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THE PROMISED LAND

THE GREAT BLACK MIGRATION
AND HOW IT CHANGED AMERICA



NICHOLAS LEMANN

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The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America

Nicholas Lemann



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To my mother and father

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—*Chicago Tribune*



Nicholas Lemann
THE PROMISED LAND

Nicholas Lemann was born and raised in New Orleans and has been a magazine writer since he was a teenager. He has worked at *The Washington Monthly*, *Texas Monthly*, and the *Washington Post*, and since 1983 has been a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*. In addition, he writes regularly for *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, and other publications. He lives near New York City with his wife, Dominique Browning, and their two sons.

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CLARKSDALE

THREE OR four miles south of the town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, there is a shambling little hog farm on the side of the highway. It sits right up next to the road, on cheap land, unkempt. A rutted dirt path leads back to a shack made of unpainted wood; over to the side is a makeshift wire fence enclosing the pen where the hogs live. Behind the fence, by the bank of a creek, under a droopy cottonwood tree, is an old rusted-out machine that appears to have found its final resting place. The vines have taken most of it over. It looks like a tractor from the 1930s with a very large metal basket mounted on top. Abandoned machinery is so common a sight in front of poor folks' houses in the South that it is completely inconspicuous.

The old machine, now part of a hoary Southern set-piece, is actually important. It is the last tangible remnant of a great event in Clarksdale: the day of the first public demonstration of a working, production-ready model of the mechanical cotton picker, October 2, 1944. A crowd of people came out on that day to the Hopson plantation, just outside of town on Highway 49, to see eight machines pick a field of cotton.

Like the automobile, the cotton picker was not invented by one person in a blinding flash of inspiration. The real breakthrough in its development was building a machine that could be reliably mass-produced, not merely one that could pick cotton. For years, since 1927, International Harvester had been field-testing cotton-picking equipment at the Hopson place; the Hopsons were an old and prosperous planter family in Clarksdale, with a lot of acreage and a special interest in the technical side of farming. There were other experiments with mechanical cotton pickers going on all over the South. The best-known of the experimenters

were two brothers named John and Mack Rust, who grew up poor and populist in Texas and spent the better part of four decades trying to develop a picker that they dreamed would be used to bring decent pay and working conditions to the cotton fields. The Rusts demonstrated one picker in 1931 and another, at an agricultural experiment station in Mississippi, in 1933; during the late 1930s and early 1940s they were field-testing their picker at a plantation outside Clarksdale, not far from the Hopson place. Their machines could pick cotton, but they couldn't be built on a factory assembly line. In 1942 the charter of the Rust Cotton Picker Company was revoked for nonpayment of taxes, and Mack Rust decamped for Arizona; the leadership in the development of the picker inexorably passed from a pair of idealistic self-employed tinkers to a partnership between a big Northern corporation and a big Southern plantation, as the International Harvester team kept working on a machine that would be more sturdy and reliable than the Rusts'. With the advent of World War II, the experiments at the Hopson plantation began to attract the intense interest of people in the cotton business. There were rumors that the machine was close to being perfected, finally. The price of cotton was high, because of the war, but hands to harvest it were short, also because of the war. Some planters had to leave their cotton to rot in the fields because there was nobody to pick it.

Howell Hopson, the head of the plantation, noted somewhat testily in a memorandum he wrote years later, "Over a period of many months on end it was a rare day that visitors did not present themselves, more often than otherwise without prior announcement and unprepared for. They came individually, in small groups, in large groups, sometimes as organized delegations. Frequently they were found wandering around in the fields, on more than one occasion completely lost in outlying wooded areas." The county agricultural agent suggested to Hopson that he satisfy everyone's curiosity in an orderly way by field-testing the picker before an audience. Hopson agreed, although, as his description of the event makes clear, not with enthusiasm: "An estimated 2,500 to 3,000 people swarmed over the plantation on that one day. 800 to 1,000 automobiles leaving their tracks and scars throughout the property. It was always a matter of conjecture as to how the plantation managed to survive the onslaught. It is needless to say this was the last such 'voluntary' occasion."

