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From Pike Road to the Big Apple: A Glimpse of Madge Allen

What struck me first and foremost about Ms. Allen is her energy. She speaks with an enthusiasm and speed that most 20 year olds don't match, lively and willing to laugh. What may have struck me next is her straightforwardness- when you ask her a question, Ms. Allen answers it simply, briefly sharing the reasoning behind a decision and leaving out emotions. She's happy to share her experiences from earlier in life, but not looking to talk about them either.

I was drawn to speaking to Ms. Allen for a few reasons. Firstly, though I'm from the North, I spent four years of college in Alabama, and I myself am a migrant to New York. I only realized after she pointed it out that she grew up during segregation in a state I too had experienced during a formative part of my life. And the opportunity to speak to Ms. Allen was also appealing because the preservation of African American history, which I have spent this summer studying, is something she genuinely cares about.

In this essay, I attempt to explore Ms. Allen's personal story as a migrant from the rural South, as well as color it with the broader historical context of the time. Ms. Allen's story is one typical of the Second Great Migration-- a story of relocating for better economic prospects, at least partially and implicitly due to worse treatment of African Americans. As we will see, it's also an optimistic one that tells a story of someone striving for a better life in America who, in New York, was able to achieve it.

Ms. Allen's story: Before the migration

Ms. Allen grew up on a farm in Pike Road, Alabama, a small farm town about 15 miles South of Montgomery. When she was six she started school, like most other children

in Alabama, in a segregated school. Her classes took place in a three-room schoolhouse, where each classroom housed two to three grades. A middle child of five, young Ms. Allen and her two brothers and two sisters would work on the family farm during the week, growing cotton. "That was very hard work", she told me. On Saturdays, the family washed the house, not having had time during the week. About once or twice a month on Sundays, the family would head together to church as well; and otherwise, they played checkers and baseball with friends.

Life on an early 19th century Alabama farm can remind us of how much more comfortable life today has become. As the family's house had no electricity, there was no air conditioning in the Alabama summer, let alone a fan; though she didn't think much of it as a kid, she couldn't believe how hot it was when she visited after some time in New York. Once or twice a week the family would buy ice from a traveling ice seller and stick it in their icebox to keep food cool. ("Food spoils so fast today!" Ms. Allen would tell me in response to my follow up questions on this point.) Young Ms. Allen fetched water daily from a well; and due to the time it took to travel a few miles, her father only went into town about once a month to buy the things they need- specifically those things that they couldn't get from their own farm and garden. In their two bedroom house, the parents had a room, and the five children shared the other - the boys in one bed, the girls in another. When she was in 7th or 8th grade, the house got electrified; and when Ms. Allen was in 10th grade, the family got a washing machine.

Miss Allen went to college when she was 18 or 19, studying Commerce and minoring in English. When I asked what Commerce meant, she said "business, accounting, typing, shorthand... things like that." She loved college, meeting friends and feeling that she learned "so much". Because college was in "the city", referring to Montgomery, she lived with her first cousin and walked to her classes. She graduated from what is today Alabama State University, after four years, in 1959, at the age of 22.

The Great Migration as a Trend in the United States

Between 1917 and 1970, more than four million African Americans left their homes in the rural South and moved to the industrial North in what is known as the First Great Migration from the 1917 to the 1930s, and later the Second Great Migration from the 1940s until 1970. The two primary pull factors for African Americans to move North were better work and an improved racial climate. The South had historically been the poorest region of the country; with the popularity of the cotton gin growing quickly in the twentieth century and a reduced price for the crop overall, African Americans saw fewer opportunities in the South. With transportation such as railways that went from Mississippi and Alabama to Michigan and Ohio, and busses that went from Georgia to Philadelphia and beyond, the early 20th century offered affordable transportation North. In 1910, just 8% black Americans lived outside the South; by 1970, that number had grown to 47%.

Pulled North by the labor shortages of WWI and WWII and pushed away from the South by Jim Crow, the migrations fueled much of America's 20th century economic change. Between 1940 and 1970, the percentage of black people below the poverty line fell from 87% to 30%. Though conditions were better in the North, this certainly didn't mean the end of institutional racism. Black people fared better in the industrial Northern job market but often hit an invisible ceiling in how high they could rise within white organizations. Red-lining and unfair lending practices made home ownership particularly challenging.

The late 20th and early 21st century have seen a reverse migration, with younger African Americans moving back to the South in significant numbers. Today, however, large cities across America much better reflect our racial diversity than they did 100 years ago.

Ms. Allen's story: How the migration happened

Miss Allen's migration story starts in the summer of 1956. A friend told her that she could go to New York and work for \$30 a week, which amazed the 18 year old Madge.

So she found an agent in Alabama, and that summer, boarded a 19 hour bus to head to Manhattan. When she arrived, she went straight to the agency, where someone came in and hired her as a helper, in a role that was something like a live-in maid.

"If you didn't get a teaching job there, there were no other opportunities for you, being an African American- even with the federal government" says Madge of her economic prospects in Alabama. When I inquired as to whether being a woman potentially affected her prospects as well, her answer was pretty clear: no. As an educated black person in Alabama, there were no jobs available to you.

Ms. Allen's migration story focuses primarily on her college summers. Every summer, freshman sophomore and junior, Ms. Allen took the 19 hour bus ride from Montgomery to New York City to find work through an agency. And she found it quickly. Only one year, her third summer in New York, had she not already found work on the day she arrived. That year, she got in contact with a friend from the previous two summers, and spent the first evening at her place. Every other summer, however, she immediately moved into the home of her new employer.

