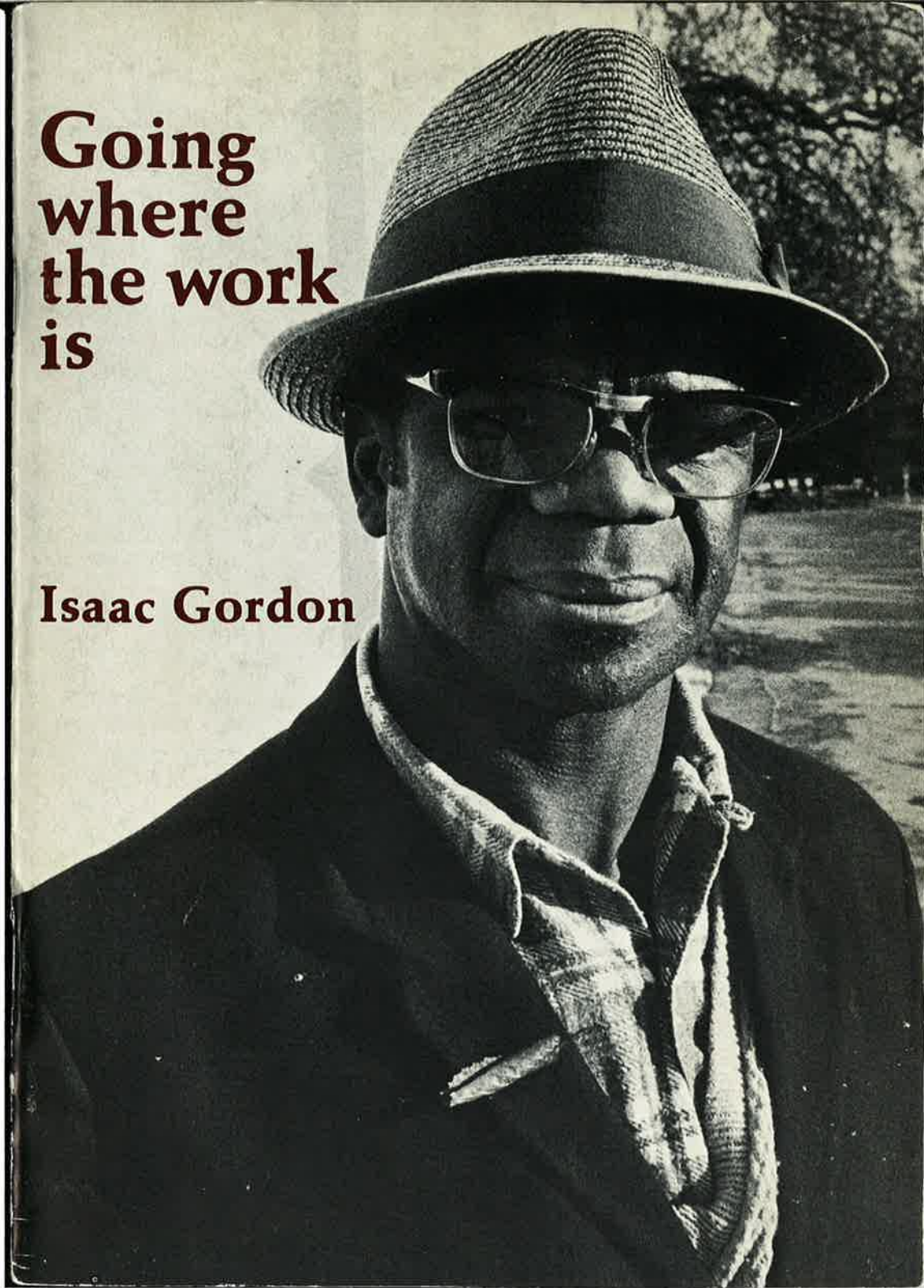


**Going  
where  
the work  
is**

**Isaac Gordon**



# **Going where the work is**

**Isaac Gordon**

**Hackney Reading Centre**

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Going where the work is