In group photographs of the men developing the cotton picker, Howell Hopson resembles Walt Whitman's self-portrait in the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass*: a casually dressed man in a floppy hat, standing jauntily

with a hip cocked and a twig in his hand. In truth he was more interested in rationalizing nature than in celebrating it. Perhaps as a result of an injury in early childhood that kept his physical activity limited, Hopson became a devoted agricultural tinkerer. His entrancement with efficiency was such that after he took over the family plantation, he numbered the fields so that he could keep track of them better. The demonstration was held in c-3, a field of forty-two acres.

The pickers, painted bright red, drove down the white rows of cotton. Each one had mounted in front a row of spindles, looking like a wide mouth, full of metal teeth, that had been turned vertically. The spindles, about the size of human fingers, rotated in a way that stripped the cotton from the plants; then a vacuum pulled it up a tube and into the big wire basket that was mounted on top of the picker. In an hour, a good field hand could pick twenty pounds of cotton; each mechanical picker, in an hour, picked as much as a thousand pounds—two bales. In one day, Hopson's eight machines could pick all the cotton in c-3, which on October 2, 1944, was sixty-two bales. The unusually precise cost-accounting system that Hopson had developed showed that picking a bale of cotton by machine cost him \$5.26, and picking it by hand cost him \$39.41. Each machine did the work of fifty people.

Nobody bothers to save old farm equipment. Over the years the Hopsons' original cotton pickers disappeared from the place. Nearly forty years later, a family son-in-law discovered the one rusty old picker that sits in the pigpen south of town; where the other ones are today, nobody knows. Howell Hopson had some idea of the importance of his demonstration in c-3, though. In his memorandum, he wrote that "the introduction of the cotton harvester may have been comparable to the unveiling of Eli Whitney's first hand operated cotton gin. . . ." He was thinking mostly of the effect on cotton farming, but of course the cotton gin's impact on American society was much broader than that. It set off some of the essential convulsions of the nineteenth century in this country. The cotton gin made it possible to grow medium- and short-staple cotton commercially, which led to the spread of the cotton plantation from a small coastal area to most of the South. As cotton planting expanded, so did slavery, and slavery's becoming the central institution of the Southern economy was the central precondition of the Civil War.

What the mechanical cotton picker did was make obsolete the share-cropper system, which arose in the years after the Civil War as the means by which cotton planters' need for a great deal of cheap labor was sat-

isfied. The issue of the labor supply in cotton planting may not sound like one of the grand themes in American history, but it is, because it is really the issue of race. African slaves were brought to this country mainly to pick cotton. For hundreds of years, the plurality of African-Americans were connected directly or indirectly to the agriculture of cotton; at the time of the demonstration on the Hopson plantation, this was still true. Now, suddenly, cotton planters no longer needed large numbers of black people to pick their cotton, and inevitably the nature of black society and of race relations was going to have to change.

Slavery was a political institution that enabled an economic system, the antebellum cotton kingdom. Sharecropping began in the immediate aftermath of the end of slavery, and was the dominant economic institution of the agrarian South for eighty years. The political institution that paralleled sharecropping was segregation; blacks in the South were denied social equality from Emancipation onward, and, beginning in the 1890s, they were denied the ordinary legal rights of American citizens as well. Segregation strengthened the grip of the sharecropper system by ensuring that most blacks would have no arena of opportunity in life except for the cotton fields. The advent of the cotton picker made the maintenance of segregation no longer a matter of necessity for the economic establishment of the South, and thus it helped set the stage for the great drama of segregation's end.

In 1940, 77 per cent of black Americans still lived in the South—49 per cent in the rural South. The invention of the cotton picker was crucial to the great migration by blacks from the Southern countryside to the cities of the South, the West, and the North. Between 1910 and 1970, six and a half million black Americans moved from the South to the North; five million of them moved after 1940, during the time of the mechanization of cotton farming. In 1970, when the migration ended, black America was only half Southern, and less than a quarter rural; "urban" had become a euphemism for "black." The black migration was one of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements of people in history—perhaps *the* greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation. In sheer numbers it outranks the migration of any other ethnic group—Italians or Irish or Jews or Poles—to this country. For blacks, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America and finding a new one.

