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Highway 61: Good Roads, Great Migrations, and Delta Blues

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HIGHWAY 61: GOOD ROADS, GREAT MIGRATIONS, AND DELTA BLUES

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirement of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the social and racial factors that contributed to the cultural significance of U.S. Highway 61. First, I explore the background of road building and transportation in the United States. Next I detail the history of convict labor in the South, from convict leasing to convict labor on roads as a result of the Good Roads Movement. Third, I describe how economic and social conditions contributed to the out-migration of southerners during the twentieth century. Lastly, I analyze how social conditions spawned the Mississippi Delta blues, and how Highway 61 became a symbol of opportunity for blues musicians.

Introduction

Running 1,699 miles from New Orleans to Minnesota, U.S. Route 61 winds through regions and cities that loom large in the cultural consciousness of the United States. Officially designated in 1926 by the Joint Board on Interstate Highways to stretch from Minnesota's Canadian border to Louisiana, Route 61 is a historic highway of cultural significance.¹ For much of its history, Route 61 symbolized freedom of mobility, the opportunity to make a better life and also the hardscrabble reality faced by all Americans.

This project will focus primarily on the southern half of Route 61, particularly in Mississippi. Although U.S. Route 61 is a numbered road, and a federal commission originally designated the path of Route 61, it is not a federal highway.² Each state crossed by Route 61 is responsible for a section of the route.³ Federal money allocated to Route 61's construction varied between federal road aid laws depending on the population, area, and rural post road mileage of each state.⁴ As a result, the progress of construction and quality of highway differed in each state. Unlike other named highways, such as the

¹ Joint Board on Interstate Highways, "Report, October 30, 1925" 54.

² Federal Highway Administration, "From Names to Numbers: The Origins of the U.S. Numbered Highway System," accessed October 22, 2018.

³ American Automobile Association, *Highways Green Book*, third annual edition (1922) 24.

⁴ *Ibid*, 106.

Dixie Highway, it is difficult to know the exact history of the entire route. Different county and state work crews pieced '61 together over the course of many years.

That each state constructed a portion of Route 61 is significant because control of construction remained free of federal influence. Federal officials could not dictate what kind of labor each state used to build roads. Before the 1930s, southern states relied heavily on predominantly African American chain gang labor to build roads.⁵ Convicts faced barbaric conditions on the chain gangs. The brutality of the chain gangs is characteristic of “progressive” policies, those that were viewed by whites as positive reform to better the South’s society, of the era that helped usher in the “modern” South.⁶ The South had been left behind by much of the industrialization of the rest of the nation. Before efficient highways and transportation methods stitched together many hamlets and rural communities, the South resembled a foreign country to the rest of the nation.⁷ Residents of the South experienced a “rural isolation” that is difficult to imagine in the modern age. Farmers, in particular, knew the isolation. Even after the rise of the automobile, a system of local roads that resembled “spokes in a wheel” did little to allow those who could afford a cheap car, such as the Model T, to explore beyond local areas.⁸ The emergence of the numbered interstate highway system in 1926 did far more than

⁵ Alex Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South” *Southern Historical Association*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (Feb. 1993), 105

⁶ Howard Lawrence Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, University of Tennessee Press (1991), 8.

⁷ Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, 1.

⁸ Peter T. Hugill, “Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States 1880- 1936,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (July 1982), 336

private efforts, such as the Dixie Highway, to construct interstate highways to connect rural people to the rest of the nation.

The most important product of the numbered highway system was that it eventually allowed people to move more freely between regions than ever before. Non-wealthy rural people, such as farmers and sharecroppers, who for decades could not generally afford long train trips, now had the opportunity to travel anywhere they wanted. The interstate bus system offered cheap transportation to those without cars, while cars were becoming more affordable by the mid 1920s. Thousands of southerners used numbered highways like Route 61 to spread across the country during what James Gregory termed the “Southern Diaspora.”⁹ The Great Migrations of the early twentieth century spread the culture of the once isolated South to the rest of the nation. Southern migrants found jobs and remade their lives in the North and Midwest. Those traveling from the Deep South of the Mississippi Delta and New Orleans had the option to go to Memphis, St. Louis, and most prominently Chicago.

The cultural significance of Route 61 can be largely attributed to the musicians who sang about it. Iconic musicians such as Sam Cooke and Bob Dylan wrote songs that reflected the troubled society of the area that Route 61 crossed through. Cooke’s song “Chain Gang” described the harsh conditions faced by convicts who toiled for decades to build Route 61. Dylan explored the mythic influence of the Mississippi blues on his own work, as well as the “hardscrabble realities of life in America” in his album, *Highway 61 Revisited*.¹⁰ Route 61 became known as the “Blues Highway” because of the legendary

⁹ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, University of North Carolina Press (2005), 32.

blues musicians who lived in towns along the route. Tourists drove down '61 to visit the hometowns of important bluesmen, many of which once traveled north on the same route to recording studios in Memphis and Chicago. The complex, and at times dark, history of Route 61 is represented in the music of these artists.

The proliferation of automobiles and the federal decision to connect all hamlets of the United States with paved roads and highways pierced the Mississippi Delta's veil of isolation. The Mississippi Delta's African American inhabitants, largely poor, struggled under the violent hand of white supremacy. The discrimination Mississippi blacks faced spawned the blues, a response to "a brutal and desperate situation."¹¹ African Americans sang work songs as they toiled under forced labor to construct Highway 61, and sang as they later traveled along it to escape from the Delta. The black musicians who traveled along Highway 61 broadcasted their sound to the entire country, helped establish the Chicago blues, and served as the primary influence for the burgeoning rock and roll industry of the 1960s and later decades.

While there are many books about the blues musicians and destinations that surround Highway 61, there has been no study of how the social and racial factors of the highway's construction contributed to its cultural importance. The efforts by leaders of the Good Roads Movement to connect towns and cities while diminishing the isolation of rural areas, such as the Mississippi Delta, impacted the interpretation of Highway 61 as the "blues" highway. African American convict laborers who toiled to construct Highway

¹⁰ Court Carney, "A Lamp is Burning in All Our Dark," *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan's Road from Minnesota to the World*, edited by Colleen J. Sheehy and Thomas Swiss, University of Minnesota Press (2009), 39.

¹¹ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, The Viking Press, New York (1981), 39.

61 did so as a "progressive" measure endorsed by white supremacist politicians and governments. Measures such as road building and racial segregation were endorsed side by side in the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow system forced blacks to work on chain gangs, on prison farms, and as sharecroppers stuck in a cycle of debt led to a musical response that gave birth to the Delta Blues. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that the social environment of Highway 61's physical landscape laid the groundwork for its later cultural importance

Chapter 1:

U.S. Roads and the Movement for an American Highway System

To understand the importance of Highway 61, it is crucial to understand the state of transportation in the South prior to its designation. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the widely spaced towns and cities of the United States existed in relative isolation. Railroads constituted the most feasible method of interstate transportation, but the cost of a train ticket prevented many would-be travelers from leaving their homes.¹² The official route that once ran 1700 miles through New Orleans, the Mississippi Delta, Memphis, St. Louis, and up to St. Paul Minnesota did not exist prior to 1926.¹³ What is now U.S. Route 61 once consisted of scattered sections of often-decrepit local roads.

Few roads ran between cities.¹⁴ Rural farmers on horse-drawn wagons used roads only to go into town before the automobile became widely used, available, and cheaper to afford.¹⁵ If a person wanted to travel from the Mississippi Delta to St. Louis, for instance, they would almost certainly need to travel on railroads or the Mississippi River. River

¹² Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Making of the Modern South, 1900-1930*, University of North Carolina Press (2014), 14.

¹³ Tim Steil, *Highway 61: 1,699 Miles from New Orleans to Pigeon River*, MBI Publishing (2004), 7.

¹⁴ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 14.

¹⁵ Ibid

travel was slow and limited. Only cities near the water could be reached by boat or barge. To travel to inland cities, railroads were most the feasible option. The rail system in the United States was extensive and widely used. The main disadvantage of traveling by rail was the high cost, and cost was especially problematic for individuals attempting to travel long distances. For some African Americans in the wake of the Civil War, the need to travel long distances was necessary. To escape discrimination in the South, or to seek out opportunities in the North and Midwest, some sold all of their belongings at a loss to finance their trips. For southern African American, the “promised land” of the North seemed close but often out of reach.¹⁶ In the 1910s, a train ticket from New Orleans to Chicago would cost around \$20, equivalent to a month’s pay for many sharecroppers.¹⁷

As a result of insufficient and expensive transportation, many white and black southerners remained isolated from the rest of the nation. Poor roads affected rural farmers in particular. Farmers had limited communication with those in town or even their neighbors, especially during inclement weather. Not until the 1900s did farmers gain access to free postal delivery, and most had to travel miles into town to buy a newspaper.¹⁸ In 1896, Congress passed a law providing a mere \$10,000 for the “Rural Delivery of Mails,” which grew to a multi-million dollar enterprise. The only drawback for many southerners was that Rural Free Delivery would not deliver to areas with extremely poor roads.¹⁹

¹⁶ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 52.

¹⁷ Charles E. Cobb, “Traveling the Blues Highway,” *National Geographic* (April 1999), 64

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Transportation, *America’s Highways: 1776-1976*, 80.

While the beginnings of a reasonably convenient method of communication for southerners began with Rural Free Delivery, transportation proved to be more difficult to improve. Roads were often so treacherous that even a farmer equipped with a mule and wagon struggled to bring a crop the few country miles into town.²⁰ Most farmers still used railroads to transport their crops, but rail stations were often inaccessible in times of rain and snow. Farmers who braved the roads lost an estimated \$500-600 million per year in inventory due to treacherous road conditions.²¹ If the prospect of traveling to town seemed difficult enough, the idea of traveling to another state via roads seemed almost unfathomable. Given the array of challenges, the time between 1850 and 1900 became known as the “dark ages of the rural road.”²²

A movement to construct better roads across America began with a group of bicyclists in the Northeast. In the 1880s, a safer version of the bicycle became popular in urban areas.²³ The number of bicyclists grew. Not content with city streets, bicyclists ventured out into the country to ride for leisure and sport. Bicyclists grouped into clubs, most notably the League of American Wheelmen (LAW). The Wheelmen began as an urban club but flourished in rural areas, where “the demand for roads was most pronounced” and where the great majority of Americans still lived.²⁴ While not the

¹⁹ Albert Perry Brigham, “Good Roads in the United States,” *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, Vol. 36, No. 12 (1904), 728-29.

