

Push and Pull Factors for Chicago Immigrants, 1890–1950

Document Set 1: The Great Migration

Document 1.1: “The Land of Hope” by William Crosse

I've watched the trains as they disappeared
Behind the clouds of smoke,
Carrying the crowds of working men To the land of hope,
Working hard on southern soil, Someone softly spoke;
“Toil and toil, and toil and toil, And yet I'm always broke.”
On the farms I've labored hard, And never missed a day;
With wife and children by my side We journeyed on our way.
But now the year is passed and gone, And every penny spent,
And all my little food supplies Were taken 'way for rent.
Yes, we are going to the north! I don't care to what state,
Just as long as I cross the Dixon Line, From this land of southern hate,
Lynched and burned and shot and hung,
And not a word is said.
No law whatever to protect—It's just a “nigger” dead.
Go on, dear brother; you'll ne'er regret;
Just trust in God; pray for the best,
And in the end you're sure to find “Happiness will be thine.”

Source: William Crosse's poem appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, c 1920, and can be accessed at <http://www.georgeking-assoc.com/gointochicago/poetry.html>.

Document 1.2: “Lynch Law in Georgia” by Ida B. Wells-Barnett

CONSIDER THE FACTS.

During six weeks of the months of March and April just past, twelve colored men were lynched in Georgia, the reign of outlawry culminating in the torture and hanging of the colored preacher, Elijah Strickland, and the burning alive of Samuel Wilkes, alias Hose, Sunday, April 23, 1899.

The real purpose of these savage demonstrations is to teach the Negro that in the South he has no rights that the law will enforce. Samuel Hose was burned to teach the Negroes that no matter what a white man does to them, they must not resist. Hose, a servant, had killed Cranford, his employer. An example must be made. Ordinary punishment was deemed inadequate. This Negro must be burned alive. To make the burning a certainty the charge of outrage was invented, and added to the charge of murder. The daily press offered reward for the capture of Hose and then openly incited the people to burn him as soon as caught. The mob carried out the plan in every savage detail.

Of the twelve men lynched during that reign of unspeakable barbarism, only one was even charged with an assault upon a woman. Yet Southern apologists justify their savagery on the ground that Negroes are lynched only because of their crimes against women.

The Southern press champions burning men alive, and says, “Consider the facts.” The colored people join issue and also say, “Consider the fact.” The colored people of Chicago employed a detective to go to Georgia, and his report in this pamphlet gives the facts. We give here the details of the lynching as they were reported in the Southern papers, then follows the report of the true facts as to the cause of the lynchings, as learned by the investigation. We submit all to the sober judgment of the Nation, confident that, in this cause, as well as all others, “Truth is mighty and will prevail.”

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT.

2939 Princeton Avenue, Chicago, June 20, 1899.

Source: Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Daniel A.P. Murray Pamphlets Collection. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lcrbmrpt1612div1\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field(DOCID+@lit(lcrbmrpt1612div1))).

Document 1.3: “Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916–1918” in The Journal of Negro History, Vol. 4, 1919 (originally published in the Chicago Defender)

SELMA, ALA., May 19, 1917

Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender I think it is one of the Most Wonderful Papers of our race printed. Sirs I am writeing to see if You all will please get me a job. And Sir I can wash dishes, wash iron nursing work in groceries and dry good stores. Just any of these I can do. Sir, who so ever you get the job from please tell them to send me a ticket and I will pay them. When I get their as I have not got enough money to pay my way. I am a girl of 17 years old and in the 8 grade at Knox Academy School. But on account of not having money enough I had to stop school. Sir I will thank you all with all my heart. May God Bless you all. Please answer in return mail.

PORT ARTHUR, TEXAS, 5/5th/17

Dear Sir: Permitt me to inform you that I have had the pleasure of reading the Defender for the first time in my life as I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that its some paper.

However I can unhesitatingly say that it is extraordinarily interesting and had I know that there was such a paper in my town or such being handled in my vicinity I would have been a subscriber years ago.

Nevertheless I read every space of the paper dated April 28th which is my first and only paper at present. Although I am greatfully anticipating the pleasure of receiving my next Defender as I now consider myself a full fledged defender fan and I have also requested the representative of said paper to deliver my Defender weekly.

