

The majority of scholarship on what is called the Great Migration focuses on the large number of African Americans who moved from the South to northern industrial cities in the early to mid-twentieth century. However, a growing historiographic trend has been to study the smaller migrant flows to western cities such as Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. This examination of migration to northern Arizona's lumber country expands our understanding of that phenomenon.

“I WANTED TO GET UP AND MOVE”

THE ARIZONA LUMBER INDUSTRY AND THE GREAT MIGRATION

On July 5, 1944, twenty-two-year-old Katherine Hickman and her older sister arrived in Flagstaff, Arizona, each with two young children in tow. Rain was pouring down as they stepped off the train into the summer darkness, and the station was full of Native Americans congregating for

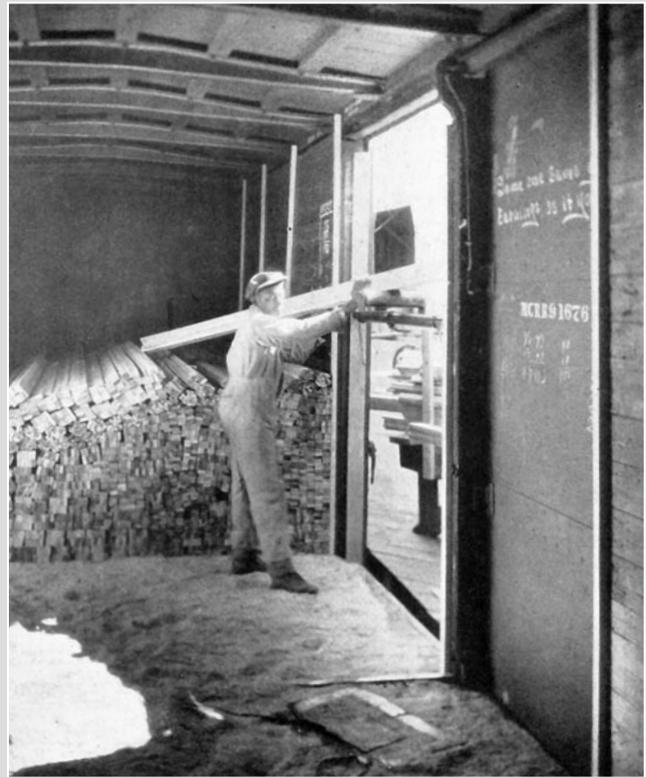
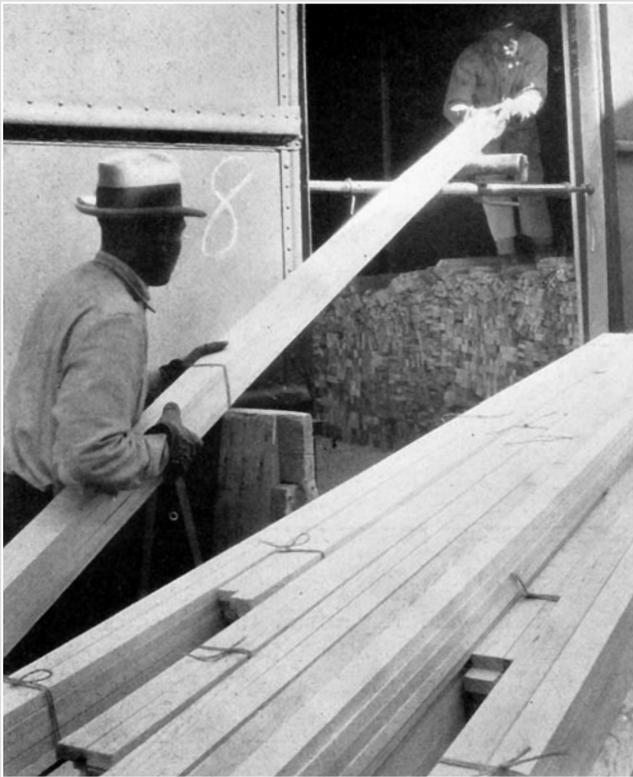
the annual powwow celebration that weekend. The two African American women had left the South for the first time and knew very little about the West. With their only knowledge of Native Americans culled from popular culture, the pair were terrified. They clutched their daughters' hands and prayed they would not be scalped. It was only when they saw their father and their godmother waiting to take them to their uncle's residence that they began to feel more at home in their new community.

The previous month had been a busy one. With their husbands away serving in World War II, the two sisters had sold the family cows, hogs, and other property to follow their father, who had moved to Flagstaff in June, after the lumber mill in the small

company town of Alco, Louisiana, had closed. The mill was the sole source of employment in the area, and its closure devastated the community. But for the logging men, the closing of the mill offered opportunity as well. Hickman's father immediately contacted his wife's three brothers, who had moved to Arizona to work in the lumber industry in the 1920s. These family connections provided him a place to stay while he found work in the more lucrative lumber business of northern Arizona. Katherine's and her sister's husband, both skilled lumbermen, would likewise relocate to Flagstaff after the war.¹

The Hickman family was part of a wave of African American families from the rural South who moved west during the 1940s

BY JACK REID



AMERICAN LUMBERMAN, APRIL 10, 1926

The April 10, 1926, issue of the industry journal *American Lumberman* included a 56-page special advertising section for the Cady Lumber Company of McNary, Arizona. Situated within the Apache Indian Reservation, the company employed whites, blacks, and Native Americans. The promotional section included photos of all three races at work, including these two photos of workers loading molding onto a railroad car.

and 1950s in what historians have dubbed the Great Migration. Most continued on to California, but some settled in northern Arizona to work in the lumber industry doing jobs similar to those they had left behind. They moved west in search of opportunity and upward economic mobility, but also to escape racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South. Their experiences shed light on race relations in both the rural South and the West during the postwar years. Fortunately, Katherine Hickman and fifteen other African Americans who made the great migration from the South to Flagstaff recorded their experiences in oral history interviews conducted by historian Carol Maxwell between 1998 and 2002.²

