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Reflecions on Black History

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For information contact
C&M Online Media Inc.
3905 Meadow Field Lane
Raleigh, NC 27606
Tel: (919) 233-8164; Fax: (919) 233-8578;
e-mail: boson@cmonline.com
URL: <http://www.cmonline.com/boson/>

Reflecions on Black History

**REFLECTIONS ON BLACK HISTORY:
JACKSONVILLE AND HARLEM, 1907-1919**

by

Thomas C. Fleming



PREFACE

Thomas Fleming's "Reflections on Black History" first appeared in the Sun-Reporter during Black History Month of 1996. The enthusiastic response from readers led to its continuation as a regular weekly column.

The original series began with Fleming's memoirs dating back to 1926, when he graduated from high school in Chico, California, moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and got a job as a bellhop on a ship of the Admiral Line. The story continued up to the 1970s.

In 1997, in collaboration with Max Millard, a former copy editor and staff writer for the Sun-Reporter, Fleming started recording his memoirs on tape, going back to his earliest years.

These recordings form the basis for the stories in this volume. The new "Reflections" debuted on the Internet in September 1997. The column is distributed by the National Newspaper Publishers Association and appears on this website:

<http://www.freepress.org/fleming/fleming.html>

Fleming welcomes email at tflemingsf@aol.com. His books and cassette tapes are available through his email address, or by writing to Max Millard, 1312 Jackson St., #21, San Francisco, CA 94109.

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JACKSONVILLE, 1907-16

When I started remembering things, I was living in Jacksonville, Florida with my paternal grandmother. Her name was Phoebe; I never did learn what her maiden name was. I'm pretty sure she was born a slave.

One day in 1912, I was with my grandmother in the backyard when she was washing clothes. She had a big iron pot of water set up over a fire, and she was stirring the clothes with that awfully smelly yellow soap she made out of tallow and lye, when my mother came up. I didn't even know it was my mother. My parents had divorced, and I didn't remember seeing her.

She and my grandmother got in a big argument out there in the yard. They started pulling at one another. My mother was taking the train to California with my sister, and she wanted me to come with her. It was almost train time.

My grandmother wouldn't give me up, and my mother finally had to leave. But she stayed in touch. She had two sisters and two brothers living there, who came every week to see me. They would buy me clothes.

My mother's oldest brother, Uncle Bud, was a collector for a furniture company in Jacksonville. Some blacks couldn't afford to pay a large sum of money, so they would buy furniture and pay about a dollar a week. Uncle Bud had a horse and buggy and he took me with him when he made his collections. Automobiles were very rare.

Jacksonville and Tampa were the major ports of call in Florida for passengers — much bigger than Miami. Seaports were more important then, because the only way you could travel was by train or ship. There were no buses going from city to city.

Our house was right across from the streetcar barns. I don't know if the blacks chose to live in that part of town, or if they were forced to. Blacks there operated separate grocery stores and meat markets, but there were only about two of each. They didn't have many commercial businesses.

Coastwise steamers went from Florida to New England, and they all stopped in New York. Blacks from all along the South Atlantic coast talked about New York, because for most of them, that was their destination. Others went to Philadelphia or Boston. They were aware that in the North, they could vote, get away from segregated schools and find jobs paying more than they could earn in the South.

You'd have to have seen it, to realize how rigid the segregation was, and how humiliating. When you got on the streetcar, you walked to the back to sit down. They had a sign posted behind a row of seats, and as more and more white people got on, they moved that sign further back, so soon there wasn't any place for blacks to sit at all. And you'd better not talk back to any white person. Every black in the South knew that.

I was told what I couldn't do, and I observed it. I wondered why I couldn't do it. They didn't try to explain it to me, but I was always very curious about it.

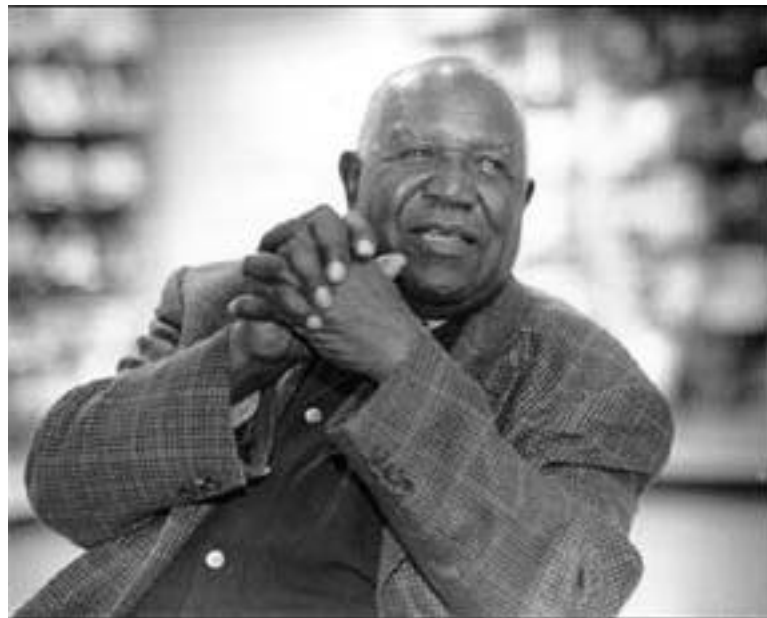
I started school in Jacksonville — it was all black — and I learned to read very well before I got out of second grade.