²⁰ Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, 12.

²¹ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 17.

²² U.S. Department of Transportation, *America's Highways*, 36.

²³ *Ibid*, 42.

²⁴ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 20.

feasible means of long distance travel that the automobile would soon become, the bicycle became an important step in the direction toward individual mobility.²⁵

Individuals could experience the personal freedom to travel without the price of rail tickets or a long line at the station.

In 1890, the New England-based Wheelmen began publishing *Good Roads* magazine, which quickly grew to reach a circulation of over a million readers in three years.²⁶ *Good Roads* and other publications rallied readers to advocate for better roads, especially in rural areas. Good roads advocates endorsed a Rural Free Delivery (RFD) bill, signed into law in 1896. RFD failed to produce better roads by 1900, largely because lack of funding and opposition from postmasters and private express companies.²⁷ In the 1890s, good roads movement did little to improve the quality of rural roads, but it did establish a solid foundation of good roads advocates.

On October 20, 1892, an assembly of good roads advocates, including the Wheelmen, prominent merchants, railroad executives, politicians, and various good roads organization members met in Chicago to form the National League for Good Roads (NLGR).²⁸ The NLGR first assembled in Chicago the October before the World's Fair of 1893. NLGR members unsuccessfully lobbied Congress to appropriate one million dollars for a special building at the World's Fair for a road-building exhibit.²⁹ The NLGR

²⁵ Hugill, "Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States," 328.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 22-23.

²⁸ National League for Good Roads, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November, 1892), 2-5.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 55.

also turned its focus towards creating a local league in each state.³⁰ Within a few years, the NLGR held good roads conventions across the country and led a spirited campaign to raise awareness for their movement in the South.

NLGR leagues advocated for the improvement of the United States' limited system of roads, which were known as "the worst to be found in any civilized country."³¹ Through an aggressive campaign to promote good roads across the nation, the Wheelmen managed to influence Congress, which created the Office of Road Inquiry in 1893.³² A largely symbolic and educational office, the Office of Road inquiry did not dispense any financial aid to build roads. With a budget of only \$10,000 per year, the director of the ORI, Martin Dodge, stated "there could be no surer way of postponing the building of good roads than by making them dependent on federal aid."³³ Mr. Dodge's statement reflects the opinion of many Americans disillusioned by the crawling bureaucracy of the federal government.

In Warren County, near Vicksburg, Mississippi, the NLGR gathered prominent citizens from across the area to survey a new one-mile stretch of "first-class hard road," paved in only three days.³⁴ In nearby Clarksdale, Mississippi, Governor Andrew Longino spoke in support of better roads, which he believed to be "more important than

³⁰ Ibid, 54.

³¹ Harold Parker, "Good Roads Movement," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 40 (March, 1912), 53.

³² Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, 12

³³ U.S. Department of Transportation, *America's Highways*, 47.

³⁴ League of American Wheelmen, *Good Roads Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (July 1901), 1.

railroads.”³⁵ Longino, a Democrat, was the first elected governor of Mississippi since the Civil War’s end. He pursued a progressive agenda because he viewed new technologies such as automobiles as promising for Mississippi, particularly white Mississippians.³⁶ The stretch of newly paved road in Warren County was a part of Longino’s early vision of a “Century of Progress.”³⁷

In neighboring Louisiana, Governor William Heard, also a Democrat, gave a speech to a crowd of good roads advocates in the same year that Longino gave his speech. In 1901, the crowd gathered for the departure of the “Good Roads Train,” which the National Good Roads Association organized to raise support for better roads. The train utilized the Illinois Central Line, beginning in New Orleans, where Louisiana Heard spoke on the importance of better roads in the South. Heard, like Longino, believed that better roads would make life easier in the countryside. Heard believed that with better roads, the rural population would stop its migration to cities in other states, such as Memphis and Chicago.³⁸ Heard also thought that better roads would lead to improved conditions for rural people. While he thought railroads would remain an important mode of transportation, he believed the recent invention of “horseless vehicles” would also usher in an “ideal Southland” of prosperous and efficient rural communities.³⁹ Of course,

³⁵ League of American Wheelmen, *Good Roads Magazine*, 1-2.

³⁶ David G. Sansing, “Andrew Houston Longino: Thirty-fifth Governor of Mississippi: 1900-1904,” Mississippi Historical Society (January 2004), <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/265/>

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ League of American Wheelmen, *Good Roads Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 1901), 1

³⁹ Ibid, 2.

nothing resembling an “autopia” of cheap cars and good paved roads would emerge immediately. But for Heard, the horseless vehicle provided a starting point.⁴⁰

The first popular “modern” gasoline-powered automobile was the 1901 Mercedes. The Mercedes gave motorists the ability to move faster than trains, but at a price that seemed out of reach for the vast majority of Americans. No sharecropper drove a Mercedes in 1901; only the elite could afford such an expensive vehicle.⁴¹ Automobiles wore down dirt or macadam roads faster than wagons did, although the wear was not serious until heavy trucks equipped with solid rubber tires became more common.⁴² Even though the Mercedes became a car for the elite, it also became the first of a class of “highway locomotive” capable of traveling distances formerly reserved for trains.⁴³

In 1909, Ford Motor Company produced the Model T, an inexpensive and tough vehicle. Ford’s target market for the Model T included the farming and rural people of America, but it proved popular among the urban and wealthy as well. Dubbed “the family car at an honest price” the Model T appealed to all economic classes.⁴⁴ The tough Model T could take urbanites out of the cities and into the country, as well as help rural farmers with farm activities such as plowing, grinding, sawing, and “even running washing

⁴⁰ Christopher W. Wells, “The Road to the Model T: Culture, Road Conditions, and Innovation at the Dawn of the Automobile Age,” *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 2007), 502.

⁴¹ Hugill, “Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States,” 330.

⁴² U.S. Department of Transportation, *America’s Highways*, 93.

⁴³ Wells, “The Road to the Model T,” 509.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 521.

machines.”⁴⁵ The Model T increased in popularity throughout the 1910s and 1920s as its price incrementally dropped. By 1923, the Model T accounted for 55 percent of all automobile production in the United States. As a result, the price of the Model T dropped to a mere \$298, or \$4376.02 in 2019 dollars.⁴⁶ The Model T was still not affordable for the poor, but it was practical for many Americans.

Yet, in the 1910s and 1920s, bad roads still crippled the mobility of the select few who did own cars. In 1916, just as the federal government first became involved in road building, the state of Mississippi, where much of the southern portion of Route 61 runs, had only 130 miles of good roads.⁴⁷ Residents of Mississippi, unfazed by their state’s lack of good roads, invested in automobiles. In 1915, a mere 9,669 automobiles were registered in Mississippi; by 1920, over 68,000 automobiles were registered.⁴⁸ Enthusiasm for automobiles increased pressure on state and federal governments to improve road conditions.

In the years before the federal government started dispensing aid for road building and maintenance, boosters raised road-building money from private citizens and organizations. Privately-funded highways did not conform to any regulated naming standards, and often carried unique names, such as the transcontinental “Lincoln Highway” or the “Dixie Highway.” Highway travel was confusing because of unreliable

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 497.

Coinnews Media Group “US Inflation Calculator,” accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>

⁴⁷ Hugill, “Good Roads and the Automobile in the United States,” 338.

⁴⁸ National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, “Facts and Figures of the Automobile Industry,” (1921), 38.

naming standards. Still, boosters who believed highways would lead to increased tourism and travel between cities, states, and regions financed and raised support. Much of what would become Highway 61 began as named private highways, such as the Jefferson Davis Highway.⁴⁹ Some of what became Highway 61 in Mississippi originated as the historic Natchez Trace, which began over a century before as a trail for slave traders looking to return north after floating south down the Mississippi River. Once improved and paved in sections, the Natchez Trace occasionally merged with Route 61 in Mississippi.⁵⁰

The proliferation of the automobile and the eventual improvement of long distance highways led to the unity of North and South.⁵¹ But, for such a trek to be made reliably, the federal government had to intervene. Good roads advocates such as the Wheelmen, as well as lobbyists from the burgeoning automobile industry, had pestered Congress for years. Congress, controlled in both chambers by Republicans since 1889, supported the railroad industry and was skeptical of federal road building.⁵² Congress struck down all substantial road aid bills prior to 1916.⁵³ But, in 1916, Democrat-controlled Congress passed the first Federal Aid Road Act, which President Woodrow

⁴⁹ Richard Weingroff, *U.S Route 61: A Highway History* (1987), 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

⁵¹ Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie*, 40-41.

⁵² United States Senate, "Party Division," accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/history/one_item_and teasers/partydiv.htm United States House of Representatives, "Party Divisions of the House of Representatives, 1789 to Present," accessed March 7, 2019, <https://history.house.gov/Institution/Party-Divisions/Party-Divisions/>

⁵³ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 86.