ARIZONA'S SOUTHERN ROOTS

A significant majority of African Americans who moved to northern Arizona during the 1940s and 1950s had roots in the rural South—Louisiana, Mississippi, and to a lesser extent East Texas. Racial segregation and discrimination were pervasive in nearly all facets of life and shaped the everyday experiences of African Americans who grew up there. Towns were almost always sharply divided into white sections and black sections. According to Felton Combs, who grew up on a farm just east of Shreveport, Louisiana, during the 1930s and 1940s, “We was in a total black community. ... Wherever the white people lived, their road was paved, and our road was just dirt.” Despite the economic disparity that Combs recalls, this separation afforded African Americans some control over their neighborhoods and an escape from the Jim Crow laws and racial restrictions that governed all encounters between blacks and whites. But Combs and others never forgot who ultimately

had control. As a child, Combs had watched as five white men beat to death with axe handles a black man who owed a storekeeper money. Thereafter, Combs’s father kept his children within a five-mile radius of the family farm to avoid trouble. Although demeaning and often dangerous, segregation fostered the creation of insulated black communities where neighbors were able to sustain an African American-centered culture that defied the rampant racial oppression beyond their neighborhoods.³

Once African Americans had left their insulated communities, however, a far different reality greeted them. Not only were schools, restaurants, and movie theaters segregated, but blacks were expected to conform to whites’ expectations of conduct as well. Conflicts could arise quickly whenever whites felt challenged, and often the only reasonable response for blacks to avoid violence, including lynching, was to appear compliant. Grady Graham recalled never being afraid of whites while growing up in Carthage, Mississippi, during the 1930s, but he knew he had to be careful around them. The number-one rule he learned in order to stay alive was to keep his distance from white women. Conversely, if a white man desired a black woman, “well, you’d just have to take it.” Anyone who breached this rule would likely end up dead. As much as African Americans resented their treatment, many felt that their wisest choice was to pray for change rather than confront the violence and possibly wind up dead.⁴

Company lumber towns and mills in both the South and the Southwest provided similar experiences for African Americans: they were segregated and the African American communities practiced self-sufficiency. Logging was a major industry in

Mississippi, Louisiana, and East Texas until southern forests were depleted beginning in the 1940s. While some workers and their families occupied rural patches near the mills, others lived on the company grounds where the male breadwinners worked alongside whites and, to a lesser extent, ethnic Mexicans. Mexican workers were less common in Louisiana than in the Southwest, but they still were a large enough presence in some southern lumber towns that management built segregated living quarters for them alongside the separate white and black quarters. James W. Williams, who spent part of his youth in the Mississippi logging town where his father worked, distinctly remembered the segregated camp: "They had a fence around one of the camps, and the white people live over there on that side of the fence, and you live over on that side." When asked whether living in segregated quarters was demeaning, Williams explained that he knew it was not right, but "being raised that way, I felt more comfortable. I've always felt that if a person don't want to be around me, I don't want to be around them." Moreover, white men held all the management positions, had the greatest opportunity to perform skilled labor, and were paid higher wages than blacks and Hispanics for the same work.⁵

Despite the company town's segregation, there was only one commissary where workers could purchase groceries. Katherine Hickman recalled, "You would buy everything you needed at the commissary...but the prices were a little bit higher." Thrifty families like Hickman's saved money and kept from going into debt to the company by growing food in home gardens at their cabin and churning their own butter. Adult male incomes were crucial to a family's survival, but women such as Katherine and her sisters and mother stretched those wages by establishing efficient household work patterns.⁶

Other families lived outside town, where they sustained themselves by sharecropping for white landlords or, in exceptional cases, farmed their own land. For many rural blacks, lumber work was a useful side job if, for example, their cotton crop failed and they needed an alternative source of income. As was common in Mississippi and other southern states, Graham's family worked a white man's farm. The landowner furnished them with mules and plows and then kept half of what they produced. Some black families owned their own land. Williams's father was able to purchase his own land near Carthage, Mississippi, with money from an injury settlement after he lost his arm in a sawmill accident during the Great Depression. Others, like Combs's family, saved money and borrowed from relatives to purchase land.⁷

Whether they sharecropped or lived in company towns, most African American lumbering families were self-sufficient. Those who lived on farms built their own homes, raised livestock, grew food in their gardens, and often made their own clothes. Most Depression-era families recognized the truth in Graham's axiom, "If you didn't raise it or grow it, you didn't have it." Williams explained that during the 1930s he truly knew what it meant to be hungry. With few jobs that offered any kind of income, the only food his family had was what they could grow or slaughter. Because meat was hard to come by, they mostly relied on seasonal crops to sustain them through the year. Combs recalled that his father built a house with help from neighbors, his mother sewed most of the family's clothes from cotton feed sacks, and home remedies—not doctors—treated most illnesses. "We grew everything; if you name it, we grew it: watermelons, peas, butter beans. We had our own cows to milk. We had butter, we had chickens, everything."⁸

Despite their basic self-sufficiency, most African American families in the rural South were bound together in religious communities where neighbors looked out for one another. According to Combs, "If one family had something in a community, they divided it with everyone else. Everything was in common, you see. When we would dress a hog or something, Mother would send a boy over to the neighbor and give them some." Combs underscored the importance of religion when he added, "everybody had everything in common; it was kind of biblical in that way." Other black families had different experiences. When Williams bought a farm in 1934, his family moved into a new community. As outsiders and strangers, they experienced difficulty obtaining help from settled residents. It took time to forge community networks and to build trust and camaraderie, without which families struggled to get by.⁹

Most young people worked hard and grew up fast during the Great Depression. Young women took care of children and siblings, milked cows, prepared food, cared for animals, and worked in the fields. Boys too young for heavy lifting or dangerous labor often worked in the fields—picking cotton, for example—or performed low-risk tasks at lumber yards, such as stacking small pieces of lumber, for little pay. As a young boy, Graham worked long hours—often from before sunup until sundown—for the white man who owned his family's farm. "It wasn't no eight o'clock to four or five, it was dark to dark, not sun to sun," he said, laughing. It seems that by age twenty, most young men advanced into more dangerous and skilled work, either as log cutters or mill workers. In 1936, at age twenty-one, Graham began working as a log cutter for the Great Southern Lumber Company in Carthage, Mississippi, and eventually moved up to log scaler, the less physically demanding job of determining how much wood could be cut from each log. Because he liked the fast pace of working in the woods and "just wanted to get out and see the world," after two years he moved to Louisiana, where he continued to cut lumber for Great Southern.¹⁰

Graham was not alone. In interview after interview, respondents explained that in their late teens or early twenties they began working in lumber mills or in the woods logging. It was hard labor, and most did not make much money. Although timber cutting was a relatively skilled position, wages were low because of the generally depressed southern economy and the declining quality of the lumber being cut. Nor did it help that white men always made more money for the same work. Nevertheless, many young southern black men earned important experience in the lumber industry that would serve them for the rest of their lives. In the early 1940s, they began to hear from friends and seasonal lumber workers, who traveled west and returned south in the winter, that far greater opportunities and more money beckoned in the dense forests of northern Arizona. Many decided to leave.