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My father had no sense of responsibility for a family life at all. I don't know why he got married. Not long after my mother left, my grandmother got real sick. My father moved in with her, and he got one of his girlfriends to shack up with him there and take care of my grandmother. She was sick for a long time, and right after she died, my father wanted to get rid of this woman, because he had met a younger woman in town. He took a table leg and beat that woman and threw her out of the house. I was watching while it was going on.

Soon after that, my father moved to New York City. He sent for me, and I lived with him in Harlem from 1916 to 1919.

Then I made one last trip to Florida before coming out to California. I have always held a strong resentment toward any state where Jim Crow was a way of life. I never set foot in Florida again until 1968, when I covered the Republican National Convention in Miami.



Thomas Fleming at 90, in 1998 (photo by George Kruse)

BLACK ENTERTAINERS ON VAUDEVILLE

Jacksonville, Florida was already a big city before World War I, and a lot of vaudeville came in there. Vaudeville was wonderful. They would always have both a motion picture and stage acts. It usually started in the early afternoon. A screen would come down over the stage for the movie, and would be raised when it was over. They would take turns showing the movie and presenting the entertainers until late at night. Most times the vaudeville show was a little longer than the motion picture.

For the stage acts, there generally would be a comedian, a dancer and a vocalist, all of them well known. Most of the larger theaters had a house band — a pit orchestra. They lived in that town, and they were hired to accompany whatever entertainer was on the stage. When they knew which entertainer was coming, they would have the musical arrangements all ready, so they could practice together before the show.

There weren't many whites living in the part of Jacksonville where I grew up, and few whites showed up in those theaters where I went. I heard that if blacks went to theaters outside of the black areas, they could sit only in the balcony. We referred to that as the crow's roost. This was also true in other parts of the United States, including the Midwest and California.

Around 1915, Bert Williams, the comedian, came to Jacksonville with a vaudeville show, and I went to see him.

There were a lot of black entertainers, but he had the biggest name. He went up higher than any before him. He was the first black to become a star in the Ziegfeld Follies, an annual revue on Broadway in New York. That's when he was really on the big time. Year after year, when Flo Ziegfeld produced each new show, Bert Williams was one of the headliners.

I'd heard his name a lot, even at that age. The talk in black communities all over the United States was that he had a diamond installed in his upper teeth. It flashed every time he opened his mouth, singing or talking.

He dressed in a battered silk hat, with a tailcoat and trousers too short, and ridiculous oversized shoes that slapped the floor very hard when he walked. That was his regular costume. Then he blacked his face too. A lot of black comics then put blackface on, like the whites used to in the minstrel shows.

He would come out there and talk all his ridiculous talk. Then Williams sang too, in his style. It was supposed to be singing, but it was more like a dialogue, done in a singsong way and very earthy. He sang about bad luck and being without very much money. He used to record comic songs for Columbia Records. I bought some of his records years later, when I got a Victrola. He had one where he said: "You ask me what I need. Well, I needs everything from my hat down to my overcoat in."

I saw him just that once, but I remember him so well because I was watching that diamond all the time I was there.

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Williams and some other black comedians were offered contracts by the Orpheum Circuit. That was the biggest vaudeville chain; they went all over the United States. Then there were smaller chains, like the Theatre Owners and Bookers Association, which they called TOBA. It was mostly in the Deep South. It had only black entertainers, and played to black audiences.

The TOBA theaters were owned by enterprising whites who saw an opportunity to put a theater in black neighborhoods, where the biggest names in Black America would appear.

In New York City it was Lenox Avenue. In Philadelphia it was Pearl Street. There were also TOBA houses in Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, DC, St. Louis, Kansas City, and as far west as Oklahoma City. The world-famous Apollo Theater in Harlem was a member of the chain.

When Duke Ellington and others came along in the '20s and early '30s, they started appearing in those theaters also, aside from playing in nightclubs. One could see all of the big names — Pigmear Markham, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday in her early days, Fats Waller, Ella Fitzgerald, the Mills Brothers when they first started, and just about any other black entertainer who appeared before the public then.

