



Images of Black families, and field workers during the Progressive Era.

Courtesy Photos

A few notable characteristics marked the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, mass industrialization posed challenges to society and culture, such as urbanization, workers' rights, income inequality, and political instability. Political corruption was rife, while efforts to curtail it increased.

Part and parcel of the widespread growth of industrialization can be attributed to the technological advances in electricity, communications such as telephones, and transport with the development of railroads.

In addition, this period,

known as the Progressive Era, included the development of new forms of art, literature, and music that countered traditional modes. Modernism describes this period. These novel changes reflected an estrangement from the prevailing social norms and the creation of social structures to support changing cultural attitudes and perspectives.

The aforementioned generations around the turn of the twentieth century reflect changes within the dominant sociocultural milieu.

However, significant nuances among the identified themes existed for Black populations in this country. At the end of the

Civil War, moderately positive developments occurred for ex-slaves and their descendants. With the adoption of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, during the ensuing twelve years known as the Reconstruction period, Blacks were legally able to assimilate into the larger society, albeit the antebellum social, economic, and political realities were difficult to transcend after slavery had ended.

Building stable lifestyles and acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to achieve a decent quality of life were often nearly impossible. Despite the development of

MISSISSIPPI LIFE & The Beckoning Of the North

institutions that could assist people with their needs, the obstacles were often insurmountable. Because most individuals and families were not given land, capital, or training to make a living, locating the instruments to satisfy their needs and to sustain their lives was overwhelmingly challenging. As a result, many people were forced to remain with their former slave owners to eke out the minimum amount of physical and financial support to survive.

When the period of Reconstruction ended in 1877, the military presence ensuring the security of Blacks in former Confederate states was removed. Consequently, the ability to discriminate against the assimilative efforts of Blacks became possible. Obstruction of justice became easier, and violence against Blacks increased significantly.

For example, the Ku Klux Klan was present during Reconstruction. Klan members targeted not only Blacks, but also white Republicans who were in favor of the abolition of slavery. After Reconstruction, the Klan gradually dissolved, for laws discriminating against Blacks made it unnecessary to continue.

Now, many ex-slaves were initially given land in the undeveloped Delta, despite the hardships of cultivating virgin soil. Some Black farming individuals

and families succeeded against the odds. But as the promise of the nation's Declaration of Independence of the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness seemed attainable for the propertied and others, the rebirth of de jure racial discrimination and exploitation by the end of the nineteenth century resulted in the confiscation of many, if not most, of the tendered land and the multiplication of tenant farming, sharecropping, and the return to a kind of indentured servitude. Thus, by the end of the first decade of the new century, Blacks in the Mississippi Delta—like runaway slaves escaping through the trackless Underground Railroad—commenced viewing the North as the proverbial Promised Land!

Whereas most historians count the beginning of the Great Northward Migration as around 1916, the movement was noticeable—at least in dribs and drabs—considerably earlier. Blacks moved from the South to burgeoning North, Midwest, and West metropolitan areas. Systemic violence, economic

exploitation, segregation, and voter suppression in the South were the main drivers for the extensive exodus to the metaphorical "Heaven"! Heaven on Earth masqueraded as new jobs in industry and increased wages that were advanced concretely by Black-owned newspapers such as the Chicago Defender, the Baltimore Afro-American, and the New York Age. While the North offered a significant improvement over the Jim Crow South, it was far from a paradise. Black migrants quickly discovered that they had traded the explicit, legal segregation of the South for the informal, often subtler, systemic racism of the North! White landowners used restrictive covenants to prevent Black people from moving into specific neighborhoods—resulting in not only overcrowding, but also substandard housing, less access to grants, loans, and credit, and fewer city services and helpful social programs. Migrants faced discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, despite legal protections in some areas.

White resentment over competition for jobs and housing sometimes erupted into violence. However, the above notwithstanding, the North still represented a chance for a new, stabler, and sustainable life.

I am Dr. Michael Blackwell, the Social Ethicist for The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you for having SOUL! ☺