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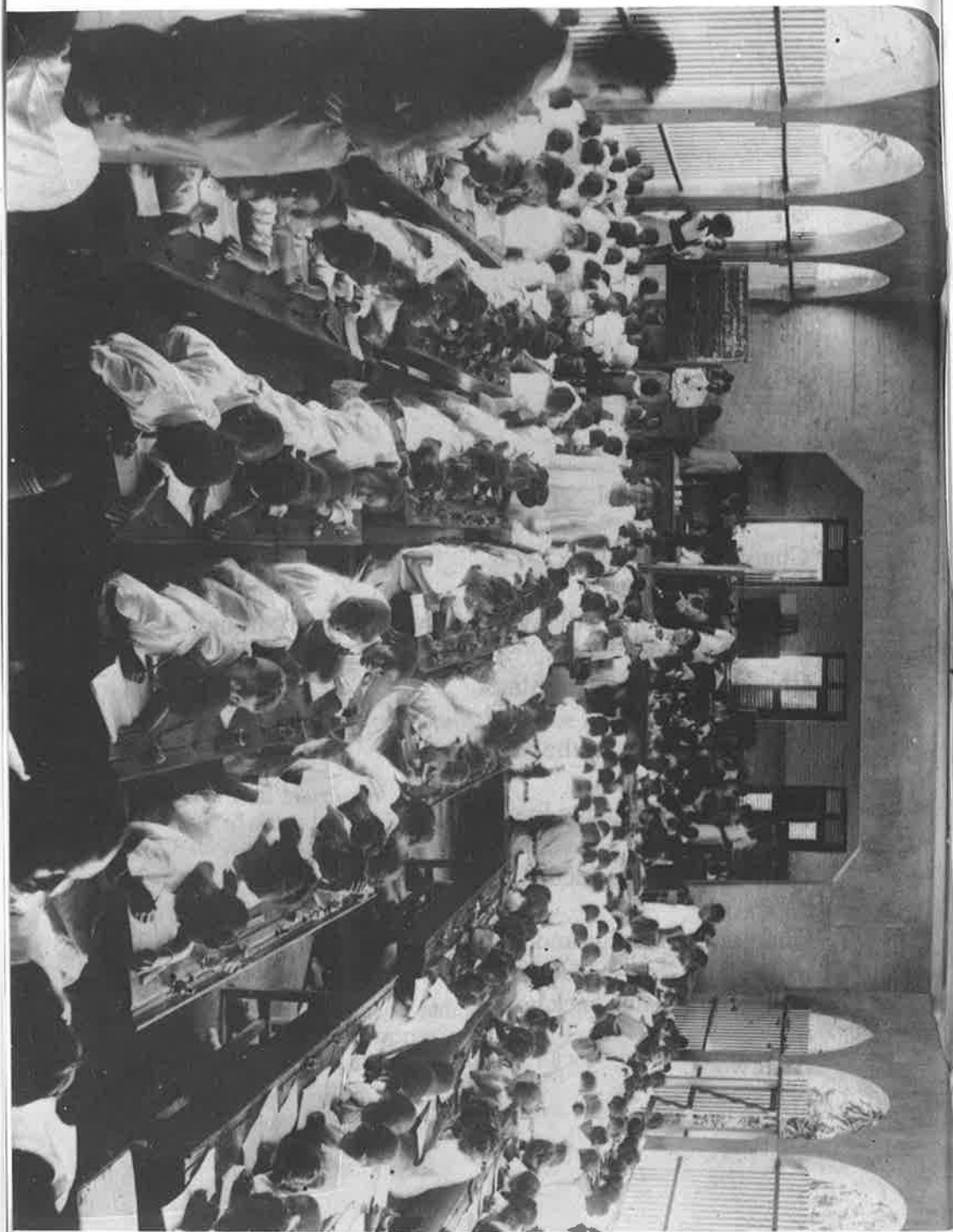
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This is like my school.  
There were different classes  
in the room.