ECONOMIC PUSH AND PULL

The Great Migration is often broadly divided into three corridors: northeast to the Atlantic Coast, particularly New York City; north to Chicago and the Midwest; and west to Los Angeles and the Pacific Coast. In many ways, the lumber migration corridor between Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas to Arizona was already in place by the 1920s. By 1924, the Cady Lumber Company of Louisiana had depleted its Louisiana forests. When it failed in its attempts to buy new tracts of land in the South, the company bought tracts previously owned by the Apache Lumber Company

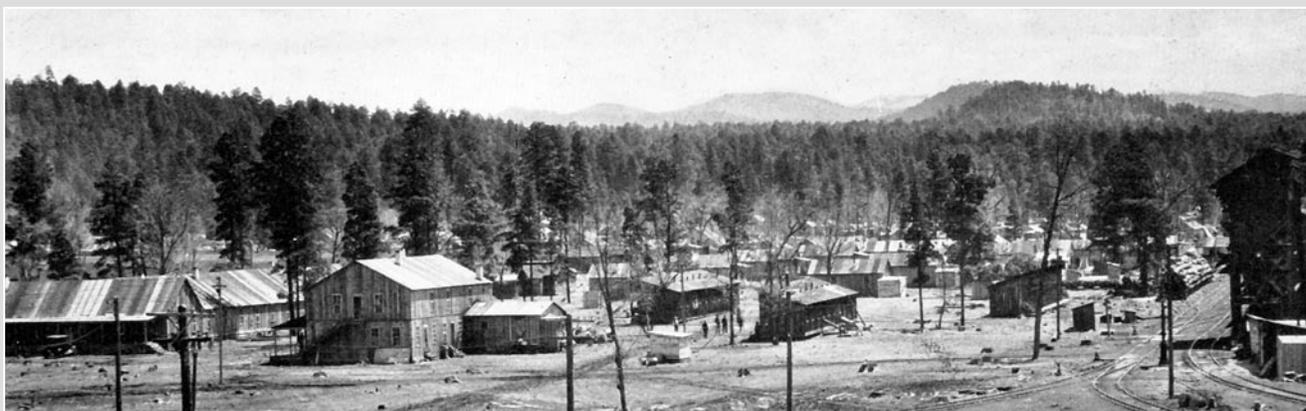
near Arizona's White Mountains. Subsequently, the company moved more than five hundred of its black laborers and their families to McNary, Arizona, as well as the buildings and houses, where Cady set up its new lumber operation. Several years later, in 1928, groups of black workers moved to Flagstaff to avoid a typhoid epidemic and to escape the isolation of the White Mountains. Because much of lumber work is seasonal, many African American laborers left Flagstaff in the winter and returned to work in the southern lumber industry, where they could supplement their income while visiting family and friends. In doing so, they made frequent use of the routes between the southern states and northern Arizona.¹¹

The economic pull of northern Arizona on African American timber workers was compelling. By the 1950s, the best forests in Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi were cut out. Timber harvested in the region was smaller and of poorer quality, and consequently brought lower financial returns—including lower wages—than trees cut elsewhere. By comparison, northern Arizona boasted a rich supply of premium lumber, which meant higher financial returns for lumber companies and higher wages for timber workers. The Second World War created a large demand for lumber, which in turn generated brisk competition for labor. After the high unemployment rates of the Great Depression, Flagstaff lumber companies began experiencing labor shortages. Rather than quickly dissipating, this boom market was sustained in the postwar years by the growth of metropolitan areas (specifically

Phoenix), fueled by defense contracts as well as migration.¹²

Meanwhile, the rise of strong industrial unions during the 1940s led to more favorable conditions for experienced minority workers. As union members, African Americans and ethnic Mexicans were more likely to secure well-paying jobs in the lumber industry. Mirroring their successes in the mining industry statewide, unions in this period also led effective strikes for across-the-board wage increases at lumberyards in Flagstaff and northern Arizona. Word spread to lumber workers in the South of higher pay and greater benefits in Arizona. At the same time, Flagstaff lumber companies were posting job listings, hoping to entice skilled lumbermen to emigrate. African American workers interviewed fifty years later recalled abundant opportunities in northern Arizona. In addition, the existence of an established immigrant community meant that many southern blacks already had contacts in Arizona who could help them find work, secure housing, and make the move more easily. No doubt these migrants also hoped that they would face less racial discrimination in the West than in the Jim Crow South.¹³

Interviews suggest that most African Americans who left the South for northern Arizona did so in search of higher-paying jobs that they had learned about through family and work. While John L. Williams was serving in the military overseas during the war, a friend wrote letters boasting “about the hundred dollars that he was making” in Flagstaff. “And I couldn’t stand that,” Williams recalled. “I said if I got out, I had to go there and make me some



AMERICAN LUMBERMAN, APRIL 10, 1926

The photo on top is of “a typical residence street in McNary, showing roomy, comfortable homes” of Cady employees. Note the trees and wooden fence, indicators of some landscaping having been done in the neighborhood. At bottom is “The ‘Quarters’—the separate residence district for the homes of all colored employees...” Train tracks are on the right, immediately adjacent to the neighborhood.

