# Introduction

This introduction anticipates curiosity about how a young white woman could conduct a study of black family life, and provides a basis for evaluating the reliability and quality of the data obtained.

The questions raised relate to a broad spectrum of questions fundamental to social analysis. Is it possible for an outsider who symbolizes the dominant culture to enter a black community, win the community's participation and approval, acquire reliable data, and judge its reliability? What roles can the researcher assume? Can the observer grasp how his questions are interpreted by the informants? Can the observer discover rules used by those studied for managing their daily affairs? Can the observer distinguish his own theories for making sense of the data from the meanings given by community members in their everyday life? How do the initial channels chosen to gain an entrée into a community affect the findings and biases of an anthropological field study?

In both industrial and nonindustrial societies, researchers have typically established their first contacts with men who hold power—the colonial administrators, tribal chiefs, local mayors, and judges. These men draw upon their status in the community and favors owed to them to usher the researchers into the community, the first link in what becomes a chain of introductions. Anyone proceeding through other channels runs the risk of offending those in power and provoking an invitation to leave the community.

Within most black communities in the United States today, power is divided among the older generation of professionals in the black establishment and the younger activist leaders and

organizations. I could have gained my first contacts in The Flats by working through the established network of black men and women who had status and power in The Flats and in the larger community of Jackson Harbor. In the mid-sixties two other white social scientists had entered the black community in Jackson Harbor through contacts with preachers, teachers, social workers, and other black professionals. Although they were not conducting a study requiring intensive participant-observer techniques, their research was confined and limited. They came into contact only with individuals and families chosen by the black establishment to represent the community: churchgoers, families on good terms with their social workers, and those men and women who had obtained legal marriages. Even more decisive as a handicap was their identification, in the eyes of those studied, with those black leaders who personally derived their status and importance from their acceptance within the white community. They were regarded as "uppity" individuals who "thought they were too good to sit down on an old couch."

When I first began this study in the mid-sixties, the community itself had produced a few articulate, intellectual spokesmen against racial and political injustice. Their speeches and their activities were aimed primarily at the white community. Within the black community itself, they were not controlling voices. I later came to know the young men and women involved in political activism within the black community as I became committed to their causes: a free health center, a Welfare Rights Organization, a job-training center, black businesses. Many of these individuals whom I met in the initial stages of this research later became members of activist organizations in The Flats. Such persons may, in the future, decide whether a research study of their community may be conducted and by whom. They may choose to censor findings that they believe may be used to repress, harm, or manipulate those studied.

Some of my colleagues strongly advised me to enter the black community through the older black establishment; they cited various reasons: contacts were available; the research setting, they argued, was physically dangerous to a white person and I might need the sponsorship and protection that such contacts could provide; and tradition dictated such a procedure. I decided instead to find my own means of entrée. I decided to circumvent the obvious centers of influence—the pastors, the politicians—and try to reach families without resorting to middlemen. Through my own efforts and good luck I came to know a young woman who had grown up on welfare in The Flats and had since come to my university. She agreed to introduce me to families she had known as she was growing up there. She would introduce me to two unrelated families and from then on I would be on my own.

In time I knew enough people well who were closely related so that after any family scene, gathering, or fight, I could put together interpretations of the events from the viewpoints of different individuals, particularly in instances when there were conflicts over rights in children. In addition to taking multiple observations of each event myself, I eventually asked others to assist me in the study. I found three Flats residents (two women and a man) who participated as part-time and casual assistants in the project. I selected individuals from the families I knew, who were interested in the study, and who were imaginative and critical thinkers. At times these assistants became "informants," in the language of anthropology, that is, they provided me with data. Together we worked out questions on various topics to ask the families studied. The research schedules used in this book (see Appendix B) are an outcome of mutual attempts by my assistants and myself to map out meaningful questions about daily life in the community.

We selected questions in the general areas of social and domestic relations, kinship and residence, and child-keeping;

these questions provided a starting point for long discussions on a single issue. At no time did I formally interview anyone. I taped informal conversations after an event, when I was alone with someone I knew very well and with permission, asking that the situation be related to me from that person's point of view. This offered a check against my own field notes. The quoted passages chosen for this book represent, to my thinking, my common-sense model of the individuals I studied in The Flats. The theoretical perspectives that helped me to order the data I gathered can be divided into three central concerns: how people are recruited to kin networks; the relationship between household composition and residence patterns; and the relationship between reciprocity and poverty. The rationale for selecting these perspectives emerges in the course of the book.

Because of the personal nature of the information obtained about individuals, and the promise that this information would be confidential, it was necessary to disguise the names of the informants. I gave a fictitious name to each person whose name or life entered into the study. Even when I tried out my own assumptions and interpretations of events on my friends and assistants, I used fictitious names for the examples.