## 1 School

I was born in Scarborough in Jamaica.  
I didn't know my mother.  
My mother leave the district when I small,  
and went to St. Annes.  
I live with my father and my mother-in-law.

Well, I went to infants school.  
I could remember I used to sleep in the class.

I left the infants school  
and went to the ordinary big school.  
I just wouldn't go to school.  
I just feel I didn't learn anything.  
When the teacher ask a question  
the others put their hand up,  
and I couldn't put mine up.  
I wouldn't go to school any more.  
I start to cry and hide from school.  
I leave the home  
like I go to school  
and then stop on the way  
and just play around on the common.

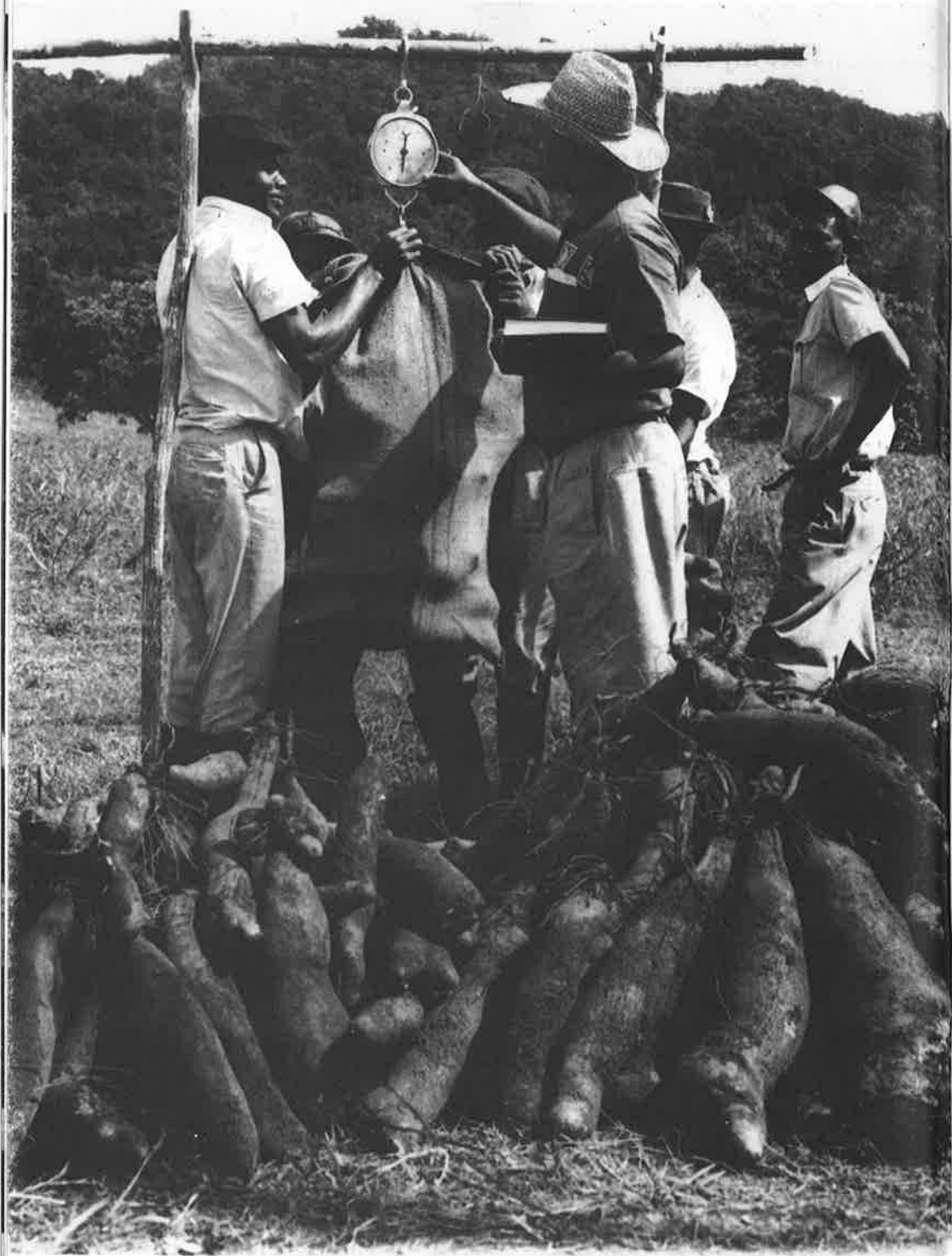
When my mother give my money  
in the morning, for lunch,  
I throw it away.  
One of my friends told her  
I wasn't going to school.  
The evening I came home, she beat me.  
She still send me back to the school.  
I still wouldn't go.  
She moved me from there.