of that big money. So that's what I done. I came out here and went right to making that big money." Asked if he, in fact, had made high wages when he went to Flagstaff in 1946, Williams responded, "I sure did! Oh, plenty days we'd go there and make a hundred dollars a day"—a stark contrast with the fifty to seventy dollars he made every two weeks in Mississippi. Ben Shird, who came to Flagstaff in 1945, confirmed Williams's recollections, stating that he made more in one day cutting lumber in Flagstaff than he did in a week in Louisiana.¹⁴

Lumber company pay records from three days in 1954, well after the initial boom in logging in the area, are the only extant documents that list Williams's and Shird's daily wages. They show each man making roughly thirty-five dollars per day. Though much less than they recalled later, it nonetheless represented a substantial increase over their wages in the South. Even if one hundred dollars a day was not as common as Williams and Shird suggested, it is likely that when migrants first arrived in the mid-1940s, northern Arizona forests yielded more and higher-quality lumber, which would have translated into higher pay. Regardless, nearly all the interviewees *remembered* receiving a substantial increase in wages when they arrived in Flagstaff. At the very least, it reflects their excitement at the prospect of boosting their pay and the critical role this played in their decision to migrate.¹⁵

Although most interviewees stressed higher wages and upward mobility as the main reasons for moving to the West, escaping oppressive discrimination in the South was additional motivation. Mack Jones, who left Mississippi in 1951 to seek a high-paying job in northern Arizona sawmills, said, "Well, what you had to think about was, you wouldn't be lynched, and you would get the same wages that the white guy got." Records show that by the 1940s, after the unions organized the workers, wages for black men in the northern Arizona lumber industry were roughly equal to those of Anglo whites and Mexican Americans, though Anglos still held the bulk of managerial positions.¹⁶

TRAVELING WEST

Single males or male heads of family commonly made the westward migration to Flagstaff and northern Arizona alone or with coworkers. After arriving, married men generally waited until they had secured employment and living quarters before sending for their wives and children to join them. In the meantime, most sent money home to support their families. These migrations provide a window into gender roles and female agency, as some women, often in their early twenties, refused to move west with their husbands, preferring to remain with their families in the South. Daniel Broomfield, who left Mississippi in 1945 to work in the Flagstaff lumber industry, was among those whose wives refused to move west. "I sent her money to come with," he said. When she failed to respond, "I said, 'Well, she don't wanna come, she don't wanna come.'" Although males were considered the heads of household, women were still able to control their lives in important ways, in this instance by choosing to not migrate.¹⁷

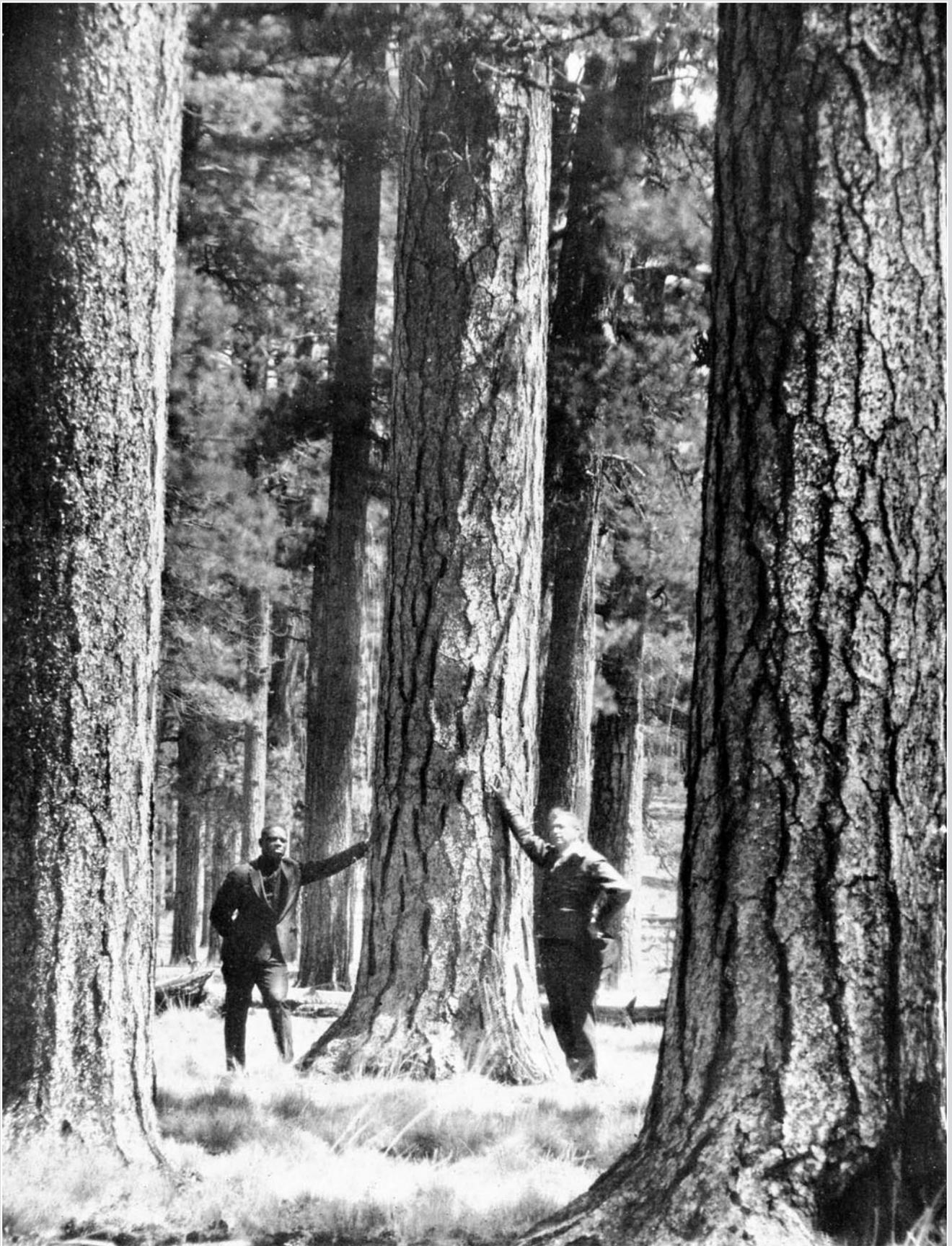
The westward migration of African Americans makes clear the era's differences in mobility for African Americans and whites. It also illustrates how blacks negotiated racial barriers while traveling. While in the South, blacks experienced a sense of autonomy and power within their own community; traveling made them feel exposed. Placed in uncomfortable situations and in close proximity to whites, they were unsure how to act. Most migrants bound for northern Arizona lumber camps took the train, which