Wilson signed into law.⁵⁴ The 1916 bill succeeded for two main reasons: the increasing public demand for better roads, and the fact that Congressmen found a middle ground between radical and conservative ideas of federal road aid. The Federal Aid Road Act combined a bill from House Congressman Dorsey Shackleford, a Democrat, and a bill from Senator John Hollis Bankhead, also a Democrat. The Shackleford bill granted modest federal aid to rural counties, while the Bankhead bill represented the interests of the highway lobby that wanted a federal highway system.⁵⁵ The end result, sometimes called the Bankhead-Shackleford Bill, allocated \$75 million in aid over five years to improve rural post roads.⁵⁶

The Bankhead-Shackleford Bill did not immediately construct paved highways for interstate mobility. Some residents and politicians in the South were suspicious of any federal aid. Officials in Mississippi worried that federal aid dispensed to the Jackson Highway would mean the Government would “take the road over as a national highway.”⁵⁷ Instead, the bill struck a middle ground between the concerns of conservative politicians and angry farmers. Only rural post roads would receive funding from the bill, and the bill did not stipulate that new roads must be linked to one another. But most importantly, every state that wanted federal funding would need to create a state highway department.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid, 88.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 86-87.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 88-89.

⁵⁷ Richard Weingroff, “From Names to Numbers: The Origins of the U.S. Numbered Highway System,” updated 06/27/2017.

The Federal Aid Road Act could not help the South's roads as much as its residents wanted. Most impoverished southern states could not afford to match federal funds to build new roads or to maintain primitive dirt roads.⁵⁹ The entry of the United States into World War I became another hindrance to better roads. The war reduced the number of men available to work on roads. Moreover, trucks hauling war materials, men, and heavy machines further damaged roads around the country. By the time the war ended, a mere seventeen miles of new road had been built.⁶⁰ A clear vision of an interstate highway continued to elude the U.S. even after an extension of the 1916 bill was approved in 1921.

Throughout World War I, good roads organizations "recast interstate highways as military necessities" in an attempt to secure more federal road funding.⁶¹ Enthusiasm for a national highways system continued after the war. In 1918, the Office of Road Inquiry was renamed the Bureau of Public Roads (BPI). The BPI had authority to build roads in national parks and help states with road construction.⁶² Along with the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO), which arose as a nongovernmental advisory committee, the BPI drafted legislation that would become the Federal Highway

⁵⁸ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 89.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 92.

⁶⁰ Richard F. Weingroff, "Highway Existence: 100 Years and Beyond," *Public Roads*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1993).

⁶¹ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 92

⁶² The Living New Deal, "The Bureau of Public Roads (BPR)," accessed December 17, 2018, <https://livingnewdeal.org/glossary/bureau-public-roads-bpr-1918/> Federal Highway Administration, "Brief History of the Direct Federal Highway Construction Program," updated 09/28/2017, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/blazer01.cfm>

Act of 1921. The act increased federal roads funding and presented a new vision of transportation in the United States that included linking interstate highways.⁶³

The Federal Highway Act of 1921 set the stage for the creation of Highway 61. The bill included a stipulation that three sevenths of federal aid money must go to the creation of interstate highways.⁶⁴ The three-sevenths stipulation was included to appease politicians who wanted rural roads to continue to receive the majority of aid, while still allocating a substantial minority of aid to interstate highways. Without increased federal funding, and the agreement that America's highways should form a coherent interstate system of transportation, Route 61 would not have existed.

Highway mileage increased significantly after WWI and the Federal Highway Act of 1921, but the state of road building remained problematic. The competition between private investors led to low quality highways that often sprawled inefficiently between cities of importance to investors and the communities they represented. Many roads existed only to "provide salaries for their organizers."⁶⁵ Such an inefficient system would dissuade some would-be automobile travelers from using confusing and unnecessarily long routes. In 1924, the Joint Board on Interstate Highways formally released a plan to designate a numbered system of interstate highways.⁶⁶ The Joint Board selected routes that would connect existing auto trails in the shortest distance manageable, with

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Weingroff, "From Names to Numbers."

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of Transportation, *America's Highways*, 109.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 110.

considerable input from state officials. The numbered system that the Joint Board finally approved in 1926 marks the official birth of U.S. Route 61.

Chapter 2:

From Convict Leasing to Chain Gangs

Route 61 became a sum of the unique histories of its parts. An amalgamation of existing roads prefaced Route 61 and then created a highway that would connect the North and South, eventually contributing to the physical and cultural diaspora of southern migrants. Most significant to this diaspora was the southern half of the highway, which connected Memphis to the Mississippi Delta and New Orleans. In the era in which most of the roads that became Route 61 emerged, the Jim Crow system of discrimination and white supremacy gripped the South. The Jim Crow system assisted the Good Roads Movement in the South via African American convict labor.

Before the Civil War, most prisoners in the South were white. Most prisoners were white because slave masters did not want to jail their own slaves.⁶⁷ When the Civil War ended in 1865, the Mississippi State Legislature penned the first “Black Codes,” which white supremacists “vigorously” implemented in Mississippi. Other states copied Mississippi’s code, sometimes word for word, in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas. Black Codes aimed to “control the labor supply” by jailing African Americans for being unemployed and for minor offences such as insulting

⁶⁷ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 132.

gestures and mischief.⁶⁸ The Black Codes restricted the freedoms of African Americans while helping a few white men build a fortune via a scheme known as convict leasing.

As imprisonment of African Americans increased after the Civil War, the prison system could not keep up. The Civil War destroyed many southern prisons, including the Jackson penitentiary, which burned down in 1863.⁶⁹ Prisons soon overflowed with convicts and the southern states, increasingly controlled by whites, looked for a solution. In 1868, businessman Edmund Richardson struck a deal with federal authorities in Mississippi. Originally from North Carolina, Richardson turned a \$2,800 inheritance into a cotton empire. A millionaire on the eve of the Civil War, Richardson lost nearly everything by 1865 except for five hundred bales of cotton.⁷⁰ Richardson used his cotton as capital and moved his business to Mississippi. The deal he made with Mississippi authorities guaranteed him cheap labor to work his Yazoo farms. Felons on loan from the state worked for free on Richardson's cotton plantations. The deal entitled him to \$18,000 per year from the state to feed and house the prisoners. Richardson used this deal to become one of the richest men in the South. He diversified his holdings, which soon included railroads, banks, textiles, and steamboats. Based on Richardson's model, convict leasing became a common method to ease the burden of overpopulated prisons across the South.

Only African American prisoners were sent to work on Richardson's farms. In 1871, 152 African American prisoners were sent to work on Mississippi Delta farms,

⁶⁸ David Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. Simon and Schuster, New York (1996), 21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

while the other 61 white prisoners remained at a state penitentiary in Jackson.⁷¹ Leased convicts endured savage conditions. Convicts were punished by whipping and beating. Dozens were shot between 1868 and 1871. David Oshinsky argued that conditions for leased convicts were “far worse than anything they had ever experienced as slaves.”⁷² The convict leasing system faced little criticism in southern newspapers in its early years. Mississippi Governor James Lusk Alcorn condemned convict leasing in 1870 after he witnessed the “shocking spectacle” of a convict group followed closely by men with guns.⁷³ Although Alcorn condemned convict leasing, the state had no other feasible alternatives. Only a few months after seeing the convict group, Alcorn extended Richardson’s contract for two more years.

The Mississippi State Legislature soon passed laws that expanded the convict leasing system. In 1876, Mississippi passed the “Pig Law” which imposed longer sentences for theft. Any theft of a farm animal or property worth ten dollars or more constituted “grand larceny,” punishable by up to five years in prison.⁷⁴ The Pig Law caused convict numbers to increase. In 1874, Mississippi had 272 state prisoners. By 1877, their number had increased to 1,072.⁷⁵ A second 1876 law, the Leasing Act, permitted county jails, which held prisoners serving a sentence of less than a year, to

⁷¹ Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 36.

⁷² *Ibid*, 35.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

⁷⁵ Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*, University of South Carolina Press (1966), 135.

lease out their convicts.⁷⁶ County prisoners were sent to work on chain gangs and local plantations. The Leasing Act had a significant effect on the good roads movement in Mississippi. Though convict leasing officially ended in 1890, county jails were still able to send prisoners to work on roads and highways. Other states, most prominently Georgia, would eventually use state prisoners on their chain gangs while Mississippi used county inmates serving shorter sentences. The result was that even convicts serving time for minor crimes, such as gambling and petty theft, did hard labor on Mississippi's roads. Prisoners such as Walter Blake, an African American boy who owed the county \$182 for illegal gambling, was typical, sentenced to hard labor on chain gang for an entire year to pay off his debt.⁷⁷

The Pig Law and the Leasing Act expanded the convict leasing system, but also led to its demise. Conditions for leased convicts deteriorated after 1876. Jones S. Hamilton won the rights to Mississippi's exclusive state convict leasing contract after Richardson. Unlike Edmund Richardson, who used convict labor on his own farms, Hamilton subleased convicts out for a fixed rate per person.⁷⁸ In 1884, prisoners sent from plantations in the Delta were not allowed to march through Vicksburg because of their "horrifying" condition. Soon thereafter, the Mississippi House of Representatives investigated the incident and presented a report to the legislature.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 41.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 43-44.

⁷⁹ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 138.

Public sentiment turned against the convict leasing system by the late 1880s. Investigations into the conditions faced by leased convicts disturbed both whites and blacks. Convict labor also started to compete with contract labor. The outspoken editor of the *Clinton Sword and Shield*, Roderick Gambrell, criticized Hamilton for the treatment of his convicts. Hamilton challenged Gambrell to a duel on Capitol Street in Jackson, though dueling had been illegal since 1820. Hamilton killed Gambrell, but was severely wounded. In 1887, a jury acquitted Hamilton of murder.⁸⁰ A year later, John Martin, an outspoken newspaper editor critical of convict leasing, was shot and killed by Hamilton's friend.⁸¹

Class anger contributed most to the end of convict leasing in Mississippi. At the 1890 constitutional convention, delegates clamored for the end of convict leasing because small farmers felt that plantations worked by convicts for free had an unfair advantage. Displaced low wage laborers convinced representatives to fight for lost jobs. On September 5, 1890, the convention voted to abolish convict leasing.⁸² Mississippi was the first southern state to end convict leasing, but an overcrowded penal system remained. Mississippi turned to convict labor on public projects to solve the problem.

