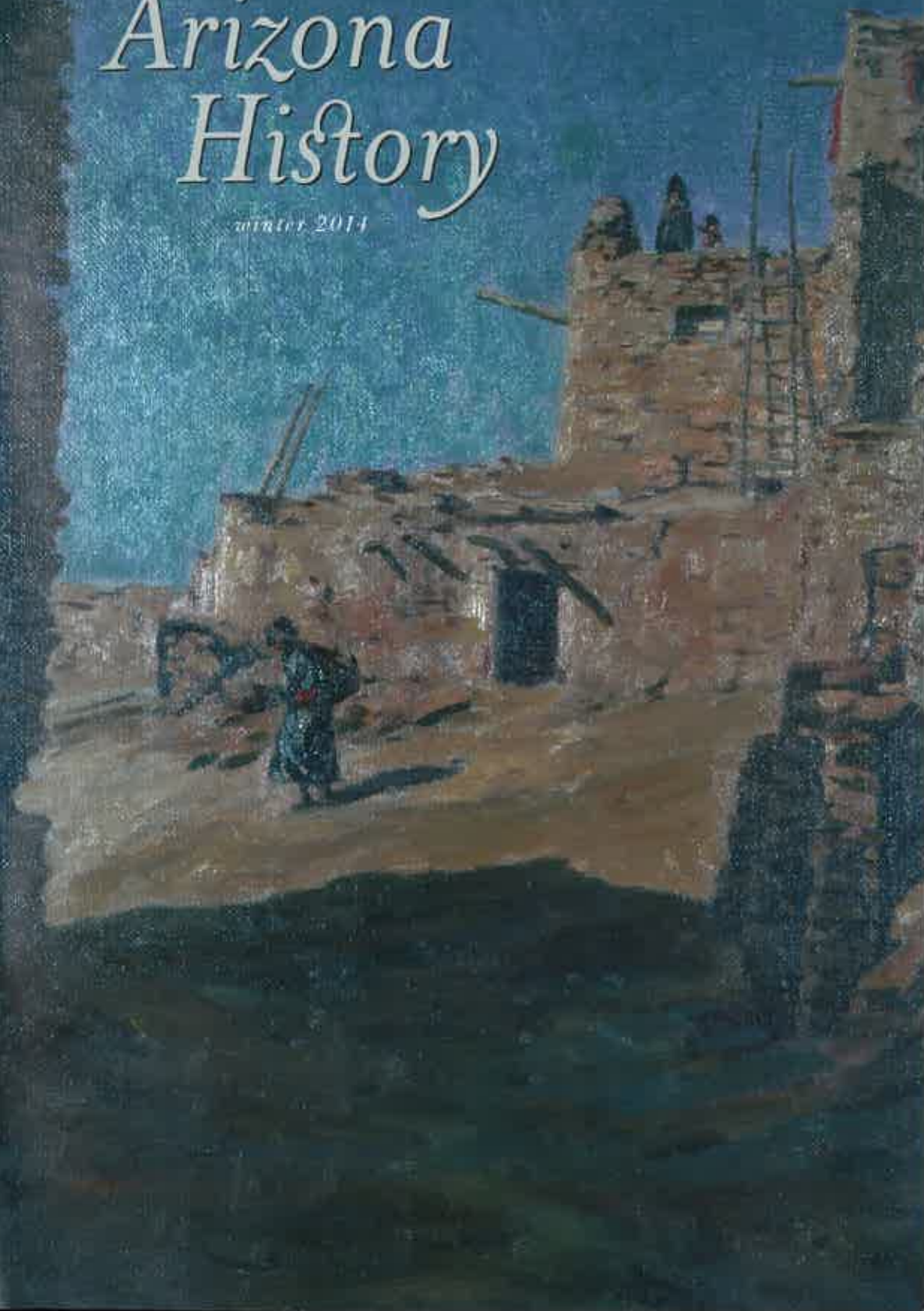


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THE "GREAT MIGRATION" IN NORTHERN ARIZONA Southern Blacks Move to Flagstaff 1940-1960

by
Jack Reid

ON JULY 5, 1944, twenty-two year old Katherine Hickman and her older sister arrived in Flagstaff, Arizona, from Louisiana, 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 were leaving the South for the first time and knew very little about the West. With their knowledge of Native Americans culled from popular culture, the pair was 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 WWII, 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 was devastating to 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 lumber in the 1920s. These family connections provided him with a place to stay while