conveniently stopped in Flagstaff. Train cars were segregated throughout the South until roughly the stop following St. Louis; even then, many dining establishments at stops along the way either refused to allow blacks inside or imposed segregated seating. Jim Crow laws and customs created anxiety and caused confusion for some African Americans, especially as they crossed state lines and encountered unfamiliar or different rules. Broomfield, for example, was uneasy sitting next to white people on the train from Jackson, Mississippi, to Flagstaff, where he followed his parents in 1945. After switching trains in Amarillo, Texas, an older white woman sat down next to him. Years later, he recalled that "I wanted to get up and move, and I did!" He explained, "Well, I was just scared. I don't sit aside no white person." The woman, who turned out to be from California, asked, "What you runnin' for?" To which he responded, "Well I'm not supposed to be sittin' beside you." The woman explained that he could sit beside her all he wanted. Later, she took him to the dining car and bought him lunch. When people stared at them, she told Broomfield, "Don't worry about it, they ain't gonna say a word."¹⁸

Although most migrants rode the train to Flagstaff, a few traveled west in automobiles. Because of wartime rationing, not many working-class African Americans owned automobiles. Few cars were produced during the war, making them scarce and generally affordable only to more affluent whites. Although automobiles offered an enclosed space and a degree of separation from racial discrimination, they frequently raised other problems. African Americans who traveled by automobile were typically unable to find adequate lodging; forced to sleep along the roadside, they hastened to their destinations. Dining along American highways was also problematic, as most cafes and restaurants enforced discriminatory practices that African American motorists tried to avoid by preparing their own meals. Even stopping to use the restroom was challenging.¹⁹

James W. Williams's experience driving west with three other lumber workers in 1942 illustrates these problems. Asked if the trip had been peaceful, Williams retorted: "Peaceful, yeah. Such as people could be. At that particular time you couldn't sleep or eat anyplace. You had to get a store-bought lunch if you were going to eat, no cafés." Pressed to explain, he elaborated: "You could go to a café, but you had to go around back.... You'd have to drive all night and have to look for the colored part of town, maybe you could find a room." Rather than go through this charade, Williams and his friends stopped along the side of the road to sleep—four adults in the car—and then woke up and kept driving. "We never slept in a hotel or motel," Williams recalled. Whereas in the South, African Americans were familiar with segregation laws and knew where to find all-black communities that would offer them hospitality, on the road the situation was much different.²⁰

Problems of this nature led Victor Green to publish a "negro travel guide," called the *Green Book*, aimed at helping African American travelers find accommodations while "avoiding humiliation." Published from 1936 to 1966, the widely read booklet offered state-by-state and city-by-city listings of fuel stations, restaurants, and lodging establishments that catered to African Americans. In a sense, the *Green Book* allowed blacks to extend along highways across the country the insulated communities in which they lived and exercised control, thereby avoiding humiliation and violence. Even with the stark differences separating African American and Anglo versions of mobility, the automobile



AMERICAN LUMBERMAN, APRIL 10, 1926

The American Lumberman had several photos of men standing among the white pine trees for scale. There are several with two white men in the photo, and several with a single African American man. This is the only one with both a white and black man.

was still seen as a fleeting symbol of freedom and autonomy from the racial politics that dominated American life, especially in the South. The automobilist was able to control, to some extent, his or her pace, direction, and destination. Blacks could ride in the driver's seat, instead of being forced to the back of the bus. And yet, this autonomy went only so far. Every driver and passenger would eventually have to pull over and interact with strangers, some of whom might be hostile. Even so, the *Green Book* increased the sense of freedom for African Americans moving across unfamiliar terrain.²¹

ADAPTING AND ADJUSTING TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS

African Americans who participated in the Great Migration encountered different circumstances depending on their destination. The dominant course was north to big industrial cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and New York, where low-level positions in defense industries were open to African Americans during the war. Aside from defense work, the steel and meatpacking industries appear to have commonly drawn African Americans north. Once there, they often moved into crowded and unhealthy inner-city tenements. Those who moved to the urban West during the early 1940s commonly found work in the defense industry or in the fields outside Los Angeles and Phoenix. Rather than offering freedom from residential discrimination, communities like Phoenix were segregated, with most African Americans and ethnic Mexicans living in disease-ripe slums on the south side of the city. Other southern blacks settled in seasonal labor camps, where conditions for minority workforces were highly exploitive. Still other African American migrants moved to rural towns centered on the cotton industry south of Phoenix.²²

Blacks who moved to Flagstaff in the 1940s and early 1950s discovered a small but quickly expanding mountain community of roughly five thousand people. By 1940, the population had grown 25 percent in ten years. John L. Williams recalled that when he arrived in 1944, most of the streets were unpaved, even downtown, and neighborhoods south of the railroad tracks lacked sidewalks. Although other sources report that Route 66 and several downtown streets were, in fact, paved by 1940, Williams's recollection provides insight into the process of forging an identity within a small and rustic but growing town. What is now Northern Arizona University was then only a small teaching college consisting of a few buildings scattered south of Flagstaff's downtown. Today's south campus was wooded hunting ground. Apart from lumber mills and the small community of Sunnyside, nothing interrupted the tree-filled landscape east of town.²³

Most Flagstaff residents were Anglo and lived north of the train tracks that divided the community both spatially and racially. The town's large minority of ethnic Mexicans resided alongside a smaller community of African Americans south of the tracks. Native Americans, mostly Navajo and Hopi, lived in town and on nearby reservations, or commuted back and forth. Although Flagstaff was less overtly segregated than southern communities, there was a clear separation between white and minority homes and businesses.²⁴