A key role of convict leasing was, as Tammy Ingram wrote, the “strengthening of the walls of white supremacy,” but by the time convict leasing ended in Mississippi, the Jim Crow era was just beginning. Convict road-building took the place of convict leasing, and it also served as a critical part of what Tammy Ingram terms “a reform agenda based

⁸⁰ Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*, 49-50.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 50.

⁸² *Ibid*, 52.

on racial control.”⁸³ The reform agenda, later known as the Jim Crow system, created a society of racial separation in the South.

To understand the significance of convict labor on roads it is crucial to understand its role in the South’s progressive movement. Jim Crow laws emerged in the 1880s, and were distinct from Black Codes because they mandated the separation of races regarding public works and amenities. Tennessee enacted the first Jim Crow law in 1881. The law required railroad companies to provide separate cars or compartments to African-American passengers, but most importantly, it set a precedent for later segregationist laws.⁸⁴ Mississippi passed a similar law in 1888 requiring black and white passengers to ride in different cars. Railroad companies resisted the law because it required them to provide additional rail cars. In 1890, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Mississippi law.⁸⁵ Louisiana followed Mississippi and Tennessee’s example in 1890 when it passed a railcar segregation law of its own. Homer Adolph Plessy, who refused to ride in a “Jim Crow Car”, challenged the Louisiana law in 1892.⁸⁶ Four years later, in a landmark decision, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy. The Court cited the “separate but equal” rule as the “justification for segregation.”⁸⁷ The Plessy decision deemed segregation legal.

⁸³ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 136.

⁸⁴ Stanley J. Folmsbee, "The Origin of the First "Jim Crow" Law." *The Journal of Southern History* 15, no. 2 (1949): 235.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 244.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 245.

⁸⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press (1955), pg. 54.

C. Vann Woodward stated that the first step to accomplishing white supremacy in the South was “the total disenfranchisement of the Negro.”⁸⁸ Mississippi led the way in drafting legislation that limited the rights of African Americans. Mississippi enacted poll taxes and literacy tests that indirectly limited the rights of African Americans to vote. Mississippi also used the “understanding clause,” where an illiterate individual could vote only if they were arbitrarily judged to understand a part of the state Constitution read to them. The rest of the southern states quickly followed Mississippi by implementing similar voter suppression schemes. Louisiana was the first to use the “grandfather clause” to directly prevent African Americans from voting because their grandfathers could not vote.⁸⁹ Voter suppression efforts were effective in Louisiana, which had 130,334 registered African American voters in 1896, and only 1,342 in 1904.⁹⁰

Disenfranchised African Americans had little recourse against emerging laws that discriminated against them. Through voter suppression, “lily-white” state and county governments enforced a system of white supremacist racial order.⁹¹ Lily-white governments churned out laws segregating African Americans from whites, and targeted African American freedom. A key facet of the disenfranchisement that Woodward wrote about was the imprisonment of African Americans for minor crimes. These laws were a part of what some white southerners called progressive reform. Imprisonment for minor

⁸⁸ Ibid, 66.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 67.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 68.

⁹¹ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, (1971), 324.

crimes fueled the convict labor system. Mississippi's Leasing Act gave counties the ability to either lease out convicts to local plantations, or use them for public works. While convict leasing ended in 1890 in Mississippi, counties retained the right to use prisoners serving less than a year to work on local roads. Mississippi counties used convicts for roadwork until the 1950s. Oddly and tragically, the move to chain gangs was viewed as a progressive "reform" in the South. Chain gangs provided both an affordable way to build and maintain roads that residents clamored for, while still upholding the racial ideology of the Jim Crow era by using forced black labor. In the South, chain gangs became widespread by 1890, just as the good roads movement was gaining momentum.⁹²

Leaders of the good roads movement endorsed convict labor on roads. A recurring segment in *Good Roads* magazine extolled the virtues of convict road labor. An article in *Good Roads* praised the efficiency of convict road labor in North Carolina, and even contended that the health of prisoners working on roads had improved.⁹³ By 1900, good roads enthusiasts accepted convict labor in both the North and South. In North Carolina, good roads advocate and state geologist, Joseph Holmes, championed convict road labor as the answer for improvement of public roads, and as "the beginning and the basis of modern road building in the southern states."⁹⁴ Holmes wrote that Mississippi rightly adopted convict road labor by 1901.⁹⁵ Roy Stone, the first chairman of the Office

⁹² United States Department of Agriculture, "Convict Labor for Road Work," Washington Government Printing Office (December 15, 1916), 9.

⁹³ League of American Wheelmen, "The Use of Convict Labor," *Good Roads Magazine* Vol. 2, No. 4 (September, 1901), 17.

⁹⁴ "Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South," 88.

of Road Inquiry, the precursor to the Bureau of Public Roads, “bragged to the secretary of agriculture” about the success of chain gangs in the South and West.⁹⁶

Critics pointed to chain gangs as inhumane and inefficient. Journalists exposed the brutal treatment of convicts during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. The most influential first-hand account of life on chain gangs was Robert Burns’ memoir *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* In the book, Burns describes in horrific detail the whippings of his fellow convicts with a heavy leather strap.⁹⁷ Shackles were permanently attached to convicts, which led to a painful condition known as “shackle poison.”⁹⁸ Convicts worked tirelessly for the state, without adequate food or shelter. Just as in convict leasing, the resemblance to slavery was pronounced, but Burns’s experience on his chain gang was indicative of how chain gangs across the South operated. Indeed, in 1912, The National Committee on Prison Labor called chain gangs “the last surviving vestige of the slave system.”⁹⁹

Convict roadwork reached its height during the 1920s, as federal funds for roads first became available. Federal money helped pay for materials and expert road workers, but southern states continued to utilize cheap convict labor to do the brunt of the work. Ingram contends that convicts did most of the work on southern roads between 1900 and

⁹⁵ J. A. Holmes, “Road Building With Convict Labor in the Southern States,” *Yearbook of the Department of Agriculture* (1901), 320.

⁹⁶ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 134.

⁹⁷ Robert E. Burns and Matthew J. Mancini, *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang!* University of Georgia Press (1997), 54.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 49.

⁹⁹ Mitchel P. Roth, *Prisons and Prison Systems: A Global Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Press, Westport Connecticut (2006), 57

1930.¹⁰⁰ By 1930, Mississippi was well on its way to finishing its portion of the 1926 national highway designation, including Route 61. On June 30, 1930, a total of 1,820 miles of the 3,604 miles of highway designated by the Joint Board in 1926 had been improved via federal aid and convict labor.¹⁰¹ “Improved” highways were no longer the treacherous paths of previous decades, but instead they were made drivable for a growing number of automobile travelers.

¹⁰⁰ Ingram, *Dixie Highway*, 131.

¹⁰¹ United States Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Public Roads*, (1932), 29.

Chapter 3:

Traveling the Highway: The Southern Diaspora

Just as the federal government took action to build interstate highways, and southern states began using convict labor to build highways, millions of southerners began to migrate north and west. They migrated for a bevy of economic reasons, including turmoil within the cotton industry and economic opportunity in the North spurred by WWI. Some southern African-Americans decided to leave the South as the Jim Crow system solidified in the 1920s, and as racial violence increased. In what James Gregory called “the most momentous internal population movement of the twentieth century,”¹⁰² white and black southerners piled into trains, automobiles, and busses, hungry to begin a new life with better economic opportunities, and for some, an escape from discrimination. Highway 61 served as a route for migrants from the Mississippi Delta and below to journey north to Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago.

Most historians cite 1914 as the beginning of the “Great Migration.” The stream of migrants leaving the South began accelerating in 1914, when the First World War erupted in Europe and new immigrant labor dwindled. Southerners migrated at smaller rates for decades before 1914 because of economic opportunities in industrialized cities, as the U.S. touted the biggest industrial economy in the world by 1900.¹⁰³ The start of

¹⁰² Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, xii.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 22.

WWI led to two major factors that influenced the U.S. economy and labor market: first, the war created over three million manufacturing jobs.¹⁰⁴ Second, immigration plummeted during WWI. Immigrants supplied the U.S with low-cost labor for most of its history. In the years prior to WWI, the U.S. witnesses over a million immigrants annually, but that number dwindled to 110,000 by 1918.¹⁰⁵ With millions of new, high-paying jobs in America's manufacturing cities, primarily in the north Midwest and Northeast, companies needed to attract laborers. The most accessible labor pool became white and black southerners. The South was not nearly as industrialized as the Midwest and North by World War One; most southerners were agricultural workers.

Disruption within the southern cotton industry contributed to unease among the southern labor population. A small insect called the boll weevil swarmed the southern countryside; decimating cotton crop yields for cotton-producing states. Mississippi experienced the greatest crop reduction in its history in 1913, when the weevil reduced cotton yields by 33 percent.¹⁰⁶ The boll weevil hit Mississippi and Louisiana hardest between 1910 and 1919. Mississippi lost the largest percentage of black residents to out-migration during the same time span, as 153 per every thousand blacks migrated.¹⁰⁷ While the boll weevil did not solely cause blacks to leave Mississippi, it did impact the economic welfare of farmers dependent on cotton. Boll weevil destruction acted as one of several "push" mechanisms for migration. Push mechanisms such as the weevil, and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 24.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Higgs, "The Boll Weevil, the Cotton Economy, and Black Migration 1910-1930," *Agricultural History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April 1976), 347-348.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 339.

general economic struggle among poor black and white southerners, combined with the “pull” factors created in industrial centers by the war.¹⁰⁸ The economic opportunity in rising industrial centers varied between migrants, with the largest divide between white and black migrants.