The people that I studied in The Flats use first names in one another's presence, and to refer to their neighbors and friends. Surnames are used infrequently and often people do not know the surnames of long-time acquaintances and friends, although the coining of nicknames for siblings and friends is a creative and endless pastime. Nicknames personalize and endear; they dramatically expose memorable or striking characteristics about a person, giving him a very special identity. I also acquired several nicknames during the study, but the one that held was "white Caroline," a name originally given to me by a family to distinguish me from their niece whose name was also Caroline. (My real name, Carol, was always pronounced

*Caroline*). She became known as "black Caroline" soon after the children in her family began calling me "white Caroline." I first discovered this nickname one afternoon when I phoned the family and a youngster who answered the phone called out, "Mama, white Caroline's on the phone."

To retain the flavor of daily communication, I have chosen to use first names in this book after people are initially introduced. Surnames are used in The Flats primarily when residents deal with the whites who enter the community as social workers, landlords, or teachers who assume asymmetrical relationships to Flats' residents.

In the life histories presented in this book, a person's job, family size, and the intimate events in life histories have been changed so that no one would be recognizable. Likewise, The Flats is a fictitious name, as is the name of the city, Jackson Harbor. The statistics cited on the community are derived from the U.S. Census (1960–1970), but in order to conceal the identity of the city, the figures have been slightly obscured. Nonetheless, the description depicts the setting, and accurately characterizes numerous other urban areas in the Midwest and the ghetto quarters within these towns.

Although the community assistants never asked many of the questions they generated (see Appendix B), their questions provided me with a perspective on their explanation and perception of a variety of behavior patterns in The Flats. This procedure provided one form of data, one of the many methodological devices tried in the study. Cicourel (1964, p. 61) develops this method in his book *Method and Measurement in Sociology*. He says, "The scientific observer must take into account the common-sense constructs employed by the actor in everyday life if he is to grasp the meanings that will be assigned by the actor to his questions, regardless of the form in which they are presented to the actor."

It is very often difficult for social scientists to comprehend the

impact of institutional racism on black life. This is suggested by Joyce Ladner (1971; 6) in the Introduction to her study of black adolescent girls, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*. "It has been argued," Ladner writes, "that the relationship between the *researcher* and his *subjects*, by definition, resembles that of the oppressor and the oppressed, because it is the oppressor who defines the problem, the nature of the research and, to some extent, the quality of the interaction between him and his subjects. This inability to understand and research the fundamental problem—*neo-colonialism*—prevents most social researchers from being able accurately to observe and analyze black life and culture and the impact racism and oppression has upon Blacks." Recently there have been attempts by social scientists to overcome some of these difficulties, and to understand the true nature of the relationship between the economic system and the lives of black people.

Members of a culture have biases that affect their perceptions of themselves and their life ways; outsiders bring biases to the cultures they study. Although life experiences produce a difference in perceptions, these perceptions can be shared. The three years I spent in The Flats opened and reassembled my life ways and my understanding of womanhood, parenthood, and the American economy. Likewise, I brought perceptions and biases to the study that joggled and molded the views of those closest to me.

A researcher in the social sciences is practically always defined as an outsider in a study, even if he or she has close attachment and commitment to the community, and shares a similar cultural background. Even a study of the culture of one's most intimate associations—our friends, colleagues, or kin—thrusts the researcher apart. Whether studying elites, bureaucracy, or the poor, if one hopes to discover the rules of routine behavior, the observer himself must attempt to learn how to move appropriately inside the private world of those observed. The re-

searcher must take time and patience and practice, attempting to reduce the distance between the model outsiders used to explain social order and the explanations employed by those studied. Attempts will fail, but this prodding hopefully will bring the observer to an intimate point of contact in the study whereby he becomes both an actor and a subject whose learned definitions can themselves be analyzed.[1]*

* Notes to the chapters begin on p. 155.

*"Although there was always generosity in the Negro neighborhood, it was indulged on pain of sacrifice. Whatever was given by Black people to other Blacks was most probably needed as desperately by the donor as by the receiver. A fact which made the giving or receiving a rich exchange."*

—I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,
*Maya Angelou*

1

# THE FLATS

## THE SETTING

The Flats is the poorest section of a black community in the Midwestern city of Jackson Harbor (these names are fictitious). The city of Jackson Harbor is on a major rail line connecting Chicago and several Southern states, the way north for many of the black people who came to The Flats from the South in the thirties and forties. The railroad remained a relatively cheap and convenient means of keeping contacts alive with relatives in the South and with friends and relatives in Chicago. Kin and friends in Chicago are important to people in The Flats, for they provide a model for an urbanized life style, contacts for exchange of goods, and reduce the sense of isolation often felt by a repressed minority in a small city.

The past fifty years have witnessed a similar migration of rural, Southern Blacks to other urban centers in the United States. Between 1940 and 1960 many thousands of farms in the South disappeared, and three and a half million black people left the South for a new life in the cities. Many of the first hopeful participants in this great migration are now middle-aged or elderly residents who have lived a lifetime in poverty and now see their grandchildren entrapped in the same poverty-stricken conditions.