In reading the Defenders want ad I notice that there is lots of work to be had and if I havent miscomprehended I think I also understand that the transportation is advanced to able bodied working men who is out of work and desire work. Am I not right? with the understanding that those who have been advanced transportation same will be deducted from their salary after they have begun work. Now then if this is they proposition I have about 10 or 15 good working men who is out of work and are dying to leave the south and I assure you that they are working men and will be too glad to come north east or west, any where but the south.

Now then if this is the proposition kindly let me know by return mail. However I assure you that it shall be my pleasure to furnish you with further or all information that you may undertake to ask or all information necessary concerning this communication.

Thanking you in advance for the courtesy of a prompt reply with much interest.

BESSEMER, ALA., 5/14/17

Sirs: Noticing and ad in Chicago Defender of your assistance to those desiring employment there I thought I mayhaps you could help me secure work in your Windy City. I'm a married man have one child. I have common school education, this is my hand write. I am presently employed as a miner has been for 14 years but would like a Change. I'm apt to learn would like to get where I could go on up and support myself and family. You know more about it than I but in your opinion could I make anything as pullman porter being inexperienced? I'd be so grateful to U. to place me in something I've worked myself too hard for nothing. I'm sober and can adjust my life with any kind and am a quiet christian man.

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE April 23, 1917

Gentlemen: I want to get in tuch with you in regard of good location & a job i am for race elevation every way. I want a job in a small town some where in north where I can receive verry good wages and where I can educate my 3 little girls and demand respect of intelegence. I prefer a job as cabinet maker or any kind of furniture mfg. if possible.

Let me hear from you all at once please. State minimum wages and kind of work.

Yours truly.

LUTCHER, LA., May 13, 1917

Dear Sir: I have been reading the Chicago defender and seeing so many advertisements about the work in the north I thought to write you concerning my condition. I am working hard in the south and can hardly earn a living. I have a wife and one child and can hardly feed them. I thought to write and ask you for some information concerning how to get a pass for myself and family. I dont want to leave my family behind as I cant hardly make a living for them right here with them and I know they would fare hard if I would leave them. If there are any agents in the south there havent been any of them to Lutcher if they would come here they would get at least fifty men. Please sir let me hear from you as quick as possible. Now this is all. Please dont publish my letter, I was out in town today talking to some of the men and they say if they could get passes that 30 or 40 of them would come. But they havent got the money and they dont know how to come. But they are good strong and able working men. If you will instruct me I will instruct the other men how to come as they all want to work. Please dont publish this because we have to whisper this around among our selves because the white folks are angry now because the negroes are going north.

Source: *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. IV, 1919, pp. 317, 327, 337, 417. This journal (including the letters) can be accessed at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21093/21093-h/21093-h.htm#Footnote_1_625.

Document Set 2: Mexican Immigrants in Chicago

Document 2.1: “El Lavaplatos”/ “The Dishwasher Corrido”

Find the Spanish and English lyrics to this song at:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=Ocz3wYCaxt8C&lpg=PA22&ots=HeiNlgmTpp&dq=corrido%20el%20lavaplatos&pg=PA22#v=onepage&q=corrido%20el%20lavaplatos&f=false>

Source: Steven Loza, *Barrio Rhythm: Mexican American Music in Los Angeles*, University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Document 2.2: Interviews with Mexican Immigrants in Chicago

In 1928, University of Chicago researcher Paul S. Taylor interviewed Mexican immigrants living in Chicago to discover why they had left Mexico. The interviews can be found on page 19 of this document:

<http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org/images/stories/pdfs/mexican-community-we-came-here-to-work-part-1.pdf>

Source: Chicago Metro History Education Center, “Lessons from Community Beginnings: Chicago’s Mexican Community,” page 19.

Document 2.3: “Esperanza McNeilly and James McNeilly interviewed by Margaret Strobel”

“We came from St. Paul, Minnesota. My parents were immigrants. They migrated to... into Texas from Mexico.”

From what part of Mexico?

“Silao, which is the central... I think sometimes they call that the ‘bread basket of Mexico.’ It’s like the Midwest because it’s very agriculturally oriented. So they came from that area and came into Denton, Texas, in ’24 right after they were married, about three days after they were married, and they lived there for a few years. But then my father was unskilled, and not only that but he had a language barrier. So he really was unable to get a job that would support the family. And at that time the sugar beet companies in Minnesota were providing transportation and meals for people in the south and southwestern states to come up to St. Paul, and there they were farmed out to these various farmers who were growing sugar beets. Because it was a well-paying industry for a few years. So they decided that they would come up here.