Many of the best paying white collar and skilled labor jobs went to white migrants, who outnumbered black migrants in each decade of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ By 1920, only 22 percent of white southern-born males who moved north held unskilled jobs, while the rest held either white collar or skilled labor positions.¹¹⁰ In order to attract unskilled laborers, northern companies hired labor agents to recruit southern African Americans. The majority of African Americans who migrated were from rural areas. They mostly moved to Midwestern and southern cities. The net out-migration from the rural South totaled 1,013,000 between 1900 and 1920.¹¹¹ Labor agents visited rural areas across the South and informed residents about the jobs up north and in southern cities. Some agents convinced potential laborers to sign agreements with pay under “minimum levels.”¹¹² Labor agents largely recruited literate “able-bodied men.” As a result, a sixth of all literate African American men living in the South moved north by 1920.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 348.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 14-15.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 86.

¹¹¹ Carole Marks, “Black Workers and the Great Migration North,” Clark Atlanta University, *Phylon*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1985) 150.

¹¹² Carole Marks, “Lines of Communication, Recruitment Mechanisms, and the Great Migration of 1916-1918,” *Social Problems*, Vol. 21, No. 11 (Oct., 1983), 76.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Southern towns punished labor agents with arrests and fines as governments passed a wave of “anti-enticement” laws intended to limit the drain of African Americans laborers leaving the rural South.¹¹⁴ Companies relied on labor agents for the first few years of the diaspora, after which other means of communication worked more effectively to pull African Americans north.¹¹⁵

Family and friends served as an essential means of communication between migrants and African Americans still living in the South. Often, one family member moved north and secured a job, whereby that person’s company encouraged the rest of their family to move north as well. Companies sometimes loaned money to employees so that they could move the rest of their families north.¹¹⁶ Although in many cases, letters contained all the encouragement potential migrants needed to start their journey. Letters to family and friends from established migrants sometimes contained money, a physical indicator of the opportunity brought by migration. One migrant who wrote to a friend in Hattiesburg, Mississippi was credited to have “enticed over 200 people to leave the South.”¹¹⁷

In addition to letters, black southerners found information on opportunity in the North through print media. An African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, encouraged southern blacks to head north. A 1916 article in the *Chicago Defender* entitled, “Farewell, Dixie Land,” encouraged “Every black man for the sake of his wife

¹¹⁴ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 46.

¹¹⁵ Marks, “Lines of Communication, Recruitment Mechanisms, and the Great Migration of 1916-1918,” 76-77.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 77.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*.

and daughters,” to move north even at a financial loss.¹¹⁸ The *Defender* sold 150,000 copies in 1918, and an estimated ten people read each copy, making its readership as high as a million and half people. The *Defender* became a helpful outlet for migrants by posting jobs and providing advice for transplants to the North. After restricting labor agent access to African American laborers, some white southerners tried to restrict access to the *Defender*. In Meridian, Mississippi, for instance, the chief of police ordered the *Defender* “confiscated from dealers.”¹¹⁹ Southern towns banned other publications, such as the *Crisis*, a NAACP publication. In Franklin, Mississippi, a sentenced a black minister to “five months on the county farm and a four hundred dollar fine,” for selling issues of the *Crisis*.¹²⁰

Many black southerners migrated north to escape the kind of treatment that the Franklin minister endured. They hoped to escape the injustices of the Jim Crow South. The threat of arbitrary arrest and subsequent assignment to a prison farm or brutal treatment on a county chain gang lingered in the consciousness of African-Americans. Historians have attempted to calculate the factor that social conditions played as a push factor for potential migrants. The first decades of the Great Migration, between the 1910s and 1930s, were a time of particular danger for African Americans. By 1920, the Jim

¹¹⁸ *The Chicago Defender*, “Farewell, Dixie Land,” (October 7, 1916) 12.

¹¹⁹ Alferdteen Harrison, James R. Grossman, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, “Black Labor is the Best Labor: Southern White Reactions to the Great Migration,” University Press of Mississippi (1992), 56.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*

Crow system was firmly in place, and blacks had virtually no voting rights and were assigned a “subordinate status” by law.¹²¹

Lynching was the most glaring danger for southern African Americans. Extralegal violence has long been considered a major reason that millions of African Americans left the South. Steward E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck analyzed the history of lynching against African Americans in the South in their book, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynching, 1882-1930*. They purport that most lynching against blacks were the result of an accusation of a felony such as murder, theft, or rape.¹²² Although most lynchings happened as a response to a major accusation, the most terrifying were in response to minor offences.

While most blacks did not need to worry about being accused of murder, they did worry about being lynched for something trivial. For instance, on Christmas Day 1923, a group of white men in Elliot Station, Mississippi, killed African American preacher, William Hardeman, because of “sarcastic remarks” about a local white woman.¹²³ In the same year in Mississippi, a gang of white men invaded a black youth’s home because his inability to pay a ten-cent interest on a fifty-cent loan from a white man. The youth and his father fled, but the white men shot and killed the sister who remained at the house.¹²⁴

Black soldiers returning from service in WWI were targeted with violence. An African

¹²¹ Steward E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, “Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Feb. 1992), 104.

¹²² Steward E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynching, 1882-1930*, University of Illinois Press (1995), 19.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 21.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*.

American named Wilbur Little returned to Georgia from the war, only to be threatened by a group of white men who ordered him not to wear his uniform. Days later, Little was found beaten to death outside of town.¹²⁵ In certain areas around the South, blacks witnessed brutality firsthand, as lynching was sometimes a public spectacle. Tolnay and Beck concluded that in areas with “high levels of lethal violence” African Americans migrated in greater numbers than other areas.¹²⁶ Living in an environment where a slight remark or gesture could spell death, visions of a northern Promised Land shined brightly.

While most white migrants needed only to worry about the cost of a train ticket in order to leave the South, black migrants had a more difficult time leaving. Whites worried that they would lose their source of cheap labor if African Americans moved to cities in the North and South, so in order to stop the flow of migrants leaving by train, some southern towns restricted access to trains. While some landlords and employers to African Americans refused to pay settlements in full or on time so that blacks could not buy train tickets, others took more direct measure. In Macon, Georgia, police evicted “several hundred Chicago-bound blacks” from a train station.¹²⁷ In Summit, Mississippi, authorities closed the entire train station and let trains pass without picking up any passengers.¹²⁸ Trains did not offer the level of personal freedom to mobility that automobiles did, but most poor African American could not afford a car, and the bus

¹²⁵ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, First Vintage Books (2011), “Atlanta, 1941: Robert Joseph Pershing Foster.”

¹²⁶ Steward E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, “Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration,” 36.

¹²⁷ Harrison and Grossman, *Black Exodus*, “Black Labor is the Best Labor,” 57.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

system was still years away from eclipsing the popularity and affordability of passenger trains.

African Americans who did migrate north were not always safe from racial violence. Housing in Chicago was limited before WWI. Between 1910 and 1930, Chicago's black population rose from 44,000 to 234,000, with nearly all African-Americans confined to thirty-five city blocks known as the "black belt," which expanded throughout the 1920s, much to the ire of nearby white residents.¹²⁹ In the same period of time, fifty-eight bombings targeted African Americans living in the Black Belt. In July of 1919, a black boy swimming near a Lake Michigan beach was killed, supposedly for swimming over an "imaginary segregation line."¹³⁰ White children on the shore hurled rocks at him, causing the boy to drown. When police who witnessed the drowning refused to make any arrests, fighting and riots spread on the outskirts of the Black Belt. Twenty African Americans and fourteen white men died, while several black houses burned down.¹³¹

Despite incidents such as Chicago race riots, whites and African Americans continued to pour into northern cities throughout the 1920s. By the end of the twentieth century, more blacks lived in Chicago than in the state Mississippi.¹³² James Gregory contended that America's great internal migration did not start reversing until the 1970s, when the South underwent its own economic revolution and more people began moving

¹²⁹ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 120.

¹³⁰ Carl Sandburg, "The Chicago Race Riots: July 1919," Harcourt, Brace and Howe, New York (1919), 1.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, "The Great Migration, 1915-1970."

in rather than out.¹³³ The tide of migration varied between its initial years and the 1970s. Migration slowed somewhat during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Word of urban unemployment kept many rural southerners from moving to cities, and some urbanites even moved back to rural areas.¹³⁴ But the beginning of World War II launched an even greater exodus of people from the rural South into southern, northern, and increasingly, western cities. Gregory marks WWII as the initiator of the “greatest reorganization of Americans in the nation’s history.”¹³⁵ WWII also marks what many historians refer to as the second phase of the Great Migration.

During the second phase, rural agricultural workers migrated in the highest percentages. In 1940, there were still fourteen million agricultural workers in the South, but by 1970, only three million remained.¹³⁶ The abandonment of farm life stems from a labor transition in the cotton industry. Most plantations after the Civil War utilized the sharecropping system, where entire families farmed a certain tract of land. Sharecroppers were usually poor, but sharecropping families still had stable work from year to year. By the 1950s, nearly all plantations moved to a “centralized farm management” system.¹³⁷ The centralized system excluded sharecroppers in favor of temporary or seasonal workers. Under the new system, employment for agricultural workers became an unstable, and increasingly infeasible way to support a family.

¹³³ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 40.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 28-29.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 33.

Those who migrated during the second phase were more likely to use different transportation than those of the first phase. Whereas most migrants during the first phase of the Great Migration used trains, migrants increasingly used automobiles and buses during the second phase. Automobile production steadily increased throughout the 1920s and 1930s. By 1947, there was one registered automobile per every 4.7 people in the United States.¹³⁸ Due to advances in automobile durability and technology, as well as the expansion and improvement of the national highway system, cars became a popular interstate travel option. For those who did not own a car, the bus system provided a cheap means of transportation. In 1928, the bus fare between St. Louis and Chicago was \$7 while rail fare was \$10.43.¹³⁹ Bus transportation became generally cheaper than any other type of travel in the 1930s, and in 1935, bus passengers outnumbered rail travelers for the first time.¹⁴⁰

Gregory concluded that the proliferation of cars, buses, and moving vans made relocating “easier than ever before,” at a time when economic opportunity abounded.¹⁴¹ The number of second phase migrants far outnumbered the first phase: 4.3 million southerners migrated in the 1940s, compared to two million in the 1920s.¹⁴² Southerners,

¹³⁸ Automobile Manufacturers Association, *Automobile Facts and Figures*, 28th edition (1948), 20.