The author is a Ph.D. student in history at Northern Arizona University. This article began as a project in a research course taught by Professor Eric Meeks.

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Eric -
Thanks for helping to get
this project jumpstarted and
for encouraging me to
publish it.
- Jack

he found work in the more lucrative lumber business of northern Arizona. Katherine and her sister's husbands, 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 and 1950s in what historians have dubbed the "Great Migration." Most continued on to California, but some settled in northern Arizona. Mainly from Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, they moved west in search of opportunity and upward economic mobility, but also to escape racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South. Most moved because they had heard, via family and work-related connections, that the logging industry in Flagstaff and northern Arizona offered opportunity and higher wages in an occupation that most of the men already performed. This migration sheds light on racial politics within both the rural South and the West during the postwar years. Although more subtle, racial discrimination nonetheless prevailed across northern Arizona, which meant that migrating African Americans had to learn a new racial order. With a smaller black community to fall back on, many African Americans looked to cultural institutions, such as the church and social clubs, to recreate the familiar community atmosphere they had left behind. 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 Dr. Carol Maxwell between 1998 and 2002, and now housed in the collections of Northern Arizona University's Cline Library. Their recollections offer first-hand insight into how individuals perceived their experiences and how they understood their move to northern Arizona.²

Origins

A significant majority of African Americans who moved to Flagstaff during the 1940s and 1950s had roots in the rural South—Louisiana, Mississippi, and to a lesser extent East Texas—during the depression era. 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



The Arizona Lumber and Timber Company is on the right in this 1950 photograph of U.S. Highway 66 entering Flagstaff from the west. AHS. PH.347.52. Arizona Historical Society, Flagstaff.

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 autonomy from the Jim Crow laws and racial etiquette that governed all encounters between blacks and whites. For example, as a child, Combs watched with his father as five white men beat to death with axe handles a black man who owed them money. Thereafter, Combs's father kept his children safe from danger within a five-mile radius of the family farm. 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 left their insolated communities, however, a far different reality greeted them. Not only were schools, restaurants, and movie theatres segregated, but blacks were expected to conform to white 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 he was never 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 etiquette would likely end up dead. As much as African Americans resented this 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 were pervasive elements in the early lives of most postwar African American migrants to northern Arizona. 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 breadwinner worked alongside whites and, to a lesser extent, ethnic Mexicans. While Mexican workers were less common in Louisiana than in the Southwest, 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 if 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." Although the black quarter of the camp may have offered a respite from discrimination, it only went so far. 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 segregated nature of the company town, there was only one commissary where workers could purchase groceries. Katherine Hickman explained that "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. While adult male incomes were crucial to a family's survival, women such as Katherine and her sisters and mother played important roles in establishing 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, Grady Graham's family worked a white man's farm. The landowner furnished them with mules and plows and, in return, kept half of what they produced. Some black families owned their own land. James W. 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 Felton 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 all types of food in their gardens, and often made their own clothes. Most depression-era families recognized the truth in Grady Graham's axiom, "if you didn't raise it or grow it, you didn't have it." James W. 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. Felton 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 doctor visits—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 you see." Combs underscored the importance of religion when he added that "everybody had everything in common, it was kind of biblical in that way." Other black families had different experiences. When James W. 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 for 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, Grady 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 (laughter)," he joked. It seems that by age twenty, most young men advanced into more dangerous and skilled work, either as log cutters or mill workers, if they were not drafted to fight in WWII. At age twenty-one, in 1936 Graham, who liked the fast pace of working in the woods, began working as a lumber cutter for the Great Southern Lumber Company in Carthage, Mississippi. Because he "just wanted to get out and see the world," after two years he moved to Louisiana, where he continued to cut lumber for the 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 cutting down timber. It was hard labor, and most did not make much money. Although timber

cutting was a relatively high-skilled position, wages were low due to the generally depressed southern economy and the declining quality of the lumber being cut. Nor did it help that racial politics dictated that white men make 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 follow.