Even with a severe housing shortage resulting from the town's rapid growth in the mid-1940s, family and friends helped African American migrants find places to live and work fairly soon after they arrived. Most accommodations were far from desirable, however. Few oral history accounts dwell on the crowded and uncomfortable housing; interviewees instead talked about their

excitement at arriving in northern Arizona and reestablishing contact with relatives and acquaintances. Friends and family members often met migrants at the train station and directed them to boarding houses or residences on the town's south side. Some, like Broomfield, asked strangers to direct them to the "negro quarters" and were pointed toward the bustling social center of South San Francisco Street (south of the tracks from downtown), where African American restaurants, clubs, and bars were interspersed with ethnic Mexican establishments. From there, members of Flagstaff's relatively small and close-knit black community might direct newcomers to wherever they needed to go. Many of the new arrivals stayed in boarding houses or with acquaintances until they could find jobs and begin looking for homes of their own. Their ability to use connections within the community, often acquaintances they had known previously in the South, was critical in helping them become situated in a new, unfamiliar environment. In effect, migrants were able to recreate some aspects of the communities they had left behind, even though there were far fewer blacks, and the racial order was substantially different, in Flagstaff.²⁵

Most men with prior experience and work connections quickly found employment with either Saginaw and Manistee Lumber or Southwest Lumber Industries, the two major companies in the area until 1953, when Southwest took over its major competitor. Raymond Flemons simply showed up with his friends who worked at the mill and was hired on the spot, without so much as an interview. But not everyone was so lucky. Broomfield was unable to find work for six months. Until he got a position at the lumber mill, he survived by selling liquor to Native Americans, who were legally prohibited from purchasing alcohol in bars. Previous experience and company connections were critical in landing a job in the lumber industry.²⁶

As in the South, lumber work was divided between cutting logs in the forest (near the Happy Jack logging camp forty-two miles south of town) and working in the sawmills (along the railroad tracks within city limits). Ben Shird already had a job when he arrived in 1945: he said he had been recruited from the South as a skilled timber feller. He worked spring, summer, and fall at Happy Jack and during the winter at the sawmill in town. Although the work was difficult and dangerous, Shird moved through the ranks to higher-paid positions. Shird said his approach was to let his boss know of any job he desired so that when an opening came up, the boss knew Shird was interested. Shird's ability to navigate Flagstaff's racial politics was also likely crucial to his success. For example, it would have been important to know how aggressive he could be to gain respect from white employers while not directly challenging the racial norms.

James W. Williams also quickly found work because of his previous experience in the South. Like Shird, he had a seasonal job cutting timber for Southwest Lumber, then worked at a local steam plant in the winter. Since most of the new arrivals had lumber industry experience, the work was familiar—only in Flagstaff, they were earning higher wages and working with larger trees. Even though whites still held the management positions, blacks had more potential for upward mobility than in the South. Company records show that by the late 1940s, African Americans were working in the upper levels of skilled labor, such as lumber foremen in charge of cutting crews, and earning wages in the top bracket below management.²⁷

Still, blacks were not equal in the white-dominated economy. African Americans might earn more in northern Arizona and



An African American worker at Flagstaff's Southwest Lumber Company in 1947.

American lumbermen, purchased land from the Babbitt brothers for one hundred dollars down and cash installments thereafter, when prominent business owners vouched for him. Other African Americans used their higher wages to buy brand-new automobiles within a few years of their arrival in Flagstaff. But they were exceptions. Private property and new automobiles were uncommon luxuries in Flagstaff's black community.³⁰

Although race relations were generally similar to what the immigrants had experienced in the South, Flagstaff's black community was much smaller than in most rural southern towns, which meant more interaction between blacks and whites and more

dependence on the town's white elite for everyday needs. Interviews confirm that although not all of Flagstaff's African American residents improved their lot, many were able, through hard work and navigating the racial politics of northern Arizona, to attain the upward mobility they were looking for when they moved. Whether through business savvy or religious leadership, enterprising individuals were able to carve out opportunities for themselves.

move to higher positions than was possible in the South, but they had to be adept at understanding and manipulating the opportunities offered to them. Whereas American mythology held that hard work would bring success, many working-class people—Anglos and people of color alike—found this not to be the case. Working hard was important, but race, class, connections, and an understanding of how to negotiate often-unspoken racial codes in order to avoid conflict were equally crucial.²⁸

The same can be said of African American women in the workforce, most of whom found low-status jobs in Flagstaff's quickly developing service sector. After the war, the town began attracting growing numbers of tourists en route to the Grand Canyon. Many would stop to eat and stay for the night. The most common jobs for African American women were washing dishes or cooking in restaurants, although a large number also worked as domestics for affluent whites, which suggests continuity between the West and the South in terms of how working relationships were framed between blacks and whites. Other women stayed at home, raised their children, and cooked meals for their families. Still others operated businesses. Viola Chapman, for example, ran El Rancho Grande, Flagstaff's only black-owned bar, for almost twenty years after her husband's death.²⁹

Most newcomers with jobs and solid pay rented homes on Flagstaff's south side, where discriminatory housing practices forced African Americans and ethnic Mexicans to reside. Representative of many migrant living situations was Hickman's uncle's large house, where her family and other lumber workers boarded. Six to eight men lived there, and the women cooked and cleaned. Over time, some families were able to save enough money to buy property and build homes, often using low-grade lumber donated by the company that employed them. Because banks often refused to lend money to African Americans, home and land ownership among Flagstaff blacks was rare. Raymond Flemons, a well-respected preacher in the black community, was an exception when he obtained his bank loan. Similarly, John L. Williams, a foreman who earned higher wages than most African

While it remained small in relation to the dominant Anglo white population, and even to the Mexican American community, Flagstaff's African American population increased, from 115 in 1930 to 667 in 1950. Although only elementary schools were officially segregated, in practice movie theaters, bars, and restaurants all restricted black access. As in Phoenix, Flagstaff's black citizens were relegated to theater balconies into the 1950s. Nor would some restaurants in the white business district serve blacks. Aside from work, most African Americans spent much of their lives south of the tracks, participating in church activities or enjoying the bars and restaurants along South San Francisco Street. In either case, they were attempting to recreate the community structure that many had left behind in the South.³¹