¹³⁹ Board of Investigation and Research, “The National Traffic Pattern,” United States Government Printing Office (September 20, 1944), 112.

¹⁴⁰ The Museum of Modern Art, *One Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series*, Accessed February 18, 2019: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/static/visualizing-the-great-migration/>

¹⁴¹ Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 32.

once from an isolated, rural region, spread out across the United States and changed the social and cultural landscape of the nation. The affordability of transportation especially benefitted low-income migrants, and allowed those who had never before left the South to relocate elsewhere. Southern musicians, for example, could more easily afford a trip to recording studios in Chicago or Memphis. And it was musicians living along Highway 61 who most significantly contributed to what Gregory called “the southernization of American popular music.”

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 14.

Chapter 4:

The Blues Highway

The Good Roads movement, forced convict labor, and the Great Migrations of the twentieth century laid the foundation for Highway 61's significance. While the road building fervor of the 1920s changed the landscape of transportation in the United States, it also led to racially discriminatory "progressive" policies of the South. The social and racial factors that led to the widespread adoption of chain gangs also contributed to the emergence of the Jim Crow system. The discriminatory social environment of the Mississippi Delta contributed to the out-migration of African Americans along Highway 61's route, inspiring the music that blues performers wrote.

Economic opportunity and social factors contributed to the exodus of black rural southerners, who migrated by the millions to cities in the North and South. The blues played an important role in the mythic significance of Highway 61. Many of the earliest blues musicians were from near Highway 61, as well as many influential musicians of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. For the most part, blues artists saw Highway 61 as the opportunity to escape the Mississippi Delta to pursue their music careers.

Historian Robert Palmer contended that the origins of the blues in America stem back from the first African slaves sent to America.¹⁴³ Slaves experienced the musical traditions of many different African regions and communities as plantation owners

¹⁴³ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, The Viking Press, New York (1981), 25-26.

bought slaves from different regions of Africa. As a result, a “hybridized musical language” emerged on plantation fields across the South.¹⁴⁴ After emancipation, former slaves enjoyed freedom of mobility for the first time in America. While many freed slaves returned to the same plantation they worked on before the Civil War, some walked, rode in wagons, or hopped on trains to different areas. In the Reconstruction era, “plantation musicians” first exercised their new freedom to travel and play music as true professionals.¹⁴⁵ Black musicians played on streets for tips or in social clubs, and influenced a younger generation of musicians to pursue their own talents.

The earliest black professional musicians in the South did not play blues songs, but instead played country music, ballads, and songs borrowed from the minstrel stage.¹⁴⁶ Early traveling musicians developed the passionate “black performing style” that became a central characteristic of later blues artists.¹⁴⁷ By 1900, blues became loosely known as a genre of music.¹⁴⁸ It is unclear whether blues simply evolved from a combination of musical influences or if an artist could rightly claim to be the inventor of blues. Regardless, as blues became more popular, each blues performer espoused their own distinct musical style, and regions became known for their own brand of blues.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 41.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 42.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 43.

The Mississippi Delta emerged as an influential regional sect of the burgeoning blues genre. Alan Lomax described the Delta as “the last American frontier,” known for its lawlessness, poverty, and harsh social conditions.¹⁵⁰ The Delta’s cotton economy developed later than the rest of Mississippi. The Mississippi Delta was largely untouched by previous Native American activity, thickly forested and prone to floods. Around 1835, settlers started to clear the hardwood trees from the Delta’s fertile soil.¹⁵¹ Employment opportunities for laborers abounded after the Civil War. Freedmen moved to the Delta to fell trees, work on plantations, and farm their own land.¹⁵² To quell the threat of flood, levee commissions coordinated efforts to build levees. Building levees was brutal work; leased convicts did most of the labor. White supervisors used whips and clubs to drive convicts.¹⁵³ Matthew J. Mancini describes Mississippi Delta levee camps as “the worst conditions on record anywhere in the history of convict leasing,” leading to a high convict mortality rate.¹⁵⁴ The levee commissions finished the first stages of the enormous project by 1883.¹⁵⁵ In levee camps, black laborers sang lonesome ballads known as levee hollers.¹⁵⁶ Similar to the later sorrow-filled hollers of prisoners at Mississippi’s Parchman

¹⁵⁰ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Pantheon Books, New York (1993), 216.

¹⁵¹ William Ferris, *Blues From the Delta*, Da Capo Press, New York (1984), 3.

¹⁵² Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Pantheon Books, New York (1993), 65.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 214.

¹⁵⁴ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 137.

¹⁵⁵ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 213.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 233.

Prison farm, African-Americans sang levee hollers as a response to the conditions around them.

When Mississippi abolished convict leasing in 1890, the state still needed a large pool of laborers to construct and maintain levees. Levee work was seasonal, so many sharecroppers worked in between farming seasons for supplementary income. Some contractors paid black workers well, occasionally more than they would make in an entire cotton season. Other contractors swindled workers out of their pay. Black workers were subject to “debt peonage” while they worked and lived in levee camps.¹⁵⁷ Contractors delayed pay periods for months so that workers had no choice but to accumulate debt purchasing food, clothes, drinking water, and rent through the commissary system. By the time workers received their pay, much of it went straight back to the contractors to pay for the exorbitantly priced supplies.¹⁵⁸

Delta bluesman Mississippi Fred McDowell described life in a levee camp in his song, “Levee Camp Blues,” released in 1968. In the song, McDowell sings “Well I worked on the levee, baby, ‘Till I went stone blind,” and also hints that the contractor took his friends pay, but “I declare, you can’t take mine.”¹⁵⁹ Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax recorded levee works songs as performed by ex-levee workers in the 1970s. One

¹⁵⁷ Richard M. Mizelle, Jr., “Black Levee Camp Workers, the NAACP, and the Mississippi Flood Control Project, 1927-1933,” *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 98, No. 4, The University of Chicago Press (Fall 2013), 511.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 513.

¹⁵⁹ Mississippi Fred McDowell, “Levee Camp Blues,” *Levee Camp Blues LP*.

sang, “Lord, in my trouble I stretch my hand to thee, Lord in my trouble no other help I know,” a common plea among levee workers.¹⁶⁰

Settlement of the Delta continued until the 1930s. Once laborers cleared the land of trees and built levees to prevent flooding, the Mississippi Delta boasted some of the most productive cotton lands in the United States. The Delta became known as “America’s super-plantation belt.”¹⁶¹ African Americans were largely excluded from rewards of the cotton boom, as they had been across the South since antebellum times. Many Delta blacks worked as sharecroppers and were regularly cheated out of their earnings by white landowners, kept in a constant cycle of debt.¹⁶² Robert Palmer contends that black African American music arose in response to “a brutal and desperate situation” that began with slavery, and continued with Jim Crow throughout much of the twentieth century.¹⁶³

Although convicts and later paid laborers toiled for years to build levees around the Mississippi River, floods still threatened the Delta. In 1927, one of the most destructive river floods in American history drowned a large portion of the Mississippi Delta. The Great Flood of 1927 displaced over 200,000 people, and 500 people died as a direct result of the flooding.¹⁶⁴ In the wake of the flood, some whites forced blacks at gunpoint to pile sandbags to stave off the flood. In Greenville, Mississippi, William

¹⁶⁰ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 233.

¹⁶¹ Ferris, *Blues From the Delta*, 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁶³ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 39.

¹⁶⁴ Derek Bright, *Highway 61: Crossroads On the Blues Highway*, the History Press (2014), 93.

Percy, a local government official, granted whites “the authority to force African Americans into whatever type of work they desired after the flood.”¹⁶⁵

The Flood of 1927 inspired some black residents of the Mississippi Delta to create songs reflecting their experiences in a similar fashion that slavery, convict leasing, and levee camps inspired. “When the Levee Breaks,” by Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe McCoy, described the pain and urge for mobility felt by people displaced by the flood. “When the Levee Breaks” was later adapted by the rock group Led Zeppelin, as well as Bob Dylan. Minnie was born in 1887 in Algiers, Louisiana, as Lizzie Douglas. Minnie and her family moved to Walls, Mississippi in 1904.¹⁶⁶ Her trip to Walls followed exactly what one-day would become Highway 61. Not satisfied to work in cotton fields or as a domestic servant, Douglas learned to play the guitar. She was among the first travelling professional musicians who played the blues. Douglas played at parties, on Delta streets, and on Beale Street in Memphis. Douglas became professionally known as Memphis Minnie. After the flood in the late 1920s, Columbia Records sent talent scouts to Memphis who recorded Minnie with her music partner and husband, Joe McCoy. Minnie and Joe moved to Chicago in the early 1930s where they recorded more songs and played in blues clubs.¹⁶⁷

The extensive damage wrought by the Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the subsequent forced labor camps overseen by white elites convinced many black families to

¹⁶⁵ Mizelle, “Black Levee Camp Workers, the NAACP, and the Mississippi Flood Control Project, 1927-1933,” 514.

¹⁶⁶ Bill C. Malone and Charles Reagan Wilson, *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music*, University of North Carolina Press (2009), 293.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 294.

leave the Delta for good.¹⁶⁸ Flood victims were a part of a larger out-migration of southerners during the first phase of the Great Migration. Many migrants were musicians. Much like Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe, southern musicians left the South for reasons common among other migrants: economic opportunity in the North, trouble within the southern cotton economy, natural disaster, and an escape from racial discrimination. Highway 61 would never have become a cultural symbol without these travelling musicians. Indeed, Highway 61's legacy is both the physical product of racially exploitative "progressive" policy, and the mythical product of the musicians who traveled the route northward.