“But before that happened I think around 1925, my uncle Jesus Torres and my aunt came into the US in ’24. But they didn’t come with my parents; they came on their own, separately. And they first went and lived in Corpus Christi and then from there they moved into—they moved to Fort Worth. And during the interval, my aunt

wrote to my grandfather to ask where my mother was. She knew she was in the States, but she didn't know where she was. And so he sent her, my grandfather sent her the address, the address of my mother, and then they got in touch and my aunt asked my... Tío Torres, my Uncle Torres, to move to Denton, Texas, and to see, how...because my mother was expecting me. I was the first born. She was expecting me, and she [my aunt] wanted to be there for the birth. And she wanted to reunite with her sister. But as far as Jesus Torres was concerned, he, too, was in the same predicament that my father was in, the language problem and with—and with him not only was he unskilled, but he was of such slight build and he was underweight. And he had such small hands, I can still see that, see his hands. He had such small hands that the labor jobs that he was able to get were just above and beyond what he could manage physically. And it really bothered him that he, that he couldn't do the work. I mean he wanted to work but he just physically was unable to do some of that work...

“But after I was born in '26, they decided that they would come up—the two couples decided that they would come up to St. Paul and take advantage of this offer of transportation. So they came up to St. Paul and worked in the beet fields. And, of course, it was work outdoors, field work doing... working outdoors, working from dawn till late at night when it got dark. You had to work these long hours. And, again, Jesus Torres had the same problem that it was difficult for him to withstand the long hours of such laborious work. And so he wasn't very happy being up there. But... So around 1927—after the season ended around there, that first time they came up here—my parents went back to Texas; but my uncle and my aunt Torres. They decided to go to Chicago because they had met this older gentleman who had said to them there was so much opportunity in the big city, in Chicago. There were... Jobs were plentiful, salaries were good.”

Was this a Mexican man?

“This was another Mexican person, yes. Hispanic. And so they decided that they would part. And so my uncle and my aunt came to Chicago and they lived, again, in the Hull House area. I think first they moved in a rooming house on Bunker Street. I don't think that street even existed when I was there. But Bunker Street and they lived on DeKoven.

“And my aunt, now, was luckier in the sense that she had sewn, had done a lot of hand-work and liked to sew in Mexico. So when she came to Chicago, a friend told her about the fact that there was a curtain factory that was going to be open... was moving to Van Buren, which was close, to Hull House and to where they lived and she could work there. And so she applied, and she got a job right away. And then she was—she used to pack and fold curtains. But then she was interested in learning to sew and so the supervisor... asked her if she wanted to learn, and he taught her. And she went from thirteen dollars a week to the sum of twenty-seven dollars a week because she could sew on these big machines. And so all her life she had jobs working in factories where it was demanded, where sewing was demanded.

“But my uncle wasn't so fortunate— that was just around the time that the Depression was beginning. And he looked for jobs and looked for jobs and couldn't find work, and couldn't find work. And so he thought he'd go to Hull House. And that's how he got... He became connected with Hull House in that he

started taking some of the art classes there. He took the art classes there, starting with pottery. And he found that he could create something that was of substance and beauty, too. And he could use his hands in a way that made him feel good about himself, gave him some self-worth, I think, because he couldn't find a job...

[Two families reconnect] “And my Uncle Torres found out that we were living in St. Paul so he came up there. And he was such a generous person; he loved children. My aunt and he did not have children of their own. So he kind of gravitated to us, and there were five of us then... So he suggested to my parents that they come down, that they move down to Chicago—it is better. And it was better for us, and my father was able to find jobs... And when we moved into that house at 819 there was a big, a huge room in the back of the house. It was just huge... And so he (Jesus Torres) began doing some of his work there. But he also was acquainted with other people in Chicago and he was able to... Somebody offered him a basement on Chicago and Huron, in that vicinity to use as a studio. And that's where he began to do wood carving, to work in pottery, did a lot of pottery—uh, excuse me, not pottery, he did copper work and woodworking and then gravitated toward jewelry, working with gold and silver... He would use a special kind of opaque paper, almost like parchment, but it was thin enough that light would go through. And he would line that fixture or lamp with that paper. And then the glow from the lamp was very, was very soft, very subtle. And that's where he started doing the wood carving for interiors of places. He did the interior for a club in Milwaukee. But I don't remember that. He kept his, that kind of life very separate from us. And I think that it kind of falls into the culture that we are modest about what we do. We don't, more or less, boast about what we're doing...