After I moved to Oakland, California in 1926, I used to watch vaudeville at the Orpheum Theater there. Some of my favorite headliners were Ethel Waters, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers, who were absolutely the best dancers I ever saw. They could tap better than Fred Astaire; he was mostly a ballroom dancer. And both brothers were far better dancers than Gene Kelly.

Vaudeville phased out when TV became popular. And I think TV has forced the entertainment world to change its attitude toward black performers, because TV has always hired more blacks than the big screen, and found out that it could make money off these people's talents. So Hollywood decided, "We'll make some of that money also."



Bert Williams (l.) with comedy partner George Walker, early 1900s.
From 1910 until his death in 1922, Williams was perhaps the most famous black entertainer in America.

A STOWAWAY TO NEW YORK

In 1916, there weren't many job opportunities for blacks in Jacksonville, or anywhere else in the Deep South.

One of the few skilled jobs that blacks could get was on the trains. At one time there were black engineers, firemen, brakemen and conductors. But when the railroads were unionized, blacks weren't allowed to join, and they got rid of the blacks in the operational crew, so that they could only work as porters or in the dining cars.

My father traveled a lot, railroading as a Pullman porter and working at sea. He'd been over to Europe as a cook on a freighter — none of the transatlantic passenger ships hired blacks — and had been exposed to a lot of things that other people hadn't. Blacks were pouring out of the South to escape the segregation, particularly from those states that border the Atlantic Ocean.

I had been living with my grandmother, and after she died, my father moved up to New York. It was the mecca for Southern blacks; they wanted to get to Harlem even more than Chicago.

He left me down in Jacksonville with my uncle, then wrote and said he wanted me to come to New York and join him. He knew the crew members from quite a few ships, since they all came to Jacksonville. So he contacted some friends on the Clyde Line, which had a fleet of steamers along the East Coast, and asked, would they bring me to New York? They said yes.

I left Florida around about April 1916. All the arrangements were made in advance. My uncle brought me down to the dock in his horse and buggy with my bag. There he met one of the ship's porters, who was waiting to see a black man bringing a little black boy. The porter introduced himself and said, "Is this Courtney Fleming's son?" My father had asked him to look out for me. Then I bid my uncle goodbye.

The porter took me into the living quarters of the stewards department and said, "You stay in here and stay quiet until this ship clears the harbor. I'll come and tell you when you can go up on the deck."

When the other members of the crew saw me, they knew I was a stowaway because this sort of thing went on, and there weren't many blacks on the ship as passengers.

The Clyde Line's deck crew and engine department were white. The stewards — that included the cooks, waiters and porters — were all black, on every ship of the Clyde Line. That was the only category of job they could get, on any line that hired blacks. But most ships didn't hire blacks at all.

We came into Charleston, South Carolina the next morning. I didn't get off. My first cousin, Sam Fleming, met the ship down there and came on deck. It was the only time I ever saw Sam.

When the ship reached New York, my father took me to his apartment on 133rd Street in Harlem. The center of black life was 135th Street. The Lafayette Theatre, which

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had all black entertainers, was located there; also the YMCA, which was a cultural center for blacks; and a branch of the New York Public Library.

There were still a lot of horses in Harlem. They pulled wagons called drays, to carry goods around. Trucks were slowly coming in.

All the buildings in Harlem had gas at least, and many had electric lights. For every apartment, the gas company installed a meter with a coin slot, and you had to put in a quarter for a certain number of hours.

I noticed right away that New York was different. You could sit in the streetcar where you wanted to, not just in the back. Blacks could vote. In New York, my father promptly registered as a Republican and always voted. He attended a lot of political meetings: at one he took me to, on 135th Street, Teddy Roosevelt came out and spoke, after he had left the White House.

Most restaurants would serve blacks, but it depended upon which one you hit. Some were so expensive that they immediately suspected that the blacks wouldn't be able to pay.

When my father sent for me to join him in Harlem, he was working as a cook on a coastal freighter between New Haven and New York.

He was glad to have me living with him. But most of the time he was traveling, and I couldn't stay in his apartment alone; I was too young to handle it. So he took me to a woman who kept children of working parents, and he boarded me out. About six black kids were living there, sleeping two in a bed. The woman put me in bed with a kid who had chicken pox, and I got it.

My father was absent so often that I spent about half of my three years in New York living in the boarding home. That's one thing about my father: he worked all the time. But he didn't want the responsibility of being a parent. About the only time I'd see him was when he came to pay for my keep. Then the woman would tell him what clothing I needed, and he would give her money to buy it.

A lot of times I felt lonely, but I learned to enjoy myself. Maybe that's one reason I started reading so much. I went to the library on 135th Street, and if they didn't have a book I wanted, I'd take the subway to the main library downtown.

