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# The Rush for Wartime Jobs

by Gregory Lewis

Dona and Frank Irvin moved their family from Texas to California in 1942. "We came with great expectation," Dona said. "It was a booming time of employment and you could make an incredibly high salary — 100 dollars a week. My husband was making 7 dollars a week in Houston. Jobs were easy to find in California."

The Irvins, with their two small children, were part of a mass **migration** of African Americans. Thousands left the South during World War II in search of higher-paying work and freedom from racial restrictions. Many came to California to work in the war industries, especially shipbuilding. They shared with the rest of the country a strong desire to help America win the war.

Ships were needed to fight the war, and California's shipyards were ready to build them. With more young men of all backgrounds signing up to fight every day, though, there were not enough workers to fill all the jobs. Before the war, many companies would not hire black workers for good jobs. With the wartime shortage of workers, these companies found they had to change their policies. They began hiring African Americans. These new workers joined thousands of others who hadn't worked in shipyards before to produce record numbers of ships for our armed forces.

The number of black Americans living in California coastal cities such as Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley, Alameda, and Richmond grew rapidly between 1940 and 1945. In some places the African American population grew 20 times larger than it had been before the war. Los Angeles's black population grew slowly at first because of racial hiring restrictions, but those restrictions soon began to be lifted. By 1942 African Americans began arriving in Los Angeles at a rate of 10,000 per month.

Most migrants to California easily found work that paid well. Many wrote back to relatives telling them about the opportunities. That's how Frank Irvin learned of the booming California economy. He and his family arrived in Oakland in 1942, and he went to work at the Moore Shipbuilding Co.

California was a land of opportunity, but the newcomers faced many difficulties. Communities did not have time to create enough good housing, public transportation, and classroom space to fit everyone comfortably right away. Many Californians were prejudiced against their new African American neighbors. People in some neighborhoods refused to sell houses to black families. Dona Irvin remembered some segregation as well: "There were restaurants we couldn't go into and some that gave us slow service when we did go inside." Bad feelings between African Americans and Caucasians sometimes even broke out in violence.

A terrible disaster increased these bad feelings. Many black sailors in the Navy worked as **stevedores** in the San Francisco Bay area. They had the dangerous job of loading ammunition — bombs, torpedoes, and other explosive weapons — onto ships. On July 17, 1944, hundreds of Navy stevedores were loading ships at the Port Chicago Naval Ammunition Depot in Concord when some ammunition exploded. A flash filled the sky with flames, and then two tremendous blasts shook California from Sacramento to San Jose. The Port Chicago explosion killed 320 people, including 202 African Americans.

A few weeks later the Navy ordered 277 black stevedores who had survived the explosion to go back to loading ammunition. The men felt it was unfair that only African Americans were doing this dangerous job. They did not want to return to work under the same conditions. They refused to handle any more ammunition. A rear admiral talked most of the men into returning to work. But 50 still refused. The Navy put the men on trial for **mutiny**. They were found guilty and sentenced to prison. The men were set free after the war, but many remember this incident as an example of unfairness toward African Americans.

Despite these problems, most black migrants improved their economic status. They found greater freedom and new educational opportunities. Even after the war years, they stayed in California and became the first large group of middle class African Americans in the West. "We, like many black people, wanted our children to have it better than we had," Dona Irvin said. The Irvins, like many others, got their wish: Their daughter, Nell Painter, is a professor at Princeton University.

While California changed things for the World War II-era migrants, they in turn changed California. The migration of African Americans, who came mostly from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Mississippi, brought to the West Coast blues music, evangelical religion, Southern-style food, and other traditional elements of black Southern culture that continue to enrich life in California today.

**Migration** is the movement of a group of people from one place to another.

A **migrant** is a person involved in a migration.

**Stevedores** are workers who load and unload ships.

**Mutiny** is refusing to follow orders.

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