greensburg history professor presents a trove of original voices from the beginning of Pittsburgh's experience of the Great Migration — the early 20th century movement of Black Americans from the rural South to industrial Northern cities, which doubled Pittsburgh's Black population from 1915 to 1930.

For the website, migrantvoices.pitt.edu, Adam Lee Cilli has brought together many primary sources — contemporaneous letters from migrants, oral histories recorded later in their lives and those of their neighbors, plus research studies and newspaper articles from the 1910s to '30s about migrant conditions and experiences.



Adam Cilli

Cilli's own focus is on the influence of social movements on American democracy, but he also has a particular interest in Pittsburgh, since his father was a steelworker and Cilli grew up here. He has always been interested in racial justice issues and "in how class dynamics played out," he says.

He recently received a \$6,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a book examining efforts in Black communities to develop crime reduction programs and reform urban criminal justice systems during the Great Migration.

His research has led him to work with these oral histories for the past decade, for instance, and to help get some of them digitized and transcribed so that they are searchable. It also led him to include materials on the website about the relationship

between Southern migrants and Pittsburgh's Black civic reformers, as well as the relationships among older and newer Black migrants to the city, which were sometimes based on class and sometimes ignored large political differences.

"There were unique kinds of relationships that were made during this period," Cilli says, including a lot of racial solidarity but also intra-racial conflict. The reformers, in their civic groups such as the local NAACP and Urban League, "left behind a lot of rich records. But the migrants left a challenge": Where were their voices directly available?

"Oral history has proven to be a powerful way to give a voice to people who previously did not have a voice," Cilli says.

Listening to the hours of voices from this past, when Pittsburgh was still very segregated and Black residents' prospects for jobs and housing were limited, Cilli says that he "expected the participants to talk about how terrible racism was in the early 20th century, not just racial prejudice but ethnic prejudice" against the poor whites with whom Blacks shared the Hill District, for instance. But that wasn't the case. "Human memory is a flawed thing," he says. "I think that when decades pass some of the anger passes too." In fact there is even a certain nostalgia for the past, among the speakers.

The website brings together three different oral history collections in one spot: Interviews from the 1970s of 53 Black residents of Pittsburgh from the earliest parts of the 20th century (some done by a Pitt Ph.D. student and some housed in the Pitt archive). Many of these interviews were excerpted in a pair of books, but the tapes themselves were neither widely known nor heard for decades.

Cilli's Migrant Voices website also brings together a 1922 article that was published in many Black weeklies urging Black migrants to choose Pittsburgh for its job opportunities. Written by Pittsburgh's Urban League head, John T. Clark, the article received many letters from hopeful migrants asking for specifics, such as pay and working conditions, and offering details of their own current lives. About 20 of them, brief but poignant, are reproduced.

"One of the interesting features about the letters," Cilli says, is that "in particular, they speak to the agency of the migrants. It's very easy to classify migrants as if they were blown about by outside forces beyond their control — Jim Crow, boll weevils, job agents visiting" to lure them northward. "What those letters do is they demonstrate ... migrants are using strategies, calculated decisions" about when and where they are going to end up, and why.

Cilli hopes that the website will be used "by a broad swath of people, not just historians — anyone who is interested in the history of Black Pittsburgh in the early 20th century, someone who is interested in the Great Migration."

He kept the website concept simple, he said, "so that the content can speak for itself. My idea is that the kinds of content that I had to hunt for, particularly in lots of different depositories, will be right there."

Although he plans to add more oral history transcriptions so that they are all eventually searchable, these materials will remain surrounded by just enough introductory information to put them in context: "I wanted the history to speak for itself. I wanted the (material) to shine the most and I thought they would shine the most by getting out of the way."

Marty Levine is a staff writer for the University Times. Reach him at martyl@pitt.edu or 412-758-4859.

Have a story idea or news to share? Share it with the University Times.

Follow the University Times on Twitter and Facebook.

UNIVERSITY TIMES
Serving Faculty & Staff Since 1968

University of Pittsburgh
Craig Hall, fourth floor
200 S. Craig St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

412-648-4294
utimes@pitt.edu

Archive

Volume 55-50
Volumes 49-27

Email Subscription

Name

Email*

SUBSCRIBE

Revised 06/13/25 Copyright 2025 Site by University Communications [Send feedback about this site](#)