By the age of 8, I was already reading newspapers. My favorite was the New York American, because it always had sensational headlines about criminal activities, and it had good cartoons.

Except for crime stories, and some outstanding blacks who could hardly be ignored, the daily papers paid slight heed to the black community. I didn't expect to see it then, for the same reason I don't expect it now, although it's slowly changing.

If you wanted to find out about black entertainers, writers, athletes, business leaders, black social activities and black church events, you had to read the black press. Black celebrities got their first publicity there, and if they were very good, the white press picked it up.

Harlem had a weekly black paper, the New York Age, which some kids sold on the streets. It was published by Fred Moore and promoted the career of Ferdinand Q. Morton, a local black politician.

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The Chicago Defender had the largest circulation of all the black papers; it was national. Then a little later, the Pittsburgh Courier put on a mass drive and became even bigger than the Defender.

A few black reporters wrote for the white press, such as Eugene Gordon, a staff man on the Boston Globe, and George Schuyler, a columnist for the Pittsburgh Courier who also wrote for the American Mercury, H.L. Mencken's magazine, which was founded in 1923. A lot of blacks didn't like Schuyler because of the acidity of his pen. He criticized all human behavior, in the same way that Mencken did. They admired one another very much.

I recall reading in the paper about the U.S. declaration of war against Germany in 1917, and the dirigible balloons — zeppelins — that were bombing London. It caused some concern that the giant dirigibles might cross the Atlantic and bomb New York. The mayor, John Hylan, ordered a blackout each night, like the authorities did in London. Citizens were ordered to pull down their window shades after dark, so that any type of aircraft would have difficulty seeing where to drop their bombs.

By that time, I was living with my father and his second wife on 133rd Street, in a five-story building of flats. My Dad came home one night, and as soon as he hit the first step, he began to shout, "The Germans are all over the city!" Of course, that caused quite a commotion. Some of the other tenants did not think it very funny when they discovered that the old man was just indulging in a big joke, and they let him know it.

In the winter of 1917-18, when World War I was at a stalemate, the Army's all-black 369th Infantry Regiment was ordered to France, and somebody thought it would be a good idea to have them march down 5th Avenue in Harlem so blacks could see them. The commanding officer, Colonel Whitman, was white, and there was a mixture of black and white officers. When I saw them, they had crossed 135th Street and were headed downtown, because the piers were in that direction and they were getting ready to board a transport.

It was the whole regiment — about 2000 men, marching in cadence, with a band playing in front. They had on everything they were issued. The soldiers wore what they called a campaign hat, with a wide brim. Every one of them had a knapsack on their back, a topcoat, and a rifle on their shoulder, marching very proudly.

People were lined up all along the route, and they were all cheering for them. Kids on the sidewalk were jumping up and down to show off.

The 369th made a great record over there; the French were short-handed and needed them badly. They immediately put that regiment right up there with the French combat troops, and they distinguished themselves. Two soldiers of the 369th, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, were the first black Americans ever awarded the Croix de Guerre.

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William "Bud" Jackson, uncle of Thomas Fleming, in horse and buggy he used as collector for furniture company, Jacksonville, Florida, 1910.

This vehicle carried young Thomas to the Jacksonville dock in 1916, where he stowed away on a ship bound away for New York.

ENCOUNTERS WITH FATS WALLER

The day after I arrived in New York, I enrolled at P.S. 89 in Harlem as a third grader. The school had as many white kids as black kids, and all the teachers were white. In Jacksonville, all I saw was black teachers.

Just one block from my school, at 7th Avenue and 135th Street, was the Lafayette Theater, which was the main theater that blacks attended in New York. It had not only motion pictures, but vaudeville shows too. It was white-owned and run, but all the entertainers were black. Sometimes it would have serious drama instead of musicals.

In front of the Lafayette was a tree that was known by black entertainers all over the United States as the Tree of Hope. If they had long periods of unemployment, they would come by and kiss the tree and rub its bark, hoping they would get a break. And so many of them got jobs that the name stuck.

Blacks were always trying to work the Palace Theater downtown. That was the lead vaudeville house in the whole nation. Any entertainer who played the Palace, black or white, had made it on the big time.

Around the corner from the Lafayette was a motion picture house, the Lincoln Theater. I think once in a while it had stage acts. There were no talking pictures then, so during the movie, they always had somebody play the piano or organ.

The Lincoln Theater is where Fats Waller first started playing the pipe organ on weekends, when he was 12 years of age. He was a few grades ahead of me, but he was there at the school, the same time I was going.

Everybody followed him around, trying to get close to him. The kids worshiped him, because it was a heck of a thing to be playing at the Lincoln Theater, at his age. I saw him at school a lot, and went to hear him at the theater.