Migrations

The "Great Migration" is often broadly divided into three corridors: east to areas like New York City; Midwest to cities like Chicago; 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. Early in the decade, the Cady Lumber Company of Louisiana bought tracts of land previously owned by the Apache Lumber Company near Arizona's White Mountains. By 1924, the Cady Lumber Company had depleted the forests it harvested in Louisiana and had failed in its attempts to buy new tracts in the South. Subsequently, the company moved more than five hundred of its black laborers and their families to McNary, Arizona, where Cady set up its new lumber operation. Several years later, groups of black workers moved to Flagstaff to avoid a 1928 typhoid epidemic and to escape the isolation of the White Mountains. Because much 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 further cemented the route between the southern states and northern Arizona.¹¹

The economic pull of northern Arizona on African American timber workers was compelling. Over the span of the 1920s through the 1950s, forests in Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi were depleted of lumber. Wood harvested in the region was smaller and of poorer quality, and consequently brought lower financial returns, than lumber cut elsewhere. In effect, the low-grade wood being produced

in the South meant that wages there were depressed in relation to other timber producing regions. 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. WWII created a large demand for lumber, which in turn generated brisk competition for labor. After the high unemployment of the Great Depression, Flagstaff lumber companies began experiencing labor shortages. Rather than quickly dissipating, this boom market was sustained in the post-war years by the growth of metropolitan areas (specifically Phoenix) fueled by defense contracts and migration.¹²

Meanwhile, the rise of strong industrial unions during the 1940s created 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 also led effective strikes for across-the-board wage increases at lumber yards in Flagstaff and northern Arizona during the mid to late 1940s and into the 1950s. 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 lumber men to migrate. African American workers interviewed fifty years later recalled abundant opportunities in northern Arizona during this period. In addition, the existence of an established migration route meant that many southern blacks already had contacts in Arizona who could help them find work, secure housing, and make the move more comfortable. No doubt these migrants also hoped that they would face less racial discrimination in the West than in the Jim Crow South.¹³

Oral interviews suggest that most African Americans who left the South for Flagstaff and 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 WWII, 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 [Flagstaff] and make me some 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,



An African American worker at the Southwest Lumber Company. NAU. PH.85.3.231.258.

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 over the course of a week in Louisiana.¹⁴

The scarcity of lumber company pay records, however, complicates this narrative. Time receipts from three separate 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. While much less than they recalled in old age, it nonetheless represented a substantial increase in the wages they had made working 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-to-late 1940s, northern Arizona forests yielded more and higher quality lumber, which would have translated into higher

pay. Either way, it is important to note that 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

Williams's son, Melton, supported his father's recollection that the communication network between lumber workers in Flagstaff and in the South was crucial in African American migrants' decision to move West. "Many of them knew each other before they came out here [Flagstaff]," Melton Williams explained. "Mostly they came out to work in the lumber mill, so a lot of those families worked in the mills before they came out here. Some came because others had come and had written and told them about it. Or on a trip, when they had gone back to visit family, had told them 'Well come out here. There's a job out here.'"¹⁶

While most interviewees stressed higher wages and upward mobility as the main motivating forces for moving West, others balanced monetary gain with their desire to escape oppressive discrimination in the South. Mack Jones, who left Mississippi in 1951 to seek a high-paying job in northern Arizona sawmills, described this additional motivation: "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 wages for black men in the northern Arizona lumber industry were roughly equal to that of Anglo whites and Mexican Americans, even though whites still held the bulk of managerial positions.¹⁷

Single males, or male heads of family, commonly made the westward migration to Flagstaff and northern Arizona alone or with co-workers. Upon their arrival, 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. Interestingly, 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, wistfully recalled the time when his wife refused to move west: "I sent her money to come with." When she failed to respond, ". . . I said, 'well, she don't wanna come,



Southwest Lumber Mill, 1947. NAU.PH.85.3.231.261.