The church was the center of spiritual and community life for many of Flagstaff's newly arrived African Americans. Hickman's social circle completely revolved around the church, and she mostly avoided the crowds drinking and gambling along San Francisco Street. Melvin Williams, who was born in 1942, remembered the 1940s and 1950s as very church-oriented for his family, especially Sundays: "We went to Sunday school, we went to church, and then we went to Bible Training Union in the evenings. So Sunday was an all-day church day." For some, church membership overlapped with membership in fraternal orders like the Black Masons and Black Elks Club, both of which were important community social organizations. The latter was primarily a thriving dance hall and drinking establishment during the 1950s, but the Elks also gave scholarships for the top African American young scholars in the neighborhood to attend Northern Arizona University.³²

FOREST HISTORY TODAY | SPRING/FALL 2016

The bars and clubs on San Francisco Street were also integral parts of the Flagstaff's African American community. According to Okie Taylor, besides the Elks Club, El Rancho Grande was the only place where blacks could go out and have a drink throughout the 1940s and into the 1960s. Run by Lloyd and Viola Chapman, the bar was next door to Charlie Scotto's pool hall on San Francisco Street. Together, they offered release in the form of strong drink, music, and dancing. At the more risqué end of the social scene, gambling and prostitution were common along San Francisco Street.

Nearly all the interviewees remembered a tight-knit African American community where people looked out for one another. James W. Williams recalled, "There were just a few of us. Everyone knew everybody. I even knew all the kids." In fact, the neighborhood adults formed a disciplinary network for young children: several interviewees recalled that any adult in town was likely to discipline them if they were caught misbehaving. Neighbors shared game killed on frequent hunting trips, as well as homegrown vegetables. All in all, their Flagstaff experience reminded many newcomers of their southern upbringing. But important differences existed as well. Strict segregation in the South meant that blacks often owned their own businesses, organized their own churches, and controlled their own neighborhoods; Flagstaff's African American community was much smaller and African Americans worked and socialized in much greater proximity to whites on a daily basis. In Flagstaff, African Americans worked to create a sense of empowerment on a smaller scale than in the South.

Outwardly, race relations in Flagstaff were cordial, especially compared with the overt oppression of lynching and violence in the South. Jonnie Lee Egan, for example, credited newspaper editor Platt Cline with assisting local African Americans, especially when it came to helping educate young people. Other interviewees mentioned respectful working relationships with their white bosses and coworkers. Still, racial discrimination and de facto segregation were the norm in Flagstaff, as elsewhere in Arizona, until the 1960s: sheriffs enforced segregation in restaurants and movie theaters even though they were not legally obliged to.³³

During the civil rights era Arizona promoted itself as more progressive than the South, but it often fell far short of the mark. The children of Flagstaff's African American immigrants grew up knowing that certain places were off-limits and that they should avoid conflict with whites. In 1960, Melton Williams was elected the first black student body president of Flagstaff High School. Although his election appears to be evidence of the town's progressive racial outlook, the student body's white vice president took Williams's place to escort the white homecoming queen onto the football field. According to Williams, "Those kinds of things give you a sense of the times." The anecdote is a telling example of the strong current of discrimination that still flowed in Arizona.³⁴

Racial tensions also affected the seemingly cordial relations between blacks and ethnic Mexicans. African Americans were frequently denied access to El Charro Mexican restaurant on Flagstaff's south side until a successful sit-in by the black community stopped this discriminatory practice in the early 1960s. Likewise, many ethnic Mexican residents strongly discouraged African Americans from moving to Sunnyside. Judging from the oral history interviews, most interactions between African Americans and Native Americans revolved around blacks' selling bootlegged liquor to Native people at exorbitant prices. Elsewhere, interactions among Flagstaff's racial and ethnic minorities were positive and mutually

beneficial. Graham, the African American foreman of a mixed crew of black, Mexican, and Native American log cutters, fondly recalled that Native people were the fastest learners with whom he had ever worked.³⁵

COMPARING THE SOUTH WITH FLAGSTAFF

Interviewees who reflected on racial politics in the South versus Flagstaff generally concluded that they were similar. Robert Joe, born in northern Arizona and active in Flagstaff's NAACP youth council, said, "I don't think it was a lot of a change for our parents after they left the South. I think in the South, like they always say, it's just obvious. . . . I think it was more covered up, or tried to be covered up, in Flagstaff and other places that was away from the South."³⁶

In a similar vein, Melton Williams said, "Well, there were two different cultures. There was a culture [of] who was in control, and those who were subject to control. That was a southern tradition. And it came to Arizona with the lumber mill." He observed, "From what I've heard, people who grew up in southern Arizona, it came with the cotton and that industry from the South. Now, kids were somewhat sheltered from it. But the adults, who lived and worked daily, were very much aware of it."

Williams was quick to point out that not all white people were overtly or intentionally racist, explaining that "a lot of good people looked out for others because they were people—not because they were one color or another." Still, when he was growing up, it was common for Williams and his friends to call Arizona the "Mississippi of the West" because of its strong ties to the southern racial order and resource extraction-based economy. Thus, even as westward migration gave African Americans the possibility of greater upward economic mobility, these advances were made possible by the same forces that brought southern norms of racial subjugation to the West. And by moving to a region with a smaller black population, African Americans lost some of the autonomy they were accustomed to in the vibrant (if strictly segregated) black communities they had left behind in the South. These were just some of the compromises they were forced to make while seeking opportunity in the rural West.

Ultimately, the history of Flagstaff's African American migrants expands our understanding of the Great Migration and, more broadly, of the development of the twentieth-century United States. They are clear examples of how African Americans could employ skills they had acquired in the South to achieve the typical Great Migration goals of higher wages and upward social and economic mobility. In doing so, they provide insights into the continuities and differences of southern and western racism and show how migration changed the nature of the African American community.