According to the U.S. Census Jackson Harbor is ranked as an "urbanized area" since its population exceeds 50,000. A rather large state-run hospital is the city's major employer. Yet, only 3

percent of its 5,000 employees are black, compared to the city's population of more than 12 percent black. And, by and large, even those 3 percent hold the most menial jobs. In recent years intensive efforts by liberal groups to increase the percentage of black employees have been totally unsuccessful. There is little industry in Jackson Harbor. An industrial company, employing almost 2,500 people, more than half women, recently closed down. A food processing factory with about 800 employees provides most of the industrial employment for black men. The strongly segregated craft and construction unions permit few Blacks to hold jobs in their industries.

In 1968, a year of record economy in the country, unemployment among Blacks in Jackson Harbor was more than 20 percent. Among those working, more than 63 percent were service workers—maids, cooks, janitors, and the like. In 1959, while 80 percent of the "white" families made more than $4,000 a year, 60 percent of the "non-white" families (data is so labeled) made less. Those who found work were often not significantly better off than those without work who were eligible for welfare benefits.

Jackson Harbor has been rated one of the ten most expensive cities in the United States. The income necessary for a family of four has been estimated at more than $8,000. In terms of average family income, the county which includes Jackson Harbor ranks in the highest twenty nationwide. Most of the white population who have chosen to live in Jackson Harbor can afford to live there. Few of the Blacks can.

Most families live in one- and two-family houses and scattered multiple dwellings. Apartments are few, and there are no large public housing projects. Although larger old homes in The Flats have been subdivided into tiny, inadequate apartments, the population density is much lower there than in a typical urban environment such as Chicago. But for the Blacks in The Flats, as in many such ghetto communities, crowding

is severe nonetheless. Most homes in The Flats are small, wood-framed houses, bungalows, and shacks in need of major repairs. There are too many people for the available room. The streets are spotted with small grocery stores, poorly stocked and expensive, and house-front churches, barbers, bars, snack shops, sweet shops, and hat shops. The streets and front yards are cluttered with broken glass, beer cans, and old cars. Old tires and bed springs fill back yards. Porch doors, screens, and broken windows go unfixed. During the winter snowstorms, the streets in The Flats, many of them unpaved, gravel streets, are the last in the city to be cleared. Although temperatures go below zero in Jackson Harbor without fail every winter, many houses have doors and windows that do not fit tightly. A common trick to seal cracks in the window casements is to fill them with water on a freezing day to provide a frigid seal until the first thaw.

While only 10 percent of the Whites in the town live in housing termed "deteriorating" and 1 percent live in housing termed "dilapidated," by the Census of 1960, among Blacks, 26 percent live in deteriorating housing and 13 percent in dilapidated, unfit housing. I visited only few houses that were not roach-infested. In one home roaches exceeded one per square foot on all of the walls inside the house. Children sleeping in this house were covered with sores and scabs from insect bites.

Health care for Blacks in Jackson Harbor is also predictably inadequate. Until recently the few white doctors who would take black patients held separate office hours for them in the evenings in order not to offend their white patients. A free health clinic, supported by state health funds, recently opened in The Flats, but communication within The Flats concerning the clinic is poor and few people use it. Despite increasing public assistance for medical needs, many black people put off seeing a doctor as long as possible. Feelings of mistrust run deep.

The ways in which the poor die reflect the conditions of their lives. In 1965 more than 9.1 percent of the deaths among non-whites were caused by diseases of early infancy; only 4.6 percent of the deaths among Whites were infant diseases. More than 10 percent of non-white deaths were due to accidents or homicide, as compared with less than 5 percent for Whites.

Dental care is equivalent in mediocrity to medical care. Few Blacks over the age of twenty-five have many of their original teeth. It is not uncommon to find people who had all their teeth pulled on their first visit to the dentist.

Among young women this usually occurred when they were in their early twenties and covered by the same AFDC health benefits as their young children.

Many more statistics could be added, but they would simply repeat the same depressing patterns of the black situation in any "urbanized area" in the country. In all their contacts with the dominant white culture, Blacks in Jackson Harbor are treated with some form of institutional or personalized racism. At best this takes the form of overt, benign paternalism. At worst the reminders are in the form of bullets. In the last three years, in widely publicized cases, two Blacks in the community were murdered by white policemen. Both victims were about to be arrested for charges no more severe than speeding, and neither was armed. Each policeman faced a hearing but no punishment was decreed. No Black in The Flats was surprised.

Yet despite the similarities between economic, political, and racist forces in Jackson Harbor and those of the inner-city slums, people in The Flats think their lives are better than the lives of their friends and relatives in Chicago. An elderly woman residing in The Flats recalls that many years ago before she and her husband left Arkansas, people said to her, "If you want to lose your man just go North." Today she qualifies this advice. "If you stay out of Chicago there is a

chance a woman can hold her man." Although there are few alternatives, and no funds to move elsewhere, many people living in The Flats say that they have chosen to live there.