During the first half of the twentieth century, it was at least possible to think of race as a Southern issue. The South, and only the South, had

to contend with the contradiction between the national creed of democracy and the local reality of a caste system; consequently the South lacked the optimism and confidence that characterized the country as a whole. The great black migration made race a national issue in the second half of the century—an integral part of the politics, the social thought, and the organization of ordinary life in the United States. Not coincidentally, by the time the migration was over, the country had acquired a good measure of the tragic sense that had previously been confined to the South. Race relations stood out nearly everywhere as the one thing most plainly wrong in America, the flawed portion of the great tableau, the chief generator of doubt about how essentially noble the whole national enterprise really was.

The story of American race relations after the mechanical cotton picker is much shorter than the story of American race relations during the period when it revolved around the cultivation and harvesting of cotton by hand: less than half a century, versus three centuries. It is still unfolding. Already several areas of the national life have changed completely because of the decoupling of race from cotton: popular culture, presidential politics, urban geography, education, justice, social welfare. To recount what has happened so far is by no means to imply that the story has ended. In a way it has just begun, and the racial situation as it stands today is not permanent—is not, should not be, will not be.

ONE OF the field hands who used to pick cotton on the Hopson place sometimes in the early 1940s was a woman in her late twenties named Ruby Lee Daniels. She was tall and slender, with prominent cheekbones and wispy hair—there was supposed to be Indian blood in her mother's family. Ruby had spent most of her life on cotton plantations as a sharecropper, but now she was living in Clarksdale and working, occasionally, as a day laborer on the plantations. The planters often needed extra hands at picking time. Anyone who wanted to work would go at six in the morning to the corner of Fourth and Issaqueena streets, the main commercial crossroads of the black section of Clarksdale. Trucks from the plantations would appear at the corner. The drivers would get out and announce their pay scales. The Hopson place always paid at the high end of the going rate—at the time, two dollars for a hundred pounds of cotton.

Picking was hard work. The cotton bolls were at waist height, so you

had to work either stooped over or crawling on your knees. Every soft puff of cotton was attached to a thorny stem, and the thorns pierced your hands as you picked — unless your entire hand was callused, as most full-time pickers' were. You put the cotton you picked into a long sack that was on a strap around your shoulder; the sack could hold seventy-five pounds, so for much of the day you were dragging a considerable weight as you moved down the rows. The picking day was long, sunup to sundown with a half hour off for lunch. There were no bathrooms.

On the other hand, compared to the other kinds of work available to a poor black person, picking paid well. A good picker like Ruby could pick two hundred pounds of cotton a day. Before the war, when the rates were more like seventy-five cents or a dollar a hundred, she would have made two dollars or less for a day of picking. Now that Hopson had gone up to two dollars a hundred, she could make four dollars a day. Most of the jobs she had held outside the cotton fields were in "public work" (that is, being a maid in white people's houses), and that paid only \$2.50 a week.

Even four dollars a day for picking cotton was nothing, though, compared to what you could make in Chicago, where many people Ruby knew, including one of her aunts, had moved since the war started. In Chicago you could make as much as seventy-five cents an hour working in a laundry, or a factory, or a restaurant or a hotel, or one of the big mail-order houses like Spiegel and Montgomery Ward, or, if you were a man, in the stockyards. You could get overtime. Some of these jobs were supposed to be as hard as picking cotton, but people were making sums unheard of among black unskilled workers in Mississippi. Anybody in Ruby's situation in Clarksdale at the time couldn't avoid at least toying with the idea of a move to the North. Ruby was thinking about it herself.

The ostensible reason she hadn't moved was that she was married and her husband was away fighting, so she had to wait for him to come home. Ruby was not exactly an adoring, patient war bride, though. She had never been very much in love with her husband, and by disposition she was not the passive type; she had a tough edge. Quite often in those days, black people would do things that white people considered irrational, or, at best, impulsive. Ruby would do many such things herself, in the course of her long life. But in her case, and perhaps many others, the real motivation was a desire to live with a basic human complement of love and respect. When she had this, she was kind and sweet, though she had too good a sense of humor ever to ascend to full church-lady saccharinity; when she didn't, which was most of the time, she could be angry and sar-

castic and even mean, and could make what looked in hindsight like big, obvious mistakes.