Whenever I talked with him, he was full of wisecracks. I guess he got his nickname in grammar school, because he was fat then. Nobody picked a fight with him, because he was big enough to look out for himself. His given name was Thomas.

Like all the boys of that age, he wore knee pants, knickerbockers. He had a cap on his head. And he had frog eyes. I could always remember those bulging eyes.

Fats Waller's father was a minister at the Abyssinian Baptist church. His mother played piano; I think he got lessons at home from her.

After I left New York, I lost track of him and didn't follow his career until years later, when I was living in California. Then the records started coming out. When I read his name in the Pittsburgh Courier and the other national black papers, I knew it was him. And when I saw his picture, he looked just about the same. In the 1930s, he was still wisecracking, like he did when he was a kid.

Fats became one of the most popular entertainers of his time. He was well known all over the country because of the style of piano he played — very enthusiastic. He was also a

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composer and singer, and played jazz on the Wurlitzer organ. He might have been the first person to use the organ as a jazz instrument. He worked theaters and nightclubs both, and appeared in a few movies. He accompanied himself on all his records; that's what made him so popular. Sometimes he did them as a soloist. Other times he'd have a saxophone, a trumpet and a rhythm section — a drum and bass. He cut a lot of records, and they were played everywhere.

He was probably best known as a songwriter. He composed the music, and usually collaborated with Andy Razaf, who wrote the lyrics. Razaf was a successful writer for the musical stage, who came from Africa.

Fats wrote a flock of songs: "Honeysuckle Rose," "Ain't Misbehavin'," "Your Feet's Too Big," "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness if I Do." Those were tremendous hits. Other entertainers, black and white, played and recorded his numbers. They're being played yet.

Fats didn't make money out of all the pieces he wrote, because he'd normally sell them as soon as he composed them, for \$35 or so, and lose all of his rights. Fats was always short for money. He chased women a lot, and then he had a wife and a son at home. He lived high, all the time. He was a man of tremendous appetites for life, which I think included everything.

In December 1943, I read in the paper that he had died. The news came over the wires and went all around the world. Fats had been in Hollywood to make a picture, and was returning to New York. The train was pulling into the yard in Kansas City when he had a sudden heart attack, and that was it. He was 39 years old.



Fats Waller (1904-43), who attended public school in Harlem with Thomas Fleming, dropped out at 15 to join a vaudeville troupe and went on to become one of America's greatest jazz artists and songwriters.



Andy Razaf, African-born writer for the American musical stage, was Fats Waller's favorite lyricist.

MARCUS GARVEY COMES TO HARLEM

Marcus Garvey, the leader of the Back to Africa movement, arrived in Harlem in 1916, the same year I did. He was 38, an immigrant from Jamaica, and in a short time he became one of the most famous black men in America.

I was 8 years old and living on 133rd Street in Harlem, right in the middle of where the Garvey movement started.

In my neighborhood, there were probably more West Indian than American-born blacks. They wanted to succeed in America, and were very industrious, both husbands and wives — always trying to start small businesses. They were looking ahead, with the goal of attaining naturalization so they could vote.

There was some antagonism between the American-born blacks and the West Indian immigrants. They all wanted to come to the United States because they could live better here. One of them told me that just about every house over there had an outhouse, and didn't have gas, electricity or running water. When they wanted to take a bath on a Saturday, they had to heat a big kettle on the stove. In Harlem, all the buildings had running water and gas, and electricity was coming into a lot of places.

These people used to say they were subjects of the king, and would tell you that back there, they could get jobs that blacks weren't getting here. But they were the lowest-paying jobs, such as petty officials. Well, the first thing we asked them was: "If you could do all those things, why did you leave?" I never heard of any American-born blacks wanting to go there.

Garvey never became an American citizen, although he lived in New York for nine years. He started the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which at one time might have had over a million members. But in New York, I think the only ones who considered him to be a leader were the West Indians.

I heard a lot about him, and then I started seeing him. They used to have parades along 7th Avenue frequently. Garvey would always be standing up in a big open-top car with his immediate aides riding with him. He dressed like an admiral, with one of those cockade hats that admirals wear, and a uniform. There were marchers in front and behind him, carrying banners. The women were in white dresses, and the men wore suits. They probably started about 125th Street, and marched up to 135th and 7th Avenue.

I didn't understand what it meant then. But I think it was all part of trying to attract more members. The dues weren't very much. A lot of black women joined that thing. And just about every woman I met when I was growing up worked as a domestic. They got very, very low wages.

The first thing Garvey did was take all those dollars and form a steamship company, the Black Star Line. The first ship, an aged tub, was leaky and unseaworthy, and barely made it out of New York harbor. He sold people on the idea: this is the ship that's going to take you back to Africa and carry on commerce between Africa and here. He later added two more ships, but not one of them ever landed in Africa.