## THE RESEARCH SCENE

I was introduced to two families, one from Arkansas, one from Mississippi. First there was the household of Viola and Leo Jackson. Between 1916 and 1967 ninety-six of Viola and Leo's kin left Arkansas plantations to live and work in the fruit-harvesting areas around Grand Rapids and Benton Harbor, Michigan, and Racine, Wisconsin; eventually most of their kin settled in the urban North, especially in The Flats in Jackson Harbor.

Viola and Leo Jackson have lived in The Flats with their eleven children since their arrival from Arkansas fifteen years ago. They are buying a small, wood-framed, five-room house, an old house in need of repair and improvement. The linoleum on the living room and kitchen floors is cracked and pitted and the ill-fitted wooden beams admit freezing drafts in the severe cold of the Midwestern winters and insects throughout the humid summers. The inside walls are streaked with unfinished paint jobs, and the house is bare of decoration except for one knickknack shelf that holds empty medicine bottles, a trophy, and a picture of Viola's dead brother.

Before coming to The Flats Leo worked picking cotton and harvesting fruit. Today he is a hod carrier in a local laborers' union and receives a minimum wage guarantee when he is working, but the work is seasonal and Leo spends most of his days waiting at the union hiring hall to be called on a job. Viola works occasionally as a cook on the swing swift in a local restaurant in Jackson Harbor which pays $1.10 an hour. She works for a month or so and then quits without notice either

because she cannot stand on her feet any longer, or because a child is sick at home. The Jacksons' oldest son drives a taxi part-time, their oldest daughter accepts seasonal work at a local factory, and a son in high school washes dishes after school. (When the oldest son was drafted, the mother wanted me to seek exemption on the ground that his job was necessary.) The adults arrive home at odd hours of the day, making it impossible for them to have meals together—indeed, it is rare for a house to have enough chairs for everyone to sit down at one time—but they still see one another every day, if only in the late hours talking and drowsing with television, radio, and records in the background, often playing simultaneously. The young boys and girls spend a great deal of time practicing any of a dozen or so new dance steps—like the Funky Chicken, the Strutting Rooster, and the Gold Digger—circulating in The Flats from Chicago. Because a neighbor is a Pentecostal minister, the Jacksons draw their shades in order not to offend him.

The family's total income varies from year to year, but the family has earned in recent years no more than $4,500 in any one year (including minimal Aid to Families with Dependent Children Support). Gross family expenditures for the Jacksons, including mortgage payments, insurance, cars, food, and utilities amount to approximately $3,500. This leaves between $500 and $1,000, depending on earnings, for clothes, house repairs, medical expenses, and miscellaneous expenditures for a household of fourteen people (since the addition of a grandson).

The rooms are crowded but clean. Each child in the family has his own chores to do—the teen-age boys wash floors, the girls cook and clean the kitchen, and the younger children—ten- and eleven-year-olds—take the family laundry to the laundromat. By 9:00 A.M. every bed in the house is made. Except in a household with only young children, the adult role is primarily one of training and supervision. There are bunk beds and an old metal frame bed in the boys' room in the Jackson house-

hold, a couch and a double bed in the girls' room (two or three children sleep together), and a double bed in the parents' room. Privacy is impossible.

Social space assumes great importance in a crowded living area. This is true of the Jackson family and other families as well. The paucity of personal space leads to efforts by the adults, often extreme, to protect themselves from encroachments, and their space from violation, particularly by children. (This space varies according to a person's mood, but children are often kept as far as four or five feet away from adults.) A child who entered an adult's social space would be punished. The lack of privacy is distressing especially to teen-age girls. They spend more time at home, not on the streets in gangs as do their brothers, and until they establish their status as adults by having a child, they must share a bed and room with their younger sisters. When they have a child, they are accorded new privileges, for example, a bed to be shared only with their infant (in fact, even when the father is in the home, the infant shares their bed). Also, private space sometimes may be defined by a shower curtain or a bedspread hung as a partition.

Viola and Leo frequently see their relatives who are residing in The Flats, in neighboring counties, and in Chicago and St. Louis. A steady stream of relatives gathers daily in the Jackson home—Viola's seventy-year-old mother, Viola's children, their cousins and friends. In the mornings the mother visits, bringing along the three grandchildren she is raising. In the afternoons and on weekends Viola's brother and his two sons, and Leo's sister and brother and their families, visit. When relatives come unexpectedly from Chicago or St. Louis, it is the occasion for a big and festive meal. The women devote all day to preparing it. Fresh coconut is munched as an hors d'oeuvre before dinner. Dinner may be greens flavored with pig's knuckles, egg pie (like a quiche), sweet potatoes, and home-baked buttermilk biscuits. There may be raccoon shot by men

of the neighborhood and sold door to door, but the Jacksons prefer chicken or turkey.

On an ordinary day, in the morning after the children leave for school and the adults for work, Viola is often lonely. The house is empty and quiet. During such hours, with little money to spend, no car, and little to do since the children have done the chores, Viola welcomes an attentive listener, a willing companion to take along visiting, shopping, or to the laundry. I tried to become such a listener and companion.