The real reason Ruby hadn't moved to Chicago was that in her husband's absence, she had fallen in love with another man, a married man who was unwilling to abandon his wife and children in Clarksdale. Certainly the idea of moving was not itself in any way a deterrent to Ruby. She had been moving for all of her life already.

Ruby was born Ruby Lee Hopkins, on November 23, 1916, in Kemper County, Mississippi, near the Alabama border. She was one of a set of identical twins born out of wedlock to a fifteen-year-old girl named Ardell Hopkins. When Ruby's grandfather, George Hopkins, found out that his daughter was pregnant, he picked up his shotgun and went out looking for the young man who had gotten her in that condition, intending to kill him. When the young man, whose name was Sam Campbell, heard about this, he joined the Army and went off to fight in World War I. Ruby and her twin sister Ruth didn't meet their father until twenty years later.

The family history, as Ruby heard it, was sketchy. Her grandfather's grandmother had been a slave whose last name was Chambers, but she was sold to a white family named Hopkins who changed her name to match theirs; shortly afterward, according to family legend, she had given birth to a white-looking child whose father was the master. This child was Ruby's great-grandfather. Quite often in those days, poor black families in the South didn't pass on to their children too much information about slavery, because they considered it an unpleasant memory and one that might induce a lack of self-esteem if dwelt upon at length. Many people of Ruby's generation were left with a vague picture of horrors—whippings, sales that broke up families, sexual oppression, material privation—and a feeling that you were better off not knowing the details, so long as you were aware that things were better now.

Ruby's grandfather was a small farmer in Kemper County, barely getting by. Shortly after Ruby was born, a white man named Charlie Gaines appeared in the county. He was a manager on a big cotton plantation outside the town of Hill House, a few miles outside of Clarksdale; he had come all the way across Mississippi to recruit black people to come to Hill House as sharecroppers. His sales pitch was simple: a promise of prosperity. It convinced George Hopkins. In January 1917, when Ruby was six weeks old, George moved the family to Hill House to start over.

Hill House, and Clarksdale, are in a part of Mississippi called the Delta—a flat alluvial plain two hundred miles long and fifty miles wide

that runs between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers from Memphis down to Vicksburg. The Delta is the richest natural cotton-farming land in the United States. Its dark black-brown topsoil, deposited over eons of springtime floods, is more than fifty feet deep. Like an oil field or a silver mine, the soil of the Delta is the kind of fabulous natural resource that holds the promise of big, big money, and so the agricultural society that grew up on top of it was dominated by farming tycoons, not yeomen.

The Delta is remote, even now, and in its state of nature it was wild — swampy in some places and densely forested in most others, and populated by Choctaws and panthers and bears. It was the last area of the South to be settled; the mythic grand antebellum cotton plantation did not exist there. The leading planter families of the Delta consider themselves to be members of the Southern upper class — which is to say that they are Episcopalian, of British or Scotch-Irish extraction, and had ancestors living in the upper South before 1800 — but they were never so well established somewhere else as to have precluded a move to the Delta when it was frontier. The patriarch of the Hopson family, Joseph J. Hopson, came to the Delta from Tennessee in 1832, and he was one of the first white settlers. The Hopson plantation didn't begin its operations until 1852. Most of the other big plantations in the Delta were founded after the Civil War. John Clark, for whom the town of Clarksdale is named, arrived in 1839, and laid out the town's streets in 1868. Clarksdale had no rail line until 1879, wasn't incorporated until 1882, and had no paved streets until 1913.

The reason the Delta was quiescent before the Civil War wasn't just that the land was substantially uncleared and undrained, though clearing and draining it was a tremendous undertaking; it was that the Mississippi River flooded so often. Floods ruin crops. The river had made the land rich, but for the land to make men rich, its link to the river had to be severed. It was two decades after the end of the war before a marginally reliable system of levees was in place. Even then the Delta never became grand. It is a purposive country, the purpose being to grow cotton. The landscape is long and wide. Trees appear in lines, to demarcate the fields. The turn rows undulate only when they have to make their way around creeks. The planters' houses, most of them, are quite modest, with small lawns and a few shade trees, evidence of a desire not to divert too much arable land to other uses. The big money made in the Delta is usually spent outside the Delta, on parties in Memphis and tours of Europe and Eastern prep schools.