“His parents had the same demeanor that my uncle had—very kind, very modest, very generous. I know he said one time that he felt honored that people appreciated what he did, what he created. It was kind of a surprise to him that people would admire what he made...

“He died in 1948. He was 50 years old...”

Source: “Esperanza McNeilly and James McNeilly interviewed by Margaret Strobel,” 6/25/2001, JAMCOH-093 Hull-House Oral History collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago

Document Set 3: European Jews in Chicago

Document 3.1: Excerpts from *The Promised Land* by Mary Antin

“I do not know when I became old enough to understand. The truth was borne in on me a dozen times a day, from the time I began to distinguish words from empty noises. My grandmother told me about it, when she put me to bed at night. My parents told me about it, when they gave me presents on holidays. My playmates told me, when they drew me back into a corner of the gateway, to let a policeman pass. Vanka, the little white-haired boy, told me all about it, when he ran out of his mother’s laundry on purpose to throw mud after me when I happened to pass. I heard about it during prayers, and when women quarreled in the market place; and sometimes, waking in the night, I heard my parents whisper it in the dark. There was no time in my life when I did not hear and see and feel the truth—the reason why Polotzk was cut off from the rest of Russia. It was the first lesson a little girl in Polotzk had to learn. But for a long while I did not understand. Then there came a time when I knew that Polotzk and Vitebsk and Vilna and some other places were grouped together as the ‘Pale of Settlement,’ and within this area the Czar commanded me to stay, with my father and mother and friends, and all other people like us. We must not be found outside the Pale, because we were Jews....” (page 5)

“The Passover season, when we celebrated our deliverance from the land of Egypt, and felt so glad and thankful, as if it had only just happened, was the time our Gentile neighbors chose to remind us that Russia was another Egypt. That is what I heard people say, and it was true. It was not so bad in Polotzk, within the Pale; but in Russian cities, and even more in the country districts, where Jewish families lived scattered, by special permission of the police, who were always changing their minds about letting them stay, the Gentiles made the Passover a time of horror for the Jews. Somebody would start up that lie about murdering Christian children, and the stupid peasants would get mad about it, and fill themselves with vodka, and set out to kill the Jews. They attacked them with knives and clubs and scythes and axes, killed them or tortured them, and burned their houses. This was called a ‘pogrom.’ Jews who escaped the pogroms came to Polotzk with wounds on them, and horrible, horrible stories, of little babies torn limb from limb before their mothers’ eyes. Only to hear these things made one sob and sob and choke with pain. People who saw such things never smiled any more, no matter how long they lived; and sometimes their hair turned white in a day, and some people became insane on the spot....”
(page 8)

“It was bewildering to hear how many kinds of duties and taxes we owed the Czar. We paid taxes on our houses, and taxes on the rents from the houses, taxes on our business, taxes on our profits. I am not sure whether there were taxes on our losses. The town collected taxes, and the county, and the central government; and the chief of police we had always with us. There were taxes for public works, but rotten pavements went on rotting year after year; and when a bridge was to be built, special taxes were levied. A bridge, by the way, was not always a public highway. A railroad bridge across the Dvina, while open to the military, could be used by the people only by individual permission.

“My uncle explained to me all about the excise duties on tobacco. Tobacco being a source of government revenue, there was a heavy tax on it. Cigarettes were taxed at every step of their process. The tobacco was taxed separately, and the paper, and the mouthpiece, and on the finished product an additional tax was put. There was no tax on the smoke. The Czar must have overlooked it.