Convict labor on roads, one of the racially discriminatory "progressive" policies that white southerners endorsed, was often the subject of blues songs. Gertrude Pridgett, later known as Ma Rainey, was born in 1886 in Columbus, Georgia.¹⁶⁹ Rainey toured with minstrel shows before signing with Paramount Records in 1923 as the first female professional blues musician.¹⁷⁰ Paramount released Rainey's "Chain Gang Blues," in 1926.¹⁷¹ "Chain Gang Blues," told the story of a woman sentenced to ninety days on the county chain gang for the crime of "stealing a woman's man."¹⁷² Rainey likely witnessed

¹⁶⁸ Richard Hornbeck and Suresh Naidu, "When the Levee Breaks: Black Migration and Economic Development in the American South," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (March 2014), 967.

¹⁶⁹ Malone and Wilson, *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music*, 333.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Max E. Vreede, *Paramount: 12000/13000 Series*, Storyville Publications, London (1971), series no. 12338

¹⁷² Ma Rainey, "Chain Gang Blues," *Ma Rainey*, Roots Records (2011).

chain gangs at work while living in Georgia. As Alex Lichtenstein detailed, the state of Georgia instituted chain gangs extensively in 1908 after the state abolished convict leasing. Georgia sent five thousand convicts began work on roads in 1908.¹⁷³ Later in the 1950s, the Mississippi Delta soul artist, Sam Cooke, wrote a song after he witnessed a chain gang in action. Cooke wrote the hit song, “Chain Gang,” after he and his brother saw a chain gang while on tour. Cooke witnessed how hard the shackle-clad convicts worked, so he bought them some cartons of cigarettes to ease their pain.¹⁷⁴

As Sam Cooke’s forefathers knew, African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta in the 1920s had few options to achieve monetary stability. During the 1920s, recording companies began to target black audiences by selling so-called “race” records played by black musicians.¹⁷⁵ Music thus became “one of the few avenues to success” for blacks. Talent scouts scoured the Mississippi Delta trying to find the best blues performers to send to record companies. One such freelance “talent broker,” Henry C. Speir, a Mississippi native, recorded several of the most legendary Delta bluesmen, including Son House, Robert Johnson, and Charley Patton. Speir charged “desperate” record companies a fee for finding bluesmen that became some of the best selling artists of the “race” records era.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South,” 103-04.

¹⁷⁴ Steve Baltin, “Chain Gang,” the *Rolling Stone* (May 7, 2012), accessed March 19, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/chain-gang-75494/>

¹⁷⁵ Ferris, *Blues From the Delta*, 9.

¹⁷⁶ Ben Wynne, *In Tune: Charley Patton, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Roots of American Music*, Louisiana State University Press (2014), 134

Charley Patton, known as the “father of the Delta blues,” was an early Delta musician who recorded albums in the North towards the end of his life.¹⁷⁷ Born in Hinds County, Mississippi, Patton was raised in Sunflower County, Mississippi after his family moved to the Dockery Plantation. By the time Patton and his family moved, blacks outnumbered whites by more than three to one in Sunflower County.¹⁷⁸ The white planter elite, anxious of the pronounced black majority, enforced a strict social system along racial lines. One of the most disturbing lynchings in Mississippi history occurred in 1904 in Sunflower County, when a white mob burned a black couple alive for allegedly killing a white man’s son.¹⁷⁹ In Sunflower County, blacks had few options to escape the debt peonage cycle of sharecropping, and to avoid being exploited by white planters.

Although Patton worked in cotton fields starting at an early age, he disdained manual labor. Fellow blues performer Son House once said, “Charley hated work like God hates sin.”¹⁸⁰ Instead, Patton turned to music to earn his living. Patton made his living by playing at plantation “juke joints,” black house parties, and white social functions.¹⁸¹ Patton auditioned with Speir in 1929. Speir soon thereafter sent Patton to Richmond, Indiana, to record with Paramount Records.¹⁸² The recording session produced several of Patton’s most famous songs, including “Down the Dirt Road Blues,”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 12.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 77.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 82.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 78.

¹⁸² Ibid, 135-136.

which earned him a thousand dollars.¹⁸³ In 1930, a Paramount representative, Art Laibley, met Patton, Son House, bluesman Willie Brown, and piano player Louise Johnson in Lula, Mississippi on Highway 61. Laibley arranged a local man to drive the group up Highway 61 to Grafton, Wisconsin, for a recording session in Paramount's new facility.¹⁸⁴

Historian Ben Wynne argues that Patton's 1929 recording session represented a "flashpoint" that brought Mississippi Delta blues to national prominence.¹⁸⁵ Patton influenced Son House and the next generation of Delta Blues performers to ply their trade in southern clubs and in northern recording studios. In 1930, Patton and his group's drive north on Highway 61 was the beginning of a decades-long movement of musicians seeking fortune outside the confines of the Mississippi Delta. Highway 61 represented an escape from sharecropping under constant debt, peonage in levee camps, and a racist judicial system that sent blacks to work on sweltering roads and in prison fields. For Charley Patton, among many others, success in the music business lay north of the Delta.

The Mississippi Delta proved to be fertile territory for talent scouts to recruit blues artists. Alan Lomax contended that "the vast majority" of professional blues musicians in Chicago originated from the Mississippi Delta.¹⁸⁶ Delta musicians were a big part of what Gregory termed the "southernization" of American music.¹⁸⁷ Migrations

¹⁸³ Ibid, 137.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 139.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 137.

¹⁸⁶ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 441.

¹⁸⁷ Gregory, *Southern Diaspora*, 30.

of black southerners to northern cities, created “Black Metropolises,” where African American culture became visible to the rest of the U.S. for the first time.¹⁸⁸ The list of Mississippi Delta blues performers who migrated to Chicago to pursue their music career was extensive and included Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, and B. B. King. As he watched Memphis Minnie play in a Chicago club, the poet Langston Hughes wrote: “Through the smoke and racket of the noisy Chicago bar float Louisiana bayous, muddy old swamps, Mississippi dust and sun, cotton fields, lonesome roads, train whistles in the night, mosquitoes at dawn, and the Rural Free Delivery that never brings the right letter.”¹⁸⁹ The Delta blues found its home in Chicago.

While many musicians still traveled north by train into the 1940s and 1950s, buses became the cheapest form of interstate transportation. Record companies, as in the case of Charley Patton, sometimes arranged for musicians to be driven to northern cities. Although Highway 61 did not connect directly to Chicago, it was only one highway away. Mississippi migrants travelling by car or bus would likely have taken Highway 61 to St. Louis and connected to Chicago via Route 66. The Delta blues performer James “Son” Thomas stated in 1985 that “Most of the blues players travelled 61 to get out of here. It’s the longest road I know.”¹⁹⁰ Thomas spent most of his life in the Delta as a sharecropper and musician. Thomas, among others, sang about what Highway 61 meant to him. In his song “61 Highway,” Thomas describes the aching loneliness of a man who has yet to find someone “to give my poor heart ease,” even after walking all along

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 135.

¹⁸⁹ Bright, *Highway 61: Crossroads On the Blues Highway*, 84.

¹⁹⁰ Rafael Alvarez, “Son Thomas: Life on Highway 61,” the *Baltimore Sun* (September 26, 1985), 4D.

Highway 61, a road he claims stretches from “Chicago to the Gulf of Mexico.”¹⁹¹

Thomas had a wife, along with ten children who lived with him in his small “shotgun” house, but it seemed Thomas missed out on the opportunities that others found along Highway 61.¹⁹² Instead, Thomas lived the life of a Delta farmer. Thomas worked as a sharecropper for most of his life, though later as a gravedigger.¹⁹³ Thomas lamented that “The highway is my home, Lord I might as well be dead.”

Another song entitled “61 Highway” described some of the same themes as Thomas’s song. Mississippi Fred McDowell also misconstrued the actual route of Highway 61, claiming “she run from New York City down to the Gulf of Mexico.”¹⁹⁴ For McDowell, Highway 61 was still unpaved and sandy, so much so that “Greyhound buses don’t run,” making the only way out of the Delta on the back of a horse.¹⁹⁵ McDowell did not find success through music until much later in his life. Born sometime around 1904, McDowell spent most of his life in the North Mississippi hills as a sharecropper. In 1959, ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax recorded McDowell in Como, Mississippi. McDowell claimed musical success soon thereafter, after he recorded songs for Atlantic Records.¹⁹⁶ McDowell eventually produced fourteen LPs, and recorded a two volume live album in

¹⁹¹ James “Son” Thomas, “61 Highway,” *James* (1985), L+R Records GmbH.

¹⁹² Ferris, *Blues From the Delta*, 15.

¹⁹³ Alvarez, “Son Thomas: Life on Highway 61,” 4D.

¹⁹⁴ Mississippi Fred McDowell, “61 Highway,” *Live in New York (1972)*, Vol. 2, Oblivion Records.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 355.

New York. McDowell's journey to opportunity led to New York as it did in "61 Highway."

Following McDowell's 1960 release, the English rock and roll group, the Rolling Stones, invited McDowell to Europe. The Rolling Stones "wined and dined him" and bought him an expensive suit.¹⁹⁷ The Rolling Stones owed a debt of gratitude to McDowell, among several other American blues artists, for their influence on successful blues-based albums. The name "Rolling Stones" is derived from the 1950 Muddy Waters song, "Rollin' Stone," which was based on Delta bluesman Robert Petway's "Catfish Blues."¹⁹⁸ Many of the most successful rock groups of the 1960s were influenced by the blues artists of previous decades. When asked what they most wanted to see in America, the Beatles replied "Muddy Waters or Bo Diddly." The reporter did not recognize the names.¹⁹⁹ By the 1960s it became commonplace for white rock groups to cover older blues songs, as Led Zeppelin did with Memphis Minnie and Kansas Joe's "When the Levee Breaks," featured on their fourth studio album.