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His idea was to set up a colony of American blacks in Liberia. The Liberians first went along with this, but then changed their minds and wouldn't let him in, because they were afraid he would take over political power.

The U.S. government wanted to break up the movement because it saw any movement of black people as a threat. The Department of Justice in Washington thought he was trying to start a rebellion, so they accused him of bilking poor working people, and arrested him on several fraud charges for collecting the money to buy the steamers and to start other commercial businesses. He was tried in federal court and jailed in Atlanta, then later deported to Jamaica. He died in London in 1940.

Two of Garvey's biggest enemies were W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis*, and Philip Randolph, editor of *The Messenger*, a socialist weekly paper, and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. They thought the Back to Africa movement was a harebrained idea — just like I think.

The idea didn't occur among any blacks here because Du Bois and all of them saw how utterly ridiculous it was. Garvey was taking advantage of people with low education and low-paying jobs.

You didn't find many American-born blacks who bothered with Garvey. They would call the West Indian blacks "monkey chasers." I think they were trying to get recognition in this country.

Garvey had a dream, but I don't think the Back to Africa movement was ever possible. How was he going to get enough money to move all the blacks back to Africa? And nobody wanted to go over to Africa.

But Garvey still has a lot of supporters today. There are still chapters of the United Negro Improvement Association in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain and the Caribbean, and the biggest park in Harlem has been renamed Marcus Garvey Park.



Marcus Garvey in uniform, 1922

A HARLEM BOYHOOD

Harlem had a lot of poor Italian immigrants, who were still arriving in large numbers, along with Jews and others from Eastern Europe, and a smattering of people from the Caribbean islands. As these groups came in, the middle-class whites started getting out.

Blacks lived primarily on the west side of Harlem, between Lenox Avenue and 7th Avenue, and the Italians dominated the east side of 5th Avenue, in East Harlem. Up above us, on Morningside Heights, was a large concentration of Irish.

I think most blacks realized they were segregated, because they were confined to living in that area Not by any law, but because most property owners outside of the neighborhood would not rent or sell to them.

For self-protection, you had to be a member of a boys' gang in the block where you lived. It might be just for the kids on your side of the street, and right across the street there might be a different gang. When you came out of the house, you generally stayed with your fellow gang members.

There were two rivers where you could swim in the summertime, the Harlem River on the east and the Hudson River on the west. The Harlem River was the better place, but between us and the swimming hole were the Italians. They didn't want us or the Irish coming through their territory. So we formed an alliance with the Irish gang. All the kids carried a stick or some other weapon, but not guns. When we crossed 5th Avenue, here came all the Italian kids, armed the same way we were. We had to fight our way to the river. Some kids stayed on shore to keep the Italians back.

We'd throw rocks at each other. They called us nigger, and we would shout, "Oh you guinea, oh you wop, oh you two-cent lollipop!"

On Halloween day, kids came to school armed with chalk or crayons, which they scratched on the windows of commercial businesses on Lenox Avenue. Some would go up on the roofs of the tenement buildings where they lived, taking some paper bags and a bucket of water. They would shout down on the passersby and drop a bag full of water on their heads.

Italian and Jewish vendors went all through New York City, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods, shouting out their wares.

They all used either a pushcart or a horse-drawn wagon. Especially in winter, when a vegetable vendor got an order and went in to deliver it, the gang I belonged to would steal just about all his potatoes and run like hell when he came out. If he started chasing us, we'd go into a building, dash up the stairs, and run a whole block across the rooftops, because all the buildings were the same height then.

We'd head for a vacant lot, dig a pit, place the potatoes in there, light some wood on top, and wait around until the potatoes were done. Most of the time they were scorched on one side and almost raw on the other, but we'd start gnawing them anyway. We didn't have salt or any other seasoning, but never in life have I tasted potatoes that were so good.

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125th Street, which is today the commercial center of black Harlem, was then mostly a Jewish area, and had very few blacks.

In the white section of Harlem, there was an area on St. Nicholas Avenue near Morningside Heights called Strivers Row, where they started letting celebrated black entertainers and professionals move in. When blacks could afford that type of residence, it meant they had arrived.

Wealthy white people often hired black musicians to play for their affairs, because not only were the blacks very capable, but they played like they enjoyed what they were doing. And blacks always wanted to excel one another in being the best.

The whites had to write the score down, but blacks could improvise, and the way they played depended on how they felt on that occasion. When they performed for black dances, they played a little bit differently. I remember years later in San Francisco, when I ran into a friend who played trombone in the house orchestra at a big hotel, and I asked him, "Why don't they ever bring Ellington in, or any of those guys?" He said, "Tom, the white folks don't know how to dance to that music."