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 west.¹⁸

Due to the segregated nature of the South, and the United States in general, the westward migration of African Americans provides a distinct portrait of the differences in mobility for African Americans and Anglos. It also illustrates how blacks negotiated racial barriers while traveling. Most migrants bound for northern Arizona lumber camps seem to have taken the train, which conveniently stopped in Flagstaff. Train cars were segregated throughout the South until roughly the stop following St. Louis, Missouri; and even then, many dining establishments at stops along the way either refused to allow blacks inside or offered them segregated seating. Racial politics created anxiety for some African Americans, especially as they crossed state lines and encountered unfamiliar laws and customs. Daniel 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!" Asked why, 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." 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.¹⁹

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 during the early to mid-1940s. Few cars were produced during the war, making them scarce and affordable only to more affluent whites. While automobiles offered an enclosed space and a degree of separation from racial discrimination, other troubles frequently arose. African Americans who traveled by automobile were typically unable to find adequate lodging. Many were forced to sleep along the roadside and to move quickly to their destination. Dining along American's highway 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.²⁰

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 cafes." 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 with four adults in the car, and then woke up and kept driving. "We never

slept in a hotel or motel," Williams recalled. As much as racial discrimination was most oppressive in the South, at least there it was clearly understood and, consequently, more easily negotiated by southern blacks. Whereas, in the South, African Americans were familiar with the nuances of segregation laws and knew of all-black communities that would offer them hospitality when necessary, on the road the situation was much different.²¹

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 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 his or her pace, direction, and destination. Blacks could ride in the driver 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.²²

Adaptation

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 WWII. 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



Workers at the Southwest Lumber Mill, 1948. NAU.PH.85.3.231.252.

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 they found conditions among the highly concentrated minority work forces highly exploitive. Still other African American migrants moved to rural towns centered on the cotton industry south of Phoenix.²³

Blacks who moved to Flagstaff in the 1940s and early 1950s discovered a small, but quickly expanding, mountain community of roughly 5,000 people. By 1940, the population had grown twenty-five 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 made up of a few buildings scattered south of 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.²⁴

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 migrated back and forth. Although Flagstaff was less overtly segregated than southern communities, there was no doubt about its strong desire to keep white and minority homes and businesses separate.²⁵

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 via train or automobile, even if most accommodations were far from desirable. Few oral history accounts dwell on the crowded and uncomfortable housing, preferring instead to express the interviewee's 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 Daniel 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 mingled 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.²⁶



Southwest Lumber Company mill crew, 1948. NAU.PH.85.3.47.242.

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. Daniel Broomfield was unable to find work for six months, until he got a position at the lumber mill in 1946. In the meantime, 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.²⁷

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), or at the sawmills (along the railroad tracks within city limits). Ben Shird already had a job when he arrived in 1945, claiming 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



African American workers at a train derailment of Southwest Forest Industries lumber cargo, ca. 1960. AHS.08.55.00024. Arizona Historical Society, Flagstaff.

higher paid positions. James W. Williams also quickly found work because of his previous experience in the South. Like Shird, he worked seasonally for Southwest Lumber, cutting lumber when possible and then working at a local steam plant in the winter. Since most of the new arrivals had previous experience in the southern lumber industry, the work was familiar; only in Flagstaff, they were earning higher wages and working with larger lumber. Even though whites still held the management positions, blacks in the northern Arizona timber industry appear to have 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.²⁸

Still, blacks were not equal in the white-dominated political economy. African Americans might earn more in northern Arizona, and 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. While the popular logic of the time, in Arizona and elsewhere, maintained that hard work equaled success, many working-class people, Anglos and people

of color, 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 in achieving success.²⁹