During my first visit Viola told me that she and her husband Leo have kept their family together for twenty-three years. Leo, she said, is a "good man, a man who works and brings his money home." After several week-day visits, Viola asked me to come over on a Sunday afternoon when the family would be home. The younger children and Viola had spoken of my visits and I was not surprised to encounter some hostility from Viola's older children and Leo's brother when I arrived. Viola called me back to the kitchen where the women were cooking a Sunday dinner. Verna, Viola's nineteen-year-old daughter, and I, both six months' pregnant, talked about names and nicknames for our babies, and eventually almost everyone in the household joined the conversation, even the young children, suggesting amusing combinations of names not only for family members. "Suppose your name was Bottom, how about Rosy Bottom? Or if it was Snap, how about Ginger Snap?" Last names are regarded as relatively unimportant; contacts among people are intimate visits rather than letter writing and there are few occasions to focus on formal identities. The tradition is oral. Names are not looked up in a phone book; numbers are memorized as are addresses and information about family financial matters.

The conversation among Verna, Viola, and myself was long, warm, and lively, and eased the strain. Our visits continued for many months.

One incident eased my communication with Viola's husband and his brother. Late one evening I was at the Jacksons' home, still pregnant, my cumbersome silhouette similar to Verna's. I was wearing dark tights and the rooms were poorly lighted, with the television providing the brightest rays. Leo, slumped down in his chair, called out to me, "Hey, Verna, get your baby his bottle so he'll stop his crying." Leo had confused me with Verna. He laughed so hard it was difficult to stop. From then on, when any relative or friend dropped by, Leo recounted this story. All their kin in The Flats—more than seventy people—heard it sooner or later.

My first year in The Flats was a period of intense observation and questioning of the familiar standard interpretations of black family life. I focused initially on the Jacksons' migration and the urban adjustment of ninety-six of their kin who had left rural Arkansas during the past fifty years and are now living in Chicago, St. Louis, or in The Flats. I began to notice a pattern of cooperation and mutual aid among kin during the migration North and formed a hypothesis that domestic functions are carried out for urban Blacks by clusters of kin who do not necessarily live together, and that the basis of these units is the domestic cooperation of close adult females and the exchange of goods and services between male and female kin (Stack 1970). This was the starting point for my study of the strategies for coping with poverty.

A year after I met the Jacksons and their kin, I met the family and friends of Magnolia and Calvin Waters and their network of kinsmen, which proved to number more than one hundred. Magnolia and her kin came from a background of urban poverty in the South. Before migrating to the North they had for the most part lived in a cluster of towns near Jackson, Mississippi. Calvin's family had been sharecroppers in rural Mississippi, but one by one he and his brothers moved northward, hoping to find secure jobs.

Magnolia Waters is a large, powerful, and resourceful woman with a regal composure. At forty-one, the mother of eleven, Magnolia appeared no older than her striking, articulate, twenty-three-year-old daughter, Ruby Banks. Magnolia's four sisters and two brothers and their families all live in The Flats and each of her sister's children has received public aid. The second generation of children born in The Flats, Magnolia's grandchildren, grandnieces and nephews, are also AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients. (This is not surprising since a third of 188 AFDC mothers included in a survey of AFDC case histories for this study [see Appendix A] were themselves AFDC children.)

I first came by the Waters' home in the summer of 1968. Magnolia, her sixty-year-old "husband" Calvin (father of six of Magnolia's children), Magnolia's oldest son Lenny, and five of the younger children were sitting in the living room on a red velvet couch, which Magnolia had covered herself. The eight were methodically folding several piles of newspapers for Lenny's five evening paper routes, a daily family routine. (The pungent smell of newspaper print filled the room.) After a lesson from a seven-year-old on how to make the fold, I joined in on the rhythmic activity that absorbed everyone's concentration. It was an hour and a half before all of the newspapers were ready for delivery. Magnolia joked about my hands, black with newsprint. I told them I would like to begin a study of family life in The Flats. Magnolia and Calvin told me to come by again and to bring my baby.

Several months later Magnolia told me that she had been surprised that I sat with them that first day to fold papers, and then came back to help again. "White folks," she told me, "don't have time, they's always in a rush, and they don't sit on black folk's furniture, at least no Whites that comes into The Flats."

## MY HOME BASE

The Jacksons' home with its seven children (living at home) became a home base, a place where I was welcome to spend the day, week after week, and where my year-old son Kevin and I could sleep, usually sharing a bed with children in the household. My personal network expanded naturally as I met those whom the Waters met or visited each day. My home base changed as I became personally accepted by others, and ultimately I was welcome at several unrelated households. These individuals and their personal networks radiated out to include more than three hundred people, whom I eventually visited, but I observed most intensively fifteen unrelated coalitions of kinsmen. In their homes my presence was least intrusive.

Through Magnolia and Calvin I met Magnolia's oldest daughter, Ruby Banks. Ruby was born in The Flats and raised "on aid" by her grandmother and Magnolia's sister, Augusta. Ruby is now raising her own children, also "on aid." Magnolia described Ruby's vitality and strong-headedness to me, warning that Ruby might be hostile to me, my whiteness, and my presence there. Nevertheless, I was anxious to meet Ruby, and Magnolia had become eager for us to meet.