“Business really did not pay when the price of goods was so swollen by taxes that the people could not buy. The only way to make business pay was to cheat—cheat the Government of part of the duties. But playing tricks on the Czar was dangerous, with so many spies watching his interests. People who sold cigarettes without the government seal got more gray hairs than bank notes out of their business. The constant risk, the worry, the dread of a police raid in the night, and the ruinous fines, in case of detection, left very little margin of profit or comfort to the dealer in contraband goods. ‘But what can one do?’ the people said, with the shrug of the shoulders that expresses the helplessness of the Pale. ‘What can one do? One must live.’

“It was not easy to live, with such bitter competition as the congestion of population made inevitable. There were ten times as many stores as there should have been, ten times as many tailors, cobblers, barbers, tinsmiths. A Gentile, if he failed in Polotzk, could go elsewhere, where there was less competition. A Jew could make the circle of the Pale, only to find the same conditions as at home. Outside the Pale he could only go to certain designated localities, on payment of prohibitive fees, augmented by a constant stream of bribes; and even then he lived at the mercy of the local chief of police....” (pages 21–22)

“The next year or so my father spent in a restless and fruitless search for a permanent position. My mother had another serious illness, and his own health remained precarious. What he earned did not more than half pay the bills in the end, though we were living very humbly now. Polotzk seemed to reject him, and no other place invited him.

“Just at this time occurred one of the periodic anti-Semitic movements whereby government officials were wont to clear the forbidden cities of Jews, whom, in the intervals of slack administration of the law, they allowed to maintain an illegal residence in places outside the Pale, on payment of enormous bribes and at the cost of nameless risks and indignities.

“It was a little before Passover that the cry of the hunted thrilled the Jewish world with the familiar fear. The wholesale expulsion of Jews from Moscow and its surrounding district at cruelly short notice was the name of this latest disaster. Where would the doom strike next? The Jews who lived illegally without the Pale turned their possessions into cash and slept in their clothes, ready for immediate flight. Those who lived in the comparative security of the Pale trembled for their brothers and sisters without, and opened wide their doors to afford the fugitives refuge. And hundreds of fugitives, preceded by a wail of distress, flocked into the open district, bringing their trouble where trouble was never absent, mingling their tears with the tears that never dried.

“The open cities becoming thus suddenly crowded, every man’s chance of making a living was diminished in proportion to the number of additional competitors. Hardship, acute distress, ruin for many: thus spread the

disaster, ring beyond ring, from the stone thrown by a despotic official into the ever-full river of Jewish persecution.

“Passover was celebrated in tears that year. In the story of the Exodus we would have read a chapter of current history, only for us there was no deliverer and no promised land.

“But what said some of us at the end of the long service? Not ‘May we be next year in Jerusalem,’ but ‘Next year—in America!’ So there was our promised land, and many faces were turned towards the West. And if the waters of the Atlantic did not part for them, the wanderers rode its bitter flood by a miracle as great as any the rod of Moses ever wrought....” (page 141)

“I know the day when ‘America’ as a world entirely unlike Polotzk lodged in my brain, to become the center of all my dreams and speculations. Well I know the day. I was in bed, sharing the measles with some of the other children. Mother brought us a thick letter from father, written just before boarding the ship. The letter was full of excitement. There was something in it besides the description of travel, something besides the pictures of crowds of people, of foreign cities, of a ship ready to put out to sea. My father was travelling at the expense of a charitable organization, without means of his own, without plans, to a strange world where he had no friends; and yet he wrote with the confidence of a well-equipped soldier going into battle. The rhetoric is mine. Father simply wrote that the emigration committee was taking good care of everybody, that the weather was fine, and the ship comfortable. But I heard something, as we read the letter together in the darkened room, that was more than the words seemed to say. There was an elation, a hint of triumph, such as had never been in my father’s letters before. I cannot tell how I knew it. I felt a stirring, a straining in my father’s letter. It was there, even though my mother stumbled over strange words, even though she cried, as women will when somebody is going away. My father was inspired by a vision. He saw something—he promised us something. It was this ‘America.’ And ‘America’ became my dream....” (page 142)

Source: Mary Antin, *The Promised Land*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912. This book can be accessed at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20885/20885-h/20885-h.htm>

Document 3.2: Excerpt from *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl* by Hilda S. Polacheck

Find the excerpt, pages 35–39, at this link:

http://books.google.com/books?id=cpbWqtNzdYIC&pg=PA35&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false

Source: Hilda S. Polacheck, *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*, University of Illinois Press, 1989.