This same logic applied to African American women in the workforce, most of whom found low-status jobs in Flagstaff's quickly developing service sector. After WWII, the town began attracting growing numbers of tourists en route to the Grand Canyon. Many would stop to dine, purchase goods, 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. Sarah Knight, who came to Flagstaff in 1941 with her lumberman husband, worked for the well-known physician, Dr. Bob Fronske. 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.³⁰

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, Katherine Hickman's uncle rented out the large house where her family and other lumber workers boarded. Six to eight men lived there, while 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 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



Esther Henderson photograph of an African American timber cutter at McNary, Arizona. NAU.PH.648.96.

and new automobiles were uncommon luxuries within Flagstaff's black community.³¹

Despite strong similarities to the racial politics of 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 upon the town's white elite for everyday needs. Oral history interviews attest to the fact 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 to northern Arizona. Whether through business savvy or religious leadership, enterprising individuals were able to carve out opportunities for themselves.

Although it remained small in relation to the dominant white population, and even to the south-side Mexican American community, Flagstaff's African American populace grew in the 1940s and blossomed into a well-established south-side neighborhood. Where the 1930 census reported 115 blacks living in Flagstaff, the 1950 census recorded 667. Although only elementary schools were officially segregated, in practice movie theatres, bars, and restaurants all restricted black access. As in Phoenix, Flagstaff's black citizens were relegated the balconies in movie theatres 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.³²

The church was the epicenter of spiritual and community life for many of Flagstaff's newly arrived African Americans. Katherine 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



Northern Arizona University students Jack and Ethel Jean Peters. NAU. PH.97.53.50.

community social organizations. While the Elks Club was primarily a thriving dance hall and drinking establishment during the 1950s, the Elks also gave out scholarships for the top African American young scholars in the neighborhood to attend NAU.³³

At the same time, the bars and clubs on San Francisco Street were also integral parts of the Flagstaff's African American community. According to Okie Taylor, aside from 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



Luther Mae Clayton poses in the family driveway. NAU.PH.97.53.39.

of strong drink, music, and dancing. On the more risqué end of the social scene, gambling and prostitution were common along San Francisco Street.

Nearly all the oral history interviewees remembered a tight-knit African American community where everyone knew everyone else and 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, as several interviewees recalled that any adult in town was liable to discipline them if they were caught misbehaving. Neighbors shared game killed on frequent hunting trips, as well as vegetables harvested from their home gardens.

All-in-all, their Flagstaff experience reminded many newcomers of their Southern upbringing. But, important differences existed as well. Where 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, interracial relations in Flagstaff were cordial, especially when compared to 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 enjoying respectful working relationships with their white bosses and co-workers. Still, racial discrimination and de facto segregation were the norm in Flagstaff, as elsewhere in Arizona, from the 1940s through the 1960s, where sheriffs enforced segregation in restaurants and movie theatres even though they were not legally obliged to.³⁴

Although during the civil rights era Arizona promoted itself as more progressive than the South, 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 to them and that they were to avoid conflict with whites. In 1960, Melton Williams was elected the first black student body president of Flagstaff High School. Although upon first glance Williams's election appears to be evidence of the town's progressive racial outlook, the student body's white vice president took Williams's place when the traditional moment arrived for the student body president to escort the white homecoming queen onto the field during Homecoming. 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 flowed beneath Arizona's progressive veneer.³⁵

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



Dunbar School custodian Steve Cunningham. NAU.PH.97.53.38.

