

After Fleeing Segregation and Lack of Opportunity Blacks Migrate From Northern Cities To Southland

EDITOR'S NOTE - Call it black flight, a reverse migration. From people like Barba Henderson, who fried hamburgers in Chicago to escape picking cotton in Mississippi, to actor Morgan Freeman, who became famous by "Driving Miss Daisy," blacks by the thousands are fleeing the cities of the North and coming home to a Southland no longer so hostile.

By David L. Langford
 TCHULA, Miss. (AP) - Up in the kudzu-covered hills a few miles east of this flat and dusty Delta town, where cotton lint from last fall's harvest still clings to the side of the road, Bennie and Hilda Rayford have started a new life in the homeland they once rejected.

Teachers who fled Mississippi's segregated schools of the 1950s, the Rayfords spent more than 30 years educating black and white kids in Toledo, Ohio. Now they're back in the South, along with their three married daughters who grew up in Ohio.

In the jargon of demographers, the Rayfords are "returnees," part of a reverse migration of thousands of blacks who are returning to the South to escape the angst of urban life in the North, the black-on-black crime and violence decried by the Rev.

Jesse Jackson and other black leaders and which President Clinton recently called the "great crises of the spirit that is gripping America today." "I left because I didn't want to become a statistic," says soft-spoken Hilda Rayford, who taught remedial reading to second-graders in Toledo. "Even at the elementary level the children had begun to bring guns into school. The week I retired a girl was stabbed in the sixth grade and a second-grader was sitting in my class with a gun." John Cromartie, a geographer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, cites census figures showing that of the 2.5 million blacks who moved from one state to another between 1985 and 1990 (the latest figures available), 730,000 moved to the South, continuing a trend that first became noticeable in the mid-1970s.

The numbers bring a gleam to the eye of Billy Ellis, a banker and big-game hunter proud of his credentials as a son of the Confederacy. Pictures of his great-grandfather who carried a Rebel flag in Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg share space on his office walls with the heads of 16 species of exotic animals he felled with a bow and arrow. A stuffed musk ox slain in a blinding blizzard above the Arctic Circle in Alaska claims a good chunk of the room.

Insurance

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"We're a farm organization," he said. "That's kind of been our niche all along." The Insurance Department says Farm Bureau's insurance operations are "substantial and growing" in the St. Louis suburbs and other urban areas.

Last year, state Insurance Director Jay Angoff ordered department examiners to look closely for discrimination at insurance companies offering homeowners coverage.

He acted after a department study showed disparities in the price and availability of insurance between poor black and poor white neighborhoods in St. Louis and Kansas City.

The Insurance Department found that poor blacks in St. Louis paid 31 percent more for homeowners insurance than poor whites, even though whites had slightly higher claims.

In legal papers, Farm Bureau turned the tables on the Insurance Department, claiming that the department is discriminating against rural Missourians.

The Farm Bureau says its own rural customers are often shunned by other insurers because their homes are small and far from fire stations. While pushing insurers into St. Louis, the department is ignoring country people, Farm Bureau charged.

The Insurance Department also accused Farm Bureau of discriminating against customers in Kansas City. Notes in one Farm Bureau file showed a homeowner's policy was canceled because the house was "on the border of Little Italy. One block inside a bad area."

As chairman of the Holmes County Bank, founded by the grandfather he calls "Big Daddy," Ellis is a booster of the returnees. And of the business they bring.

"Some of our finest customers have been people coming back from working on the assembly lines up North since the mechanical cotton picker displaced them years ago," says Ellis, whose wife, the debutante daughter of a Delta planter, started the first integrated day care center in Holmes County. "They have good retirement benefits and savings accounts and are responsible members of the community." Ellis singles out people like Barbara Henderson, the divorced mother of sons ages 11 and 20, who became the first black person of either gender to open a business on the town square in Lexington, the Holmes County seat.

Raised in a family of 12, Ms. Henderson picked cotton as a young girl in Tchula but as a teenager went off to take a job at a Burger King in Chicago, eventually becoming a buyer for a department store. She and her ex-husband, a fellow Mississippian who worked as an arc welder, saved their money and in 1981 moved back to Mississippi and bought a small grocery store in Jackson.

After the marriage broke up, Ms. Henderson opened "Barbie's Showcase," a small boutique and hair-styling shop in Lexington.

Her first hire was a ninth-grade dropout. A white girl.

Ms. Henderson says she just couldn't cope with life in Chicago's tough South Side. "It's dangerous," she says. "No place to raise a family." Not reflected in Cromartie's statistics are the younger blacks who never left the South and have no desire to do so, many holding degrees from universities their parents were not allowed to attend and who never felt the humiliation of Jim Crow segregation laws, "whites only" restrooms and drinking fountains.

Even more young people no doubt would stay in the South if there were more jobs. In Tchula (chew-lah), a poor town of 3,000 people in a poor state, most commute to work, to the catfish processing plants in Belzoni and Indianola, or the Fleetwood mobile home plant in Lexington.

"All my people want to come back," says Mrs. Fanny Booker, the 87-year-old granddaughter of a slave who says she was once fired from her job as a schoolteacher for helping blacks register to vote. "But there's nothing here for them to do, no money here." Mrs. Booker spends her waning years showing visitors through her little private museum of artifacts from the old days on the plantations.