The scene of our first meeting bristled with the tenseness of our anticipation. That very morning Magnolia and I had been casually chatting about the days before she met Calvin, and her relationship with James Henderson, the father of her oldest children. Ruby walked into Magnolia's house "cussing," "putting down" the mess and the dirt on the floor, and the clothes Magnolia's younger children had on that day. Then she saw me on the couch and my year-old son on the floor. "The dirt on the floor could kill a white baby," she said. Paying no attention, Magnolia continued our conversation, telling me how much Ruby looked like her father. Ruby pulled up a stool,

sat down, and lectured to me in a high-pitched voice, "James Henderson, he's no father to me! I don't even speak to him. I don't really own him because of the way he did me. The only father I know is my stepfather Calvin, and there's no better man in the world."

Ruby was angry at Magnolia. Her description of the world in which Ruby lived was not Ruby's. She shook her head and shouted, "Don't you believe a word of what she says. If that's what Magnolia been telling you, you better come over to my house and get things straight the way I see them." At that point Magnolia chuckled to herself, grabbed my son's bottle, and yelled at one of the children to fill it. Ruby looked at my son, grunted, and said, "That boy should have been off the bottle six months ago."

When I visited Magnolia the following afternoon, she asked me to take Ruby's youngest daughter, who spent the night at her house, back over to Ruby's. Remembering Ruby's "invitation," I was happy to run the errand. Ruby shared a house with Magnolia's sister, Augusta, across town. This was the first of hundreds of trips I made across town as I began to participate in daily visiting patterns in The Flats.

When I arrived Ruby was wringing out hand-washed clothing in an old handwringer. Her five-year-old daughter was changing a baby's diaper, and her two younger children were playing on the porch. Ruby called me into the kitchen and together we finished wringing out at least ten pounds of wet clothing. When we sat down to rest, Ruby talked about her father.

"I first met my father when I was in the third or fourth grade. I was in a grocery store and my mother introduced me to him and he looked at me and said, 'You sure have grown,' and patted me on the head. I looked up at him and asked, 'Is that really my father?' Magnolia said yes. Easter was coming so I said to him, 'How about buying me a pair of shoes since you never have given me nothing in your life and you never

did nothing for me?' He told me to come over to his house on Bell Street and ask for him and he would give me the money for the shoes. When I went it so happened he wasn't there. His wife came out and pushed me off the porch. I was small and she shook me and called me all kinds of low-down names and told me that I didn't have no father. Then she hauled off and hit me and pushed me in the car and told me never to come back there again.

"My mother knew my father's people and my Aunt Augusta is real good friends with Aunt Ann, my father's sister. Some of my father's people really took to me. Uncle Leon came around the house to see me when I was really small and that's how I got to know him. Aunt Ann welcomed me to her house anytime I got ready to go over there. She's the only one I go and see now, she and Aunt Betty. The rest of them are snobs and they don't care nothing about me. I have a half brother by my father and he cares lots for me. Whenever he sees me, if he got money he give it to me. My other half brother, he's just like his mother. He thinks he so much.

"I don't speak to my father, but when he sees me he still tells his friends that he own me—but he tells his wife that he don't have a daughter. I know I'm a Henderson, and there's no way that the law and nobody else can say differently, but my mother put her name on my birth certificate because she knew that I would hate my father when I grew up. Right today I wish that she had never told me who my father was.

"A child wants a father to play with, to laugh with, and to hug. I wouldn't give my stepfather up for anybody in this world. I really appreciate what he did for me. It reminds me of a record that came out called 'Color Him Father.' It's about a man who ran away from his wife and left her with their children. Then another man came into the picture and helped them out so much that they called him 'color him father.' That record speaks of my life. It reminds me of my real father and

how he treated me and my mother. My mother couldn't hardly get him to buy a light bulb. But, he tells a different story about how much he loved my mother, so who's to say."

We began to talk about the difference between Magnolia's, Ruby's, and Ruby's father's explanations of their relationships. Ruby told me that to learn anything about her family, or family life in The Flats—in order to interpret any single event—I would have to talk to many people. I took her advice and it turned out to be wise.

During the following months Ruby and I began to spend a great deal of time together and with our children. Ruby's attitudes toward men, kin, friends, and children shook many of my views, and I am still in the process of reshaping them today. For her part Ruby would get mad, amazed, and amused at some of the views I held. Whenever I expressed hesitation or uneasiness about my own ability to make it alone, with my child, Ruby would get very angry, providing me with numerous examples of women around The Flats who were doing so. Ruby was probing, observing, and interpreting my perceptions just as I was doing with hers. At times over the three years of our friendship, we would find many ways to test our perceptions of one another.