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. Grady Graham, the African American foreman of a mixed crew of black, Mexican, and Native American lumber cutters fondly recalled that Native people were the fastest learners with whom he had ever worked.³⁶

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, explained: "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."³⁷

Speaking in a similar vein, Melton Williams, concluded: "Well, there were two different cultures. There was a culture who was in



Louise and Wilson Riles (center) pose in a Flagstaff classroom. NAU.PH.97.53.56.

control, and those who were subject to control. That was a Southern tradition. And it came to Arizona with the lumber mill." He went on to observe that: "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 political economy. Thus, while westward migration produced greater upward economic mobility for African Americans, these advances were made possible by the same forces that brought southern norms of racial subjugation to the West. The move also meant that, by migrating 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 left behind in the South. These were just some of the



Apache dancers perform in downtown Flagstaff, ca. 1960-62. NAU. PH.2006.41.7.29.

compromises they were forced to make while seeking opportunity in the rural West.

Ultimately, Flagstaff's African American migrants offer an interesting alternative to national models of "Great Migration" history and, more broadly, to narratives of the development of the twentieth-century United States. Although small in number, they are clear examples of African Americans employing skills they were familiar with from their southern origins to achieve the typical "Great Migration" goals of higher wages and upward social and economic mobility. In doing so, they provide important insights into the continuities and differences of racial politics between the South and the rural West, and show how migration changed the nature of the African American community. Upon their arrival in Flagstaff, black migrants entered a rural western town with a much smaller local black population than they were accustomed to and where they were compelled to interact much more frequently with whites, as well as

Mexican Americans and Native Americans, than was the custom in the South. While adapting to these changes, many migrants used the church, the black Elk's Club, and other social institutions to recreate the sense of autonomy and comfort they were accustomed to in the tight-knit communities they had left behind.

In the end, these 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. While lumber company recruitment prompted westward migration, communication lines and community support systems were central to the success of African American families who abandoned their southern homes and established new roots in northern Arizona. Although fraught with danger and confusion, 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 amidst 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.

NOTES

1. Katherine Hickman interviewed 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 source); W.T. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands* (Woodville, Tex.: Dogwood Press, 1996), pp.178–93; Robert Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry, 1917–1947" (Master's thesis, Northern Arizona University, 1992).

2. The majority of scholarship on the African American "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. See, Gunner Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991); William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861–1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991). 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. For example, John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture After 1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Bradford Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix: A Profile of Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American Communities, 1860–1992* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994); Thomas Cox, *Blacks in Topeka, Kansas: A Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976); and Marsha Weiseger,

- Land of Plenty: Oklahomans in the Fields of Arizona, 1933-1942* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995). Moving one step farther from the mainstream, this essay follows Geta LeSeur's study of African American migrations to the rural West. See, LeSeur, *Not All Okies are White: The Lives of Black Cotton Pickers in Arizona* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).
3. Felton Combs interview; Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
4. Grady Graham interview (2002). This anecdote is verified by other works on the Jim Crow South, including: Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990); C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Earl Hutchinson, Sr., with Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey Through 20th Century Colored America* (Np.: Middle Passage Press, 2000).
5. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry"; Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection #47, Box 436, Correspondence, 1947, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
6. Katherine Hickman interview.
7. James W. Williams interview (May 13, 2002); Felton Combs interview. For more information on sharecropping and tenant farming in the South, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
8. Grady Graham interview; James W. Williams interview; Felton Combs interview.
9. Felton Combs interview; James W. Williams interview.
10. Grady Graham interview.
11. Harrison, *Black Exodus*; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*; Vance "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry"; Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*; LeSeur, *Not All Okies are White*.
12. Block, *Early Sawmill Towns of the Louisiana-Texas Borderlands*; Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry"; Findlay, *Magic Lands*; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*.
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); Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry"; 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; Harrison, *Black Exodus*.
14. John L. Williams interview; 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. Melton Williams (August 3, 2002). Grady Graham had also heard of work and money from seasonal workers and was motivated to move to Arizona.
17. Mack Jones interview (September 9, 1999). It is very likely that black men did not make the same wages as whites before the success of unions in the 1940s. Meeks, *Border Citizens*, explores this period and the end of "the dual wage system" for Mexican American miners. Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry," p. 68, also supports the notion that equal pay was not achieved until the 1940s. Unemployment Benefit Applications, Employment Security Commission of Arizona, Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection #47, Box 436, Employment Security File, NAU Cline Library Special Collections, allowed me to examine pay scale in terms of race because seasonal lumber employees often applied for unemployment benefits and these applications had a section