I was too young to be going to any of the Harlem nightclubs, but I heard about them. They had a floor show every night, with a big band, comedians, vocalists, and a chorus line of about six girls. Nightclubs became even more popular — and a lot more profitable — starting in 1920, when Prohibition went into effect.

It wasn't until 1923, after I had left New York, that the Cotton Club opened on 142nd Street in Harlem. All the entertainers, waiters and other personnel were black. Only the top black dancers and singers performed there. The chorus girls were beautiful and shapely, and most of them were very fair — none as dark as me. Lena Horne started as a chorus girl.

The Cotton Club's owners were members of the Mafia, and they decided they didn't want black customers in there, because they were trying to entice big white money. The Ivy League school crowd and other whites, who would come uptown "slumming," knew that nobody could play jazz music, or could dance, like blacks did. But blacks could never go in as paying customers, even if they had thousands of dollars in their pocket.

THE RISE OF BLACK PROFESSIONALS

In Harlem in 1916, blacks were just beginning to break out of the traditional jobs they had held since Emancipation.

There were at least one or two black doctors on the staff at Harlem Hospital, and a few black nurses. With the size of Harlem's black population, professionals in many fields could earn a living, once they got established.

Some of them, particularly young lawyers and dentists who were just starting their practice, would come down to Grand Central Station or Penn Station at night and haul baggage to supplement their income. And not only in New York: it was common in Chicago, Philadelphia, Jacksonville — wherever you had the big railway terminals. This wasn't so true for doctors, because blacks would respond more to a bellyache than they would a toothache.

In New York, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles and other cities outside the South with a large black population, you began to see the rise of a black middle class, which E. Franklin Frazier, the black sociologist and writer, later called the black bourgeoisie. Frazier criticized them because he thought they were isolating themselves from other blacks who weren't as successful, even though they all ran up against the same kind of segregation.

But black doctors and dentists didn't open their offices up in white neighborhoods; they made their living in Harlem, off blacks who weren't well-to-do. I thought it was a hell of a contribution they were making, because they had to work just as hard as the white doctors, but didn't get the same fees.

In New York City, blacks had a foot in the door of Tammany Hall, the political machine that controlled city government, because black votes were just as important to Tammany leaders as white votes.

The post office had a long history of hiring blacks, and some worked for the customs service, under the Department of the Treasury. If a man was earning \$60 a month, he got by pretty well.

There were a lot of poor people living in Harlem then, most of them working people. Most black men worked in service jobs — cooks, waiters, janitors, bootblacks. Harlem already had the largest black population of any city in the country, but I don't remember seeing a single black bus driver, subway worker, street sweeper or garbage collector. There might have been one or two.

In the three years that I attended public school in Harlem, I never saw a black teacher; they were all white. You did see a few black policemen and firemen, but they were so uncommon that everybody knew who they were.

Most black women worked as domestics — not only in New York, but all over the United States. The women were usually more educated than the men. I think it's because the girls stayed at home longer, and listened to their mothers better. Boys often dropped out of school by the 4th or 5th grade, and some didn't go at all.

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Many young boys admired the pimps and gamblers, because these guys would dress up sharp all the time, and always had money to spend. Even though they were living on the fringes of the law and were frequently arrested, they were heroes to a lot of boys.

When I lived in Harlem, the best-known black woman there was Madam C.J. Walker. She developed a new method of straightening hair, using heated metal combs and some kind of oily substance, and she became a millionaire. She also sold a facial cream that would lighten the skin. I never saw her, but I talked with people who had contact with her. She had a townhouse and beauty school on 136th Street, and a \$200,000 mansion on the Hudson.

Every black woman in the United States knew who Madam Walker was, unless they lived down in the swamps of Mississippi or someplace like that. And they probably heard about her there too, because her process went out all over the country. Women started opening up beauty parlors, and they used her products. The compelling drive behind her success was that black people wanted to look white.

About a decade later, a black journalist in Harlem, George Schuyler, wrote a hilarious book on the subject called *Black No More*. It was a satire about blacks trying to find all sorts of means to make their pigmentation disappear. It told about a guy who discovered a cream that could turn black people white, and showed all the confusion that would result. Some blacks would read it and roll with laughter. Some of them didn't like it; they were sensitive about it. But I thought it was funny as hell.



Madam C.J. Walker, Harlem millionaire

WEST TO CALIFORNIA

My parents had divorced in 1912 when I was 4 years old, and my mother had moved to Chico, California, an agricultural town in the north central part of the state. I had not seen her for seven years, but she continued to write to me almost every week, and I answered her letters. I'd forgotten what she looked like, but I always felt my mama was somewhere.