Ruby and I enjoyed comparing our attitudes and approaches toward everything. Although she asked me to bring my white friends over to her house, she was always hypercritical in assessing whether they were anti-Black or whether they "put on airs." Some of my friends she liked very much, yet she encouraged me to break up some friendships, especially if she had reason to doubt a friend's loyalty to me. It seemed at times, by the circumstances and demands that she contrived, that she was testing the loyalty of my friends—using her own standards, of course—just as she tested her own friends. For example, she insisted that I ask my friends to take care of Kevin or to loan me money. She was in fact teaching me how to get along.

Ruby and I also enjoyed comparing our culturally acquired tastes in furniture and dress. With no intention of buying, we loved to go to the local used furniture store to mock one another's preferences. Ruby admired new, vinyl and Masonite, tough, fake wood modern furniture. I was only interested in finding old turn-of-the-century oak furniture. She laughed at my love for old, used furniture, often warped with age. To her, aged and worn stood for poverty.

Sometimes when Ruby and I were alone we would act out a parody of one another, imitating one another's walk or dancing style, and sometimes this mime would be continued in front of friends. She and I went to white "hilly-billy" taverns not frequented by Blacks with our boyfriends. We dressed "white" in dressy dresses, the men in ties, and we danced the fox-trot to an electric guitar. The reaction to us was silence. People thought we were imitating them. At the next dance, we broke into "black" dance. Ruby and her friends took John* and me to black nightclubs to observe the reaction of their black friends to us. They bought us outfits so we would dress "black." At times the reaction at the clubs was patronizing or even hostile, but Ruby was amused.

Most of our day was spent in The Flats in the company of Ruby's friends and kin. Occasionally, when Ruby and I were with individuals who did not know me or who were apparently hostile, Ruby would cuss, tease, or "signify" to my face. If my response was equally insulting or foul, this would put people at ease. After such a scene Ruby would frequently scold me for not coming up with as good a response as she could have given herself. There is no doubt in my mind that meeting Ruby and gaining an entrée into social relationships in The Flats through her made much of this study possible. Ruby had a quick, affirmative way of letting others know my presence was

* John Lombardi, a fellow anthropologist, energetically joined the field study for over two years.

acceptable to her, and that it "damn well better be acceptable to them." At one large family gathering, relatives came from out of town to see Ruby's stepfather, who was sick. Ruby sensed their hostility and insecurity toward me. She turned to me and said, "What is your white ass doing sitting down when there is so much cooking and work to do in my kitchen?" I responded, "My white ass can sit here as long as your black ass can." With that, we both got up, went into the kitchen and got to work.

My mode of transportation varied with the weather. During the first spring and summer of my field work, I walked or rode my bicycle. People in The Flats walk year-round and ride bicycles in good weather. In the process of shopping, visiting, washing clothes, and paying bills, many walk more than five miles a day. Time consumed in walking often involves more than one trip to the same place. If the laundry has been washed, and clothes are ready at the cleaners, and a daily shopping has to be made, one or two or three members of a household, including younger children, may make three or four trips during the day to carry the load of goods home. Walking across town, sharing a work load, carrying packages, riding in a cab, and visiting kin and friends showed me about the pace of life in The Flats and the patience with which the residents endured pain, misfortune, and disappointment. Early in the morning, for example, people in a household might get excited about a large house they heard was for rent or a decent refrigerator that was for sale. A large group of us, including five to ten children, would take a walk to see the house or refrigerator, only to arrive too late.

Picking through piles of clothing at the local Goodwill or at the Salvation Army Store was another frustrating job made even more difficult without a car. Toward the end of the summer many of the women and their children in The Flats began to

make daily trips to these second-hand stores, which were located outside The Flats in the Jackson Harbor business district, to pick out enough clothes for all of their children to begin school. For three consecutive summers I spent most of the month of August walking to secondhand stores with families, helping find the right size dresses, shirts, pants, socks, coats, and shoes for their children. The children would look for clothes for themselves and their brothers, sisters, and cousins. They seemed enthusiastic when they found a piece of clothing that would fit someone, but I gained more insight into their real attitude toward these ventures one afternoon when a woman I knew well, Ophelia, asked me to take her eleven-year-old son to Goodwill because "he didn't have a shirt to cover his back." She told us to buy three shirts. Sam and I walked to the store and began the search. We found five shirts his size. Sam seemed pleased. I told him to pick out the three shirts he liked best. He shook his head and said, "Caroline, to tell the truth, I don't like any of them. You pick out three and then let's go show Mama that we got the job done." Sam's response was a mature, resigned response to the necessities of life.

In the fall of 1968 I decided to buy an old car. I thought the car would enable me to visit a variety of people across town while still spending most of the day at my current home base. I thought, too, I could help reduce the tremendous amount of money people spent on cab fare when visiting and shopping, but especially when "carrying" sick children to the doctor or to the hospital in an emergency. I talked it over with Ruby and with others. They all thought it was a fine idea. I had not anticipated some of the disadvantages of acquiring a car.