- for race (black, white, or other). Interestingly, a large percentage of men with Spanish surnames circled "white," thus shedding light on the fluid nature of race in the Southwest. See Eric Meeks, *Border Citizens*, for more on this concept.
18. 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.
19. Daniel Broomfield interview.
20. Harrison, *Black Exodus*; Thomas Sugrue, "Driving While Black: The Car and Race Relations in Modern America," *The Automobile in Life and Society*, <http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/>; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*; Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).
21. James W. Williams interview.
22. Rugh, *Are We There Yet?*; Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*; Sugrue, "Driving While Black"; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*. 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.
23. Harrison, *Black Exodus*; Hutchinson, *A Colored Man's Journey*; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*; Findlay, *Magic Lands*; Meeks, *Border Citizens*; LeSeur, *Not All Okies are White*.
24. Vance, "Lumber and Sawmill Workers in the Flagstaff Timber Industry"; U.S. Census Bureau, *Sixteenth Census of the United States* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), p. 381; Cline, *Mountain Town*; 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.
25. 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."
26. 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; Daniel Broomfield interview; Katherine Hickman interview.
27. Historical Note, Saginaw and Manistee Lumber Company, Collection #84, NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
28. Cline, *Mountain Town*, p. 358. It is important to note that while other locations existed, such as the power and steam plant, the logging camp and sawmills were the primary places of employment. I did not find specific information on recruitment programs in the lumber archives, even though the companies did indeed post position openings in trade journals that elicited numerous handwritten responses from widely divergent regions in the United States. Perhaps Shird was an exception to the norm, or it is likely that he applied for the job and was hired before he moved west. In regard to facilitating promotions, Shird mentioned that 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. Aside from this, Shird's ability to navigate Flagstaff's racial politics was likely crucial to his success. For example, it would have been important for him to know how aggressive he should be in order to attain respect from white employers, while also being compliant enough so as to not directly challenge the racial norms of the time. I was able to match racial identity with job description and pay by analyzing "Unemployment Benefit Applications" that workers filled out, often because of the seasonal nature of their work. Each document asked employees to define their race as black, white, and other. Thus, employee names can be matched with race, which can then be applied to lists of employee wages found in Employers Contribution and Wage Reports and Employee Record Time Receipts. Unemployment Benefit Applications, Arizona Lumber and Timber Company, Collection #47, Box 436, Employment Security File, and Folder 449 "Employee Records," NAU Cline Library Special Collections.
29. Meeks, *Border Citizens*, Chapt. 6.

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30. Sarah Knight interview (December 7, 1999); Sally Viola Chapman interview (January 26, 2000).
31. Meeks, *Border Citizens*. Also see Meeks for information on discrimination practices in Phoenix. Raymond Flemons interview (May 29, 2002).
32. Raymond Flemons interview. Wilson Riles, who was the principal at the black elementary school, an integral figure in the church, and even 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 in regard to segregation during the 1950s. Cline, *Mountain Town*, p. 394; William Cummins, "A History of Flagstaff Public Schools" (1987), unpublished monograph, Arizona Collection, Flagstaff Public Library.
33. Melton Williams interview; John L. Williams interview.
34. Jonnie Lee Egan interview (April 29, 2002); Cline, *Mountain Town*; Cummins, "A History of Flagstaff Public Schools." J. Peery Francis from Texas, elected sheriff in 1940 and re-elected until 1954, was primarily responsible for enforcing segregation in Flagstaff. According to Mack Taylor's interview, Francis was often cruel to African Americans.
35. Melton Williams interview.
36. Grady Graham interview. The El Charro sit-in was mentioned in numerous interviews, but Melvin Williams seems to offer the most detailed and accurate account.
37. Robert Joe and Jack Peters interview (2002).

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