Then she send me to Bethany school.  
I wouldn't learn.  
I don't know why.  
I could remember one day.  
Me and another boy catch a fight.  
Two of his brothers came into it  
and catch my pants and tear it.  
Then from that day I get scared  
to go back to school.  
My father didn't know what was going on.  
He leave home early in the morning  
to work on the farm.  
Come home nine o'clock.  
I think his wife told him.  
He say since I won't go to school,  
"Go to work with me.  
You going to be sorry later on.  
Later on  
you're going to need that read and write."

My father take me to the farm  
and I have to help he work.  
I could remember one day I in the park  
carrying bush.

I see my friends coming from school.  
I feel so embarrassed.  
I should be with them.  
One of the girls said to me,  
"Why didn't you come to school today?"  
I didn't answer the question.  
I must have been about eight.  
I didn't know how to write my name.





Weighing the yam  
to go to the market.

## 2 Farm work

Farm work is very hard.  
My father used to grow a lot of orange and coffee,  
corn, peas, potatoes and yams.  
I could remember my first job when I went to work,  
I had to help prepare the ground for planting.  
When you have rough ground,  
we use a cutlass to cut away the bushes.  
After that we have to weed the grass.  
We don't have any machines,  
we have to use our hands  
and a hoe and a fork.  
We weed the grass with a hoe.  
The hoe is not like what you call a hoe here,  
it have a short handle,  
and it give you back aches.

When my father digging the hole  
for put the yam,  
I have to go the park  
and pick up some leaf  
to put inside the hole  
for manure for the yams.

Then after that  
we have to go to the hills,  
and he start to cut bush,  
so I have to carry the bush to the field.  
After he finish at the hill,  
he spread it out for manure the yam.  
And he cut sticks for the yams in the hills.  
You know, like you put sticks for runner beans.

They grow very tall.  
The sticks are very heavy.  
In my size I have to carry one or two.  
Grown men can carry four or six.  
Most people use bamboo  
because them grow straight.  
Then he sharpen it  
and I have to carry it,  
and he jam it in the ground.

If we don't use the bush for manure  
we have to use fertilizer  
and we don't like fertilizer.  
It don't give the food the taste it should.

I get up sometime  
at 4 o'clock in the morning to work.  
I so tired sometimes, I walking and sleeping.  
I used to sleep along.  
When I go home in the evening  
I could hardly eat my dinner.  
Sometimes I don't have a wash.  
I sit on the chair in the kitchen and sleep.

### 3 From Bethany to Trelawney to Scarborough

I work with my father  
all the time I was growing up.  
Then he decided to come to England.  
All the men he was friendly with  
had come to England.  
They write and say, "You could come too."

After my father came to England  
I stayed with my cousin in Trelawney.

When I with my cousin  
I used to work with a white man.  
Building work – I used to carry the bricks  
and mix the cement.  
He did build tourist house in the sea.  
Some of them was high on legs with the sea under  
and some on the seashore.  
I did happy at that time.

I leave the job when it finish  
and went back home  
in my district in Scarborough.



After work, have a wash,  
then hang around  
on the roadside or in the shop.

I stop at my mother-in-law.  
I wash and I sleep there.  
I get up in the morning, have a wash  
and went to my Aunty to have my tea,  
then go to work.  
The reason why I didn't eat  
at my mother-in-law's house is,  
we didn't get along.