My car did not substantially increase the flow of goods between people, but it did increase daily visiting and the flow of information between people. For at least two months my role in the community, and in the lives of those people I had

become closest to, changed. Before I bought the car I was able to spend most of the day in the company of others, sharing and observing their daily experiences. Once I had the car, people continually asked me to run errands—taking children, goods, and gossip between households. For a while all I seemed to be doing was taking half a pot roast from one house to another, picking up the laundry from a home with a washing machine, going to the liquor store for beer, or waiting with mothers in the local medical clinics for doctors to see their sick children. Although the children of those people often rode around with me, giving me an opportunity to talk to them alone, the intensity of social contact with others was lost. Whenever I would try to spend an afternoon with someone, a new compelling errand had to be run.

As I drove around The Flats, a woman might come up to the car at a stop sign, recognize the children or the adult in the car, and say to me, "You are white Caroline, I heard about you," and then tell my companion to bring me by her home to visit. Often I would drive a companion to her friend's home to borrow or gain back something from a past exchange. I began to observe, firsthand, the content and style of social relationships among residents in The Flats. I also started to observe how residents in The Flats got along with white doctors, dentists, social workers, landlords, shopkeepers, and other residents of Jackson Harbor.

For example, I learned that many of the doctors and medical clinics in the city refuse to make appointments for welfare recipients and their children. Some of those that do do not take the time and interest necessary to improve health. I took one young mother and her sick baby to three different pediatricians. One yelled at the mother for not feeding her baby properly and then quickly scribbled down instructions to a mother who could not read. When the mother took the note

to the nurse for help, the nurse scolded her for taking up too much time and for missing a previous appointment. Then the nurse threatened that if this mother missed another appointment, the clinic would never see her babies again.

Also, as I assisted in the search for new housing when people I knew were evicted or were living in condemned houses, I observed the direct confrontation between residents of The Flats and white landlords and social workers. In the two or three months I spent in the process of looking for housing with companions, I saw indifference and racism expressed by the larger white society toward Flats residents. One case history illustrates a typical sequence of events facing a large black family who is forced to move.

In the fall of 1968 Jessie and Eloise, Magnolia's closest friend, and their household, including six children and Jessie's niece, were forced to move after their rented home was condemned. At the time, Jessie was unemployed and Eloise received AFDC benefits for her children. Eloise went to the welfare to tell her case worker that the family would soon be moving. The case worker told Eloise that she was "probably not paying her rent." Eloise was extremely insulted, rode a cab home and returned in a cab to show her case worker rent receipts for the past three years. She told the case worker, "I would be a fool not to pay my rent and have my large family put out on the street."

Eloise, Jessie, their kin and friends looked for housing every day for at least a month and a half. At times, when I was present, we would track down false hopes—houses that appeared to be abandoned, unrented, or available, but were actually inhabited. When Eloise finally found a large house for rent, the landlord wanted several references. Since he had seen me in the company of the family on several occasions, he would not accept my recommendation. Eloise called her social worker and asked her to call the landlord to tell him that she had seen

Eloise's rent receipts for the past three years. The social worker refused and said. "I am not supposed to get involved in anything like that."

After some pressure on the part of Eloise's kin, the social worker did eventually call the landlord. The case worker had "nothing good to say about Eloise." The next day Eloise and I drove to the local welfare office to complain. As we climbed the steps to the welfare building, Eloise said to me, "Here we are where the devils is."

After intense pressure from some white professionals I knew in Jackson Harbor, Eloise got the house. Unfortunately it was condemned soon afterwards, and the search for housing began again.

Despite the fact that my car was a convenience—it gave me an easily explainable role in the lives of the families I knew, helping me provide daily assistance with the children, the shopping, the problems with "papers," the welfare office, sick children, and so on—when it broke down I decided not to fix it. This began a very important stage of the research. Without the car, my presence in the community was less apparent. Once again I was able to spend long days in the homes of people I had met, participating in their daily lives. I had already developed tentative hypotheses on the style of social relations in The Flats and on the ways in which people expand their network of exchange. I began to focus my attention on how networks were expanded, who the participants were, and how residents in The Flats see and interpret this process.

My role in the community at this point was no longer that of an outsider. To many families I became another link in the systems of exchanges that were part of their existence. Viola Jackson's sisters once told me that people look at you when you have a white friend, saying that you are really on the white man's side and that you do everything they want you to do. But Ophelia said to me that people understand what friend-

ship means. Friends can ask any favor of one another, anytime of the night, and it shouldn't make any difference. No one would tell you to drop a friend you can trust even if she is white. Ruby Banks told me that from the first day we started going around together, people said that we looked alike and that we did so much together that we seemed just "like sisters." Our affinity influenced the behavior of Ruby's kin toward me and their persistent concern for my well being. It also influenced Ruby's behavior toward me in public settings within and outside the ghetto. When Ruby's youngest child was sick in the local hospital, we went to visit her. The first day, the white nurse on duty stopped me—the rules stated that only close relatives could visit. Ruby, told the nurse angrily, "Caroline here is my sister, and nothing's stopping her from visiting this baby." Ruby's claim went unchallenged, and we were able to visit the baby every day.