In the end, the skilled lumber workers and their families who moved west achieved their goals and, in the process, demonstrated the resilience of the African American community. Perhaps most striking is the power of communication and relationship networks in accommodating and navigating life changes. It was lumber companies' recruitment that prompted westward migration, but communication lines and community support systems were central to the success of African American migrant families. Despite the danger and uncertainty, the journeys these men and women undertook were made easier by the knowledge that someone was waiting for them on the other side. After all, as Katherine Hickman stood amid crowds of exotic strangers in the pouring

rain at the Flagstaff train station in 1944, it was not until she glimpsed her family that the Southwest began to feel a little bit more like home. □

Jack Reid is a history instructor at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. A longer version of this article was first published as "The 'Great Migration' in Northern Arizona: Southern Blacks Move to Flagstaff, 1940–1960," in The Journal of Arizona History, Vol. 55, No. 4: 469–98 and received the Theodore C. Blegen Award for the best scholarship in forest and conservation history published in a journal other than Environmental History. Readers can find full, expansive citations in the original article.

NOTES

1. Katherine Hickman, interview by Carol Maxwell, 1998, African American Pioneers in Flagstaff Oral History Collection, Arizona Humanities Council, Northern Arizona University Cline Library Special Collections, Flagstaff (all interviews cited in this article are from this collection and conducted by Carol Maxwell); W. T. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands* (Woodville, TX: Dogwood Press, 1996), 178–93; Robert Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry, 1917–1947" (master's thesis, Northern Arizona University, 1992), 38–40.
2. The majority of scholarship on the Great Migration focuses on the largest stream of emigrants who traveled from the South to northern industrial cities in the early- to mid-twentieth century. However, a growing historical trend has been to study the relatively smaller migrant flow that moved to western metropolitan areas, such as Phoenix, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Moving one step farther from the mainstream, this essay builds on Geta LeSeur's study of African American cotton workers' migration to the rural West, *Not All Okies Are White: The Lives of Black Cotton Pickers in Arizona* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
3. Felton Combs, interview, October 1, 2002; Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22–54.
4. Grady Graham, interview, April 22, 2002.
5. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*, 67–68; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 38–40; Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection 47, Box 436, Correspondence, 1947, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
6. Hickman, interview.
7. James W. Williams, interview, May 13, 2002; Combs, interview.
8. Graham, interview; James W. Williams, interview; Combs, interview.
9. Combs, interview; James W. Williams, interview.
10. Graham, interview.
11. Blyden Jackson, "Introduction: A Street of Dreams," in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, ed. Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), xvii; Earl Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey* (Los Angeles: Middle Passage Press, 2000), 29–36; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 101–108; Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*, 4–5; LeSeur, *Not All Okies Are White*, 15–18.
12. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*, 4–5; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 41, 108; John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 14–51; Bradford Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix: A Profile of Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American Communities, 1860–1992* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 149–72.
13. Platt Cline, *Mountain Town: Flagstaff's First Century* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1994), 357; Eric Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 155–79; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 77–79; Employment Security Commission of Arizona, "Labor Market Information Statement for Flagstaff Area, October 1947," Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection 47, Box 435, Folder 1, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
14. John L. Williams, interview, December 14, 1999; Ben Shird, interview, August 12, 1999.
15. Daily Time Sheets, July 25, 1954, September 1, 1954, October 1, 1954, November 1, 1954, Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company, Collection 84, Box 12, Folder 450, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
16. Mack Jones, interview, September 9, 1999. Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 68.
17. Daniel Broomfield, interview, August 13, 1999. Raymond Flemons's wife also refused to move because she did not want to be away from her family.
18. Broomfield, interview.
19. Thomas Sugrue, "Driving While Black: The Car and Race Relations in Modern America," *The Automobile in Life and Society*, accessed at <http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/>; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*, 35–36; Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 68–91; Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 105–28.
20. James W. Williams, interview.
21. Rugh, *Are We There Yet?*, 68–91; Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 105–28; Sugrue, "Driving While Black." Others took the bus and experienced the same discriminatory practices. When Grady Graham traveled west via bus, his wife packed lunches so that he would not have to patronize bus station cafes.
22. Jackson, "Introduction: A Street of Dreams," xvii; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*, 29–36; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 158–61; Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 38–42; Meeks, *Border Citizens*, 118–19; LeSeur, *Not All Okies Are White*, 100–04.
23. Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 105–16; U.S. Census Bureau, *Sixteenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 381; Cline, *Mountain Town*, 375–78; Flagstaff Historic Properties Survey, Final Report, 1985, NAU Cline Library. Vance states that Sunnyside came about in 1937 and was populated by Mexicans. Blacks were strongly discouraged from settling there.
24. John L. Williams, interview. The information here is culled from oral history interviews and from Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," 52–56.
25. Employment Security Commission of Arizona, Labor Market Information for Flagstaff Area, October, 1947, Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection 47, Box 435, Folder 1, NAU Cline Library Special Collections; Broomfield, interview; Hickman, interview.
26. Historical Note, Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company, Collection 84, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
27. Cline, *Mountain Town*, 358. Although other employers existed, such as the power and steam plant, the logging camp and sawmills were the primary places of employment.
28. Meeks, *Border Citizens*, Chapter 6.
29. Sarah Knight, interview, December 7, 1999; Sally Viola Chapman, interview, January 26, 2000.
30. Meeks, *Border Citizens*, 158–59. Also see Meeks for information on discriminatory practices in Phoenix. Raymond Flemons, interview, May 29, 2002.
31. Flemons, interview. Wilson Riles, who was the principal at the black elementary school, an integral figure in the church, and a local disc jockey, fought this segregation most aggressively. Platt Cline, a well-known Flagstaff journalist and writer, praised Riles as the man who most changed minds about segregation during the 1950s. Cline, *Mountain Town*, 394; William Cummins, "A History of Flagstaff Public Schools" (1987), unpublished monograph, Arizona Collection, Flagstaff Public Library, 33–39.
32. Melton Williams, interview, August 3, 2002; John L. Williams, interview.
33. Jonnie Lee Egan, interview, April 29, 2002; Cline, *Mountain Town*, 394; Cummins, "A History of Flagstaff Public Schools," 33–39. J. Peery Francis, a Texan who was first elected sheriff in 1940 and reelected until 1954, was primarily responsible for enforcing segregation in Flagstaff. According to Mack Taylor, Francis was often cruel to African Americans.
34. Melton Williams, interview.
35. Graham, interview. The El Charro sit-in was mentioned in numerous interviews, but Melvin Williams offers the most detailed and accurate account.
36. Robert Joe and Jack Peters, interview, 2002.