Then my father married again, and brought his new bride up from Florida. So I left the boarding home and moved in with them. That's when the problems began. I was left alone a lot with my stepmother, and maybe I was a little more independent than she thought I should be, because I was accustomed to doing things for myself. Whenever she tried to correct me, it ended in an argument, and my telling her that she was not my mother. She tried to lay the strap on me a couple of times, and I resisted. Later, I realized that she was right and I was very wrong, but that was after I came to California and reflected some on my life.

One day around February of 1919, when I was 11, the old man told me he had decided to send me back to Jacksonville — where I had spent the first eight years of my life — to live with Uncle Bud.

My father acted like he was glad to get rid of me. He got back in touch with his pals in the stewards department on the Clyde Line ships that went up and down the East Coast. So again, I was taken down to the pier and handed over to one of the porters — a stowaway for the second time in my life. After I got down to Florida, I found out my uncle was planning to send me to California, to join my mother.

I stayed in Jacksonville for about two months, until my mother could buy me a train ticket out of her earnings as a domestic. I had a younger sister, Kate, who was also in Chico. My mother told Uncle Bud that she wanted me and Kate to be raised together.

On the day of departure, my uncle and aunt took me to the station and gave me a big wicker basket full of sandwiches for the journey, which was four nights out. My dad came down from New York to see me off, and he started blubbing, "You're going a long way off. I may not see you again." I didn't know what he was talking about.

The first month I got to California, he sent \$10, and we never did hear from him any more until 20 years later. We didn't know whether he was living or dead.

When they put me on the train, the conductor pinned a ticket on my lapel to make sure I wouldn't lose it. He said that when I had to change trains, he would see that I got the right one for California.

My ticket was for a chair car. It had a row of seats on each side of the aisle and luggage racks up above. You had to sleep the best way you could. Your feet got very tired, keeping your shoes on all the time.

The cars were segregated. For all railway lines throughout the South, it was company policy to keep the races separate. That segregation was a strange thing. You never knew when the blow was going to fall on you. And you instinctively tried to avoid any conflict,

Reflecions on Black History

because it could cause something very unpleasant to happen to you. It was discussed among us all the time — what you couldn't do.

You knew you couldn't go to the same schools as whites. You knew that if you went to the theater, you had to sit in the Jim Crow section, in the balcony. You knew that if you were out of the black neighborhoods, the restaurants wouldn't serve you. So you just lived in a black world.

Most blacks had to ride in the chair cars because railroad companies in the South would not sell sleeping car tickets to black passengers. If you wanted a berth on a Pullman sleeper, you'd have to buy the ticket outside the South and mail it to whoever was going to use it.

When my Uncle Tom in San Francisco decided to marry his childhood sweetheart in Montgomery, Alabama, he bought two tickets on a Pullman coach, then went to Alabama and got married. They had to honor his tickets down there, because the sleepers were not owned by the railroad companies: they were the property of the Pullman Company. But the local railroads owned the dining cars, so no black passengers in the South could enter those cars.

When black people in the chair car wanted hot food, the waiter would give them a menu, take their order and bring the food to them. They had to eat where they were sitting. Of course, they were charged the same price as the white customers who got full table service. But once the train crossed the Mason-Dixon line, the black passengers could eat in the dining car and sit where they wanted.

My old man had given me \$7 for the trip, which I promptly spent. They had vendors going through the train all day, selling candy, peanuts, soft drinks and magazines, and renting pillows for the night.

I slept in snatches as the train rolled along, and when we got into New Orleans the next morning, the conductor took me into the station and turned me over to the Travelers' Aid Society. I didn't have any money left, so a woman from Travelers' Aid fed me, then gave me another dollar to spend. She saw that I got on the evening train to Los Angeles.

I boarded the Southern Pacific, which ran on its own tracks all the way to the West Coast. We reached Los Angeles two mornings later. I had to take another train to Sacramento, about 90 miles from Chico, where the Travelers' Aid woman asked me my mother's name. She looked up her number in the phone book and called to tell her I would be arriving in Chico at 11:30 that night.

When the train stopped at the station, the conductor said, "Well, sonny, this is the end of the line." He got my bag for me, and when I reached the door, I saw a woman standing there, and a man with her. She said, "Tommy?" I said yes. As soon as my feet hit the ground, she started hugging me so close. She was crying, too. I pulled back from shyness, but she said, "What's the matter with you? I'm your mother."

She made me feel at ease very quickly, and it seemed like I had been with her all my life. I never felt any anxiety from that moment on. Her children came first with her: that's what she lived for. And she had to work practically all her life, without any support, to bring us up, which I never forgot. She was the best friend I ever had.



Thomas Fleming in 1912, age 4

END OF BOOK

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