As Son Thomas and Mississippi Fred McDowell did, the white folk artist, Bob Dylan, wrote a tribute to Highway 61 on his album *Highway 61 Revisited*. A native of Highway 61 on its north end, Dylan was born Robert Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota in 1941. Dylan moved to Hibbing, Minnesota just off of Highway 61 when he was six.²⁰⁰ Among Dylan's early musical influences were Delta bluesmen Muddy Waters, Howlin'

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 104.

¹⁹⁹ Lomax, *Land Where the Blues Began*, 406.

²⁰⁰ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan*, Grosset and Dunlop, New York (1971), 3.

Wolf, and B.B. King. Dylan listened to Delta artists on a broadcast from an Arkansas radio station.²⁰¹ Dylan claimed to have seen Muddy Waters on a trip to Chicago in 1960, although Dylan fabricated some stories about his travels to make him seem worldlier.²⁰² Dylan aspired to play music like the greats of the Delta, covering many of their songs on his 1960s albums. His first album, *Bob Dylan*, featured a cover of Bukka White's song "Fixin' To Die Blues," which White recorded after his release from Mississippi's Parchman Prison.²⁰³

In 1965, Dylan released *Highway 61 Revisited*, a tribute to "the totality of American music as represented by Highway 61."²⁰⁴ Dylan viewed Highway 61 as the physical link between his hometown and the Mississippi Delta, and the link between the native blues of the Mississippi Delta with his own music. Dylan referred to old blues songs as "my lexicon and my prayer book."²⁰⁵ *Highway 61 Revisited* featured blues guitarist Mike Bloomfield on lead guitar, though Dylan told him he did not want "any of that B.B. King stuff."²⁰⁶ Although the blues influenced Dylan's music, *Highway 61*

²⁰¹ Ibid, 4.

²⁰² Ibid, 49.

²⁰³ Olivier Trager, *Keys To the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, Billboard Books, New York (2004), 188

²⁰⁴ Court Carney, "A Lamp is Burning in All Our Dark," *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan's Road from Minnesota to the World*, 39.

²⁰⁵ Thomas Crow, "Lives of Allegory," *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan's Road From Minnesota to the World*, 74

²⁰⁶ Dennis McNally, *On Highway 61: Music, Race, and the Evolution of Cultural Freedom*, Counterpoint, Berkeley (2014), 415.

Revisited was a rock album that “centered Dylan squarely” in the rock and roll genre.²⁰⁷

The opening track of the album, “Like a Rolling Stone,” is regarded as one of the greatest rock songs, and the “first truly serious rock ‘n’ roll song.”²⁰⁸

The song title, “Like a Rolling Stone,” was a reference to multiple songs. While Dylan was possibly referring to Petway’s “Catfish Blues,” he was more likely referring to “Lost Highway,” a song written by Texas songwriter Leon Payne and made popular by Hank Williams.²⁰⁹ The main character of “Like a Rolling Stone” was “Miss Lonely,” an affluent young woman who lost everything and found herself stuck on the streets. “With no direction home, a complete unknown, just like a rolling stone,”²¹⁰ Miss Lonely’s predicament resembles the “lost, too late to pay” narrator of “Lost Highway” and the abandoned mother in Muddy Waters’ “Rollin’ Stone.”²¹¹ But unlike Miss Lonely, Muddy Waters seemed proud of his “vagabond status” in his song.²¹² Miss Lonely “went to the finest school” according to Dylan.²¹³ She may have idolized old bluesmen like Waters just as many white college students, Dylan included, did in the 1960s did as blues became more popular.²¹⁴

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 418.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 414.

²¹⁰ Bob Dylan, “Like a Rolling Stone,” *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

²¹¹ Hank Williams, “Lost Highway,” *Hank Williams Sings* (1951).

²¹² David Yaff, “Not Dark Yet,” *Highway 61 Revisited: Bob Dylan’s Road from Minnesota to the World*, 204

²¹³ Ibid, 204.

The songs on *Highway 61 Revisited* were difficult to interpret because of their absurd and scattershot lyrics. But in certain instances, Dylan's mentioned his musical influences and offered some insight on his vision of Highway 61. At over eleven minutes long, "Desolation Row" described a street with inhabitants such as Nero, the Phantom of the Opera, Ezra Pound, and Albert Einstein. The opening line of "Desolation Row" read "they're selling postcards of the hanging," which could be an allusion to the hundreds of lynchings in the South in the twentieth century.²¹⁵ Dylan previously wrote about lynching in his song "The Death of Emmitt Till," which was about the murder of a black teenager in Mississippi by white men who were later acquitted of the crime.²¹⁶ The opening reference to hangings in "Desolation Row" set up the rest of the song as a nightmarish and wild description of the street, a section of Dylan's vision of Highway 61.

"From a Buick 6" was the most blues driven song on *Highway 61 Revisited*. The guitar riff was similar to those once played by Delta bluesmen Charlie Patton and Robert Johnson.²¹⁷ The song described a gun toting "graveyard woman," connected to the death of the narrator but who also is his caretaker.²¹⁸ She supposedly walked like a man, "like Bo Diddley," the Delta bluesman who the Rolling Stones admired.²¹⁹ The Buick was not

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Bob Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone," *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

²¹⁶ Paul Williams, *Performing Artist: The Music of Bob Dylan, Volume One, 1960-1973*, Underwood-Miller, Lancaster, PA (1990), 46

²¹⁷ Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*, Ballantine (1986), 280.

²¹⁸ Bob Dylan, "From a Buick 6," *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965).

²¹⁹ Ibid.

mentioned specifically in the song, but it is implied that the narrator crashed it. The automobile was a symbol of freedom that failed to redeem the narrator and may have ultimately led to his demise.

The album's self-titled song, "Highway 61 Revisited" offered the most insight about Dylan's vision of Highway 61 of any songs on the album. In the opening stanza, God orders Abraham to "kill me a son," on Highway 61.²²⁰ Amid postcards of hangings and gods ordering murders, Dylan viewed Highway 61 as a treacherous place of violence. Though violence could be found on Highway 61, Dylan also viewed the highway as a place for opportunity. A man named Howard advised "Georgia Sam" to head to Highway 61 for help after the welfare department denied his request for clothes.²²¹ Georgia Sam hoped to find a better life on Highway 61, as James Thomas never quite found, and as Mississippi Fred McDowell eventually achieved.

Dylan received some backlash from folk purists for the rock music on *Highway 61 Revisited*. Alan Lomax thought that Dylan's new sound was shallow and commercialized.²²² Dylan played his rock songs during the 1965 Newport Jazz festival, much to the displeasure of Lomax who served on the festival's board.²²³ Lomax would have preferred another performance from Muddy Waters, who performed at the Newport festival for the first time in 1960.²²⁴ When Waters performed at Newport in 1960, the

²²⁰ Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited," *Highway 61 Revisited*.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² McNally, *On Highway 61*, 422.

²²³ Ibid, 419.

²²⁴ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 258.

blues genre was recovering from a slump. Waters stated that rock and roll “hurt the blues pretty bad,” and that many bluesmen quit in the 1950s.²²⁵ Some blues performers found a receptive audience in Europe. In 1951, Big Bill Broonzy was one of the first blues performers to travel to Europe.²²⁶ Others including Mississippi Fred McDowell and Muddy Waters followed suit. Waters’ 1958 European tour garnered attention with white audiences in America, and earned him an invitation to the 1960 Newport festival.²²⁷ The blues experienced a revival of interest in the early 1960s. Formerly unknown artists such as Mississippi Fred McDowell gained nation recognition when Alan Lomax released his four-volume set of recordings, *Sounds of the South* in 1960.²²⁸ By 1964, English artists, most prominently the Rolling Stones, were covering blues songs and drawing heavily from American blues performers.

Mississippi Fred McDowell and James Thomas sang their tributes to Highway 61 years before Dylan. Dennis McNally wrote that *Highway 61 Revisited*, “was altogether different, yet also consonant with their blues.”²²⁹ Dylan’s album was different from McDowell’s “61 Highway” because it was from the perspective of an outsider. Dylan, a young white artist from the north side of Highway 61 did more to popularize Highway 61 in large part because he was white. Muddy Waters explained that before white rock

²²⁵ Ibid, 255.

²²⁶ Ibid, 256.

²²⁷ Ibid, 258.

²²⁸ Scott Barretta, “Mississippi Fred McDowell,” Mississippi Encyclopedia, *Center for the Study of Southern Culture* (updated June 2018), <http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/mississippi-fred-mcdowell/>

²²⁹ McNally, *On Highway 61*, 428

artists such as Dylan and the Rolling Stones recorded blues songs and spoke of blues artists in interviews, many white people wanted nothing to do with him. Waters said, “I was making race records,” and that if a white parent found a record of his in their kid’s collection, they would say “get this nigger record out of my house!”²³⁰ After his performance at Newport amid the blues revival of the 1960s, Waters found himself playing for crowds “that don’t have no black faces but our faces.”²³¹ The popularity of rock and roll thus changed the popularity and audience of blues.

Dylan’s European tour following the release of *Highway 61* “changed him from a folk star to an international pop superstar.”²³² *Highway 61 Revisited* represented “the flowering of the influence” of the blues on white music. Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited* gave credit to the delta blues artists who were the inspiration for rock and roll. *Highway 61 Revisited* rose to number three on the U.S. charts, and garnered arguably the most acclaim of any of Dylan’s albums.²³³ *Highway 61 Revisited* lent *Highway 61* the kind of national recognition that John Steinbeck’s classic, the *Grapes of Wrath* lent to U.S. Route 66. Both highways served migrants during the Great Migrations. The migrants who travelled each highway did so for much the same reason: to seek out opportunity that seemed not to exist in the South.

²³⁰ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 259.

²³¹ Ibid, 260.

²³² Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 288.

²³³ John Nogowski, *Bob Dylan: A Descriptive, Critical Discography and Filmography, 1961-2007 (Second Edition)*, McFarland & Company Publishers (2008), 30.

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