My inquiry into her feelings when she was about to take that first 19 hour bus ride to New York received an "I don't know", and she doesn't seem to have worried about it. "I was feeling good, I wanted to leave", Ms. Allen said of her decision. A cousin told her not to go, but another cousin's wife had promised that if she didn't like it, she would send her the money for the bus ticket back home. "That gave me confidence," Ms. Allen said of her cousin. "I knew any moment that if I didn't like it, I could go back home."

The first year, in 1956, when a Jewish lady picked her up from the agency, they took the ferry over to Staten Island, a place that young Ms. Allen had never heard of. She worked in that woman's house for about a month, before switching over to work for a couple in Brooklyn, and finishing the summer by working in a factory. "That was good," Ms. Allen

would say of the factory work. The next two years she tried to work again for the factory, but she had no way of getting in contact, so followed the same plan she had before.

Unable to get in contact with the first agency, Ms. Allen found a new agency her second year. Once again she worked as a live-in maid, this time in Long Island. Then, the following year, Ms. Allen worked in Manhattan, for a lady she described as a "very nice person" at 83rd and Broadway—a prime location. That summer, her employer wanted her to stay on, but Ms. Allen knew she wanted to finish school- and besides, she was only one year away. Ms. Allen offered the job to her cousin, who had come up to New York with Ms. Allen that summer and was working with someone else, decided to stay on permanently and work at the house, and didn't join her on the bus ride home.

After college, young Ms. Allen headed straight back up to New York, once again working through the agency and then only later, in September, looking for a full time job. "I thought it would be better for me to... find a job in the fall" when everybody else had gone back to work or school, she said of her decision to wait. She knew throughout most of college that she wanted to come back to New York, and you don't get the impression she ever thought twice about it.

It was only after I heard about her work each summer that I discovered how Ms. Allen had first thought about going to New York. "You know, you can go to New York and work for \$30 a week" a cousin had told her. "Whaaat?" Ms. Allen replied to this astounding news.

Ms. Allen's story: After the migration

But if there was any doubt before that first summer, there wasn't after that. Ms. Allen made friends quickly, money she was happy with, and knew every following summer that New York was where she wanted to be.

Young Ms. Allen's career was much fuller in New York than it could have been in Alabama. She began her time with work at a collection agency, or an company that specializes in retrieving debt that companies are owed, as a clerk typist, for her first seven years in the North. This was followed by a brief period of a few years at a research agency. Ms. Allen spent the bulk of her career, 40 full years, with the City of New York.

Ms. Allen says that New York life felt fundamentally less segregated than life in Alabama. This was my question- whether New York felt segregated- and Ms. Allen replied "only in housing". Miss Allen lived in Harlem, where the Great Migration had earlier fueled the Harlem Renaissance, and she's still there today.

When I inquired about her perspective on civil rights as an Alabaman living in New York, the first thing she said was, "I was so busy" with kids. Yet she also reminded me that she had been there in person for quite a bit of the civil rights movement herself. The civil rights movement was exciting because it "felt like we were accomplishing something"- so much so that when bad things happened, they didn't frighten people, even that time she saw the KKK coming up the driveway. Overall, in her view of civil rights, we've made "quite a bit of progress."

"I think it's good besides the police", she says of New York. While never having trouble with the police herself, she says, she's seen the police tell people to button their coat, or anything looking to cause some tension, when people are just minding their business. In Alabama, "in the country", the police knew her family, and Caucasian neighbors would give them a ride to school; in general, cops in Alabama "knew the people" and were more friendly- they'd "give you a hand or help you out." In New York, however, there have been times when she seen kids just laughing and talking, when she senses that officers have looked to make trouble. "I'm glad they stopped that," she says of stop-and-frisk.

Today, Ms. Allen has four children and seven grandchildren. When I first brought them up, she would say, "Oh boy, they were New Yorkers!", referring to the cultural

differences from her hometown. She worked hard to raise them, finding herself incredibly busy in the process— her only break was sending them down in Alabama in July and August to visit her parents, whose house, you'll remember, had since been electrified and had fans. Today, her oldest daughter is a probation officer, and another works for the New York Department of Homeless Services. Her other two children have indeed been participants in the recent reverse migration to the South- one daughter is a nurse in South Carolina, and her son moved to Arizona. Ms. Allen's 28 year-old granddaughter is the only one still living with her.

Conclusion

On a personal note, I realize that there's so much more to Ms. Allen's story than what I've captured here, but my limited impression of her is that she's a true adventurer. When she was 18, she decided that she was going up to New York, and seemed hardly to think twice about it. She doesn't even remember her feelings before or during her 19-hour bus ride to move across the country. Despite having a great and long-lasting relationship with them, her parents never even bothered to weigh in on her choice to move across the country, knowing she was going to do what she wanted. A few weeks back, when trying to schedule an interview with 83-year-old Ms. Allen, I told her that I'm booked 9-6pm during the week- to which she replied, "oh good, you're busy too." She seems to have an attitude of "full steam ahead" in all parts of her active life.

Ms. Allen was, for me, an opportunity to interact with a perspective that's almost entirely new. A child of segregation and life on an Alabama farm, her transition and successful career in New York are a story of tremendous change across the last three-quarters of a century. Energetic and optimistic, with middle-class children and globe-trotting grandkids, she's proof of an America that is, in her words, "a lot better" today than it was for children of her generation, born 83 years ago.

References

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