Well, who is coming back then? Carol B. Stack, an anthropologist at the University of California-Berkeley who is writing a book on returnees in the Carolinas, says the returnees cover a broad age and economic spread and include doctors and lawyers and people who were active in community and political work in the North.

"Every home in rural North and South Carolina where I was doing my research had a cement foundation built for a trailer and they could tell you who was coming back and when," she says.

Bennie Rayford, a Navy veteran of World War II and a graduate of all-black Alcorn State, headed to Ohio in 1957, when the Great Migration to the North was in full cry. He was fired as principal of an elementary school in Quitman County, where black schools were in session only in those months that the children weren't needed to work in the cotton fields.

"We had four teachers and two school buses for 300 kids," Rayford recalls. "I finally got fired for organizing the plantation people to agitate for better school conditions. The superintendent (white) sent me a note saying: 'You're too smart a nigger. We no longer need your services.'"

Why come back? Why come back to a place like the Mississippi Delta, birthplace of the blues, the 4-H Club - and the White Citizens Council, a sort of white-collar Ku Klux Klan dedicated to preserving the "Southern Way of Life?" A generation ago, just a half-hour's drive north of Tchula at a crossroads called Money, a Chicago teen-ager named Emmett Till,

who was visiting relatives, was savagely beaten and thrown into the Tallahatchie River with a cotton gin fan tied around his neck. His offense had been to "wolf whistle" at a white woman at a country store. Two white men who admitted abducting Till were nonetheless acquitted of his murder.

Bennie Rayford, laughing, recalls the going-away party for him and his wife at a church in Toledo: "The preacher said, 'Well, the Rayfords say they're going back to Mississippi, but I don't think the good Lord will send anybody back down there!'" But the Rayfords are doing just fine in Mississippi. Since returning in 1990, Mrs. Rayford has organized a literacy program for women on welfare, beginning with a dozen elderly women who at first met under a shade tree because they had no other shelter. Her husband, active in community affairs, is vice chairman of the Holmes County Republican Party.

Mississippi underwent a metamorphosis while the Rayfords were off in Ohio, thanks to the Voting Rights Act. Here in Holmes County, blacks outnumber whites 2-to-1, and that spread is reflected in who's in office and the respect they get.

Odell Hampton Jr., for example, the son of a dirt farmer, was elected 12 years ago to the Board of Supervisors, the most powerful arm of county government, responsible for such things as road maintenance and taxes for schools and hospitals. His wife is assistant superintendent of schools in Marshal County in the northern part of the state.

Over a roadside cafe lunch of catfish and hushpuppies, the Mississippi Delta's reply to Maine's lobsters, Hampton insists he's never had trouble with racist rednecks.

"I just never had any problem," he says. "Not for five minutes. But there are some people right now who would rather die than come to me and ask me for a favor. I know there are some who refer to me behind my back as 'that nigger.'" That he can deal with, he says, much better than life in Chicago.

After two years of study at Mississippi Valley State, Hampton headed for Chicago, the destination of so many young Mississippians. He went to work as a draftsman for a boilermaking company, married a girl from Mississippi, and lived on the South Side for four years.

Why did he move back to Tchula? "The gangs," he says, without hesitation. "After my daughter was born, right across the street from where I was living a little girl got killed. I was so crazy about my baby I said I was just not going to live there."

"Let's face it. Whites aren't killing blacks. Blacks are. So I moved back here, built a home and I've been here ever since." Mississippi's most celebrated returnee is actor Morgan Freeman, an Academy Award-nominee and director who gained fame as the slyly wise chauffeur in "Driving Miss Daisy." He spent his boyhood in the cotton center of Greenwood and the tiny town of Charleston on the edge of the Delta, not far from the place Emmett Till was lynched.

In 1991 Freeman bought 120

acres of land about four miles north of Charleston and started building a 10,000-square-foot house, all now guarded by an ornate fence of pink brick pillars and black wrought iron with electronic security devices.

He keeps his apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he lived for 20 years while appearing on Broadway and elsewhere, and he spends a lot of time on his sailboat cruising the Caribbean, but Freeman likes to escape to his Mississippi farm to tend his horses and drive around in his pickup.

Freeman made his debut as a director last year with the movie "Botha!" about apartheid in South Africa, but he says his upbringing in the segregated South did not influence that decision.

"This place never was South Africa," he recently told an interviewer. "Whatever we have in our history, we won't - I won't ever be able to equate that with the emotions in South Africa."

"I've always felt safe and comfortable in Mississippi." Comfortable, too, is Erlene Hart. The 35-year-old mother of a 5-year-old daughter, she's never lived outside Holmes County except for the time spent getting a bachelor's degree at Mississippi State University. She doesn't want to.

Ms. Hart was elected circuit clerk of Holmes County, an office traditionally held by elderly white men with garters on their sleeves. She says all she knows about the civil rights struggle is what she's read or been told.

When she first went to work in the clerk's office as an assistant,

she says, "some people didn't want to do business with me. They would wait for one of the white girls. But they got over that." "This is my home," she says. "I love here." Also content is Sharon Ford, the chief of Tchula's black 10-person police force and a lot of relatives living in California.

"But that's not for me," says Ford, a man of stern demeanor who wears his blue uniform and blue cap like a military cadet.

"I'm a Southern boy."

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