After I come in from work, I have a wash  
and then go to my Aunty's to eat.  
Then I play in the street,  
maybe marbles,  
if not marbles, gig,  
if not gig, cricket.  
We just hang around in the shop  
and maybe end up playing dominoes or cards.  
On Saturdays the same story.

On Sunday we used to go to church  
I used to like the church.  
The church back home is more enjoyment than back here.  
We used to go to the church in the day  
and Sunday evening time  
you have people coming from different districts,  
and have street side meetings.  
I believe that the Christian Church of the West Indies  
is more Christian than over here.  
Them are more worthier over there than over here.

I didn't want to come to England  
and I didn't have the money.  
But I did want to go to America.

To go to America is not like coming here.  
To go to America  
they have to come over and employ you.

They come and see the big man for the district  
and give him a certain amount of cards.  
Everybody wants to go,  
so you have to go and ask him,  
"Could I have one of those cards?"  
He look up on a person  
and know he's all right.  
Say, he look at me  
and he knows I'm fit.  
So he gives me a card,  
and when the time comes,  
the telegram come for you to go to Kingston.  
My father brother wife brother-in-law  
was the man who gave me the card.

## 4 Isaac to the States

After I come back to Scarborough  
I prepare a piece of land to plant corn and peas.  
A friend gave me the land to plant it,  
half for him and half for me.  
One day a lady come up and ask two of us  
who is working, if we know Gladstone.  
I say "Yes, that is my name."  
She say she been walking from morning  
and couldn't find me.

She give me the telegram to go to America.  
I take the telegram to a lady  
and ask her to read it for me.  
The telegram report "Come to Kingston for tests!"  
They test your blood if you sick,  
if you have any disease.  
The day I take the tests,  
I nervous,  
I got the flu.



After the tests  
I stay at one of my cousins house in Kingston.  
Two days after I fly off to America.

Everybody glad when someone leave  
and go to America  
because they send something back for them,  
might be money, might be a parcel.  
When I go in the plane, I look out of the window  
and everything is small, like this rubber here.

They pay our fare go and come.  
After you go over there  
they take back the fare every week  
out of your wage,  
and money for food and living,  
and then save a part for us  
and give us a part in our hand.  
The part they save, they send back to Kingston.

I stay in Lake Arbour in Florida for three months.  
My first job is to cut celery.  
You have a machine like a plane,  
you got two wings and the body.  
About 20 men on one side  
and 20 on the other,  
and two at the head.  
You get the men drive the machine.  
I cut the celery with a knife,  
put it on the moving belt,  
and women on top of the machine  
pack it in boxes.  
After that we cut corn.  
After corn we pick peas.

We start work half seven in the morning  
and finish half four or five.  
We live in a camp.  
It's like a building with one story.  
You come through the door  
and there's rooms on one side and rooms on the other  
like in a hospital.  
Four persons to a room. All men.  
A truck take we to work and back home.

Most of the time we over there  
we didn't have any work.  
The employer keep us then.  
The boss plant some more celery,  
then the frost come and kill it.  
Then he phone up the North  
to try if others could take us.  
He didn't have anything else for us to do.

They reply no.  
Right boys back on the rock – Jamaica.  
That's the game.  
Nothing else to do.  
That's the way it go.

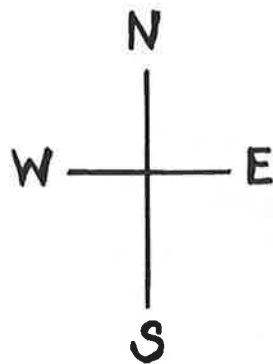
I would like to stay in America,  
but I could not stay  
because it's a contract.  
You're not allowed to work  
with no one else but your employer.  
It must that they get cheap labour from Jamaica,  
and if you're any trouble they send you back.  
We don't have any union  
but if they employ Americans, they would  
and they'd have to pay more money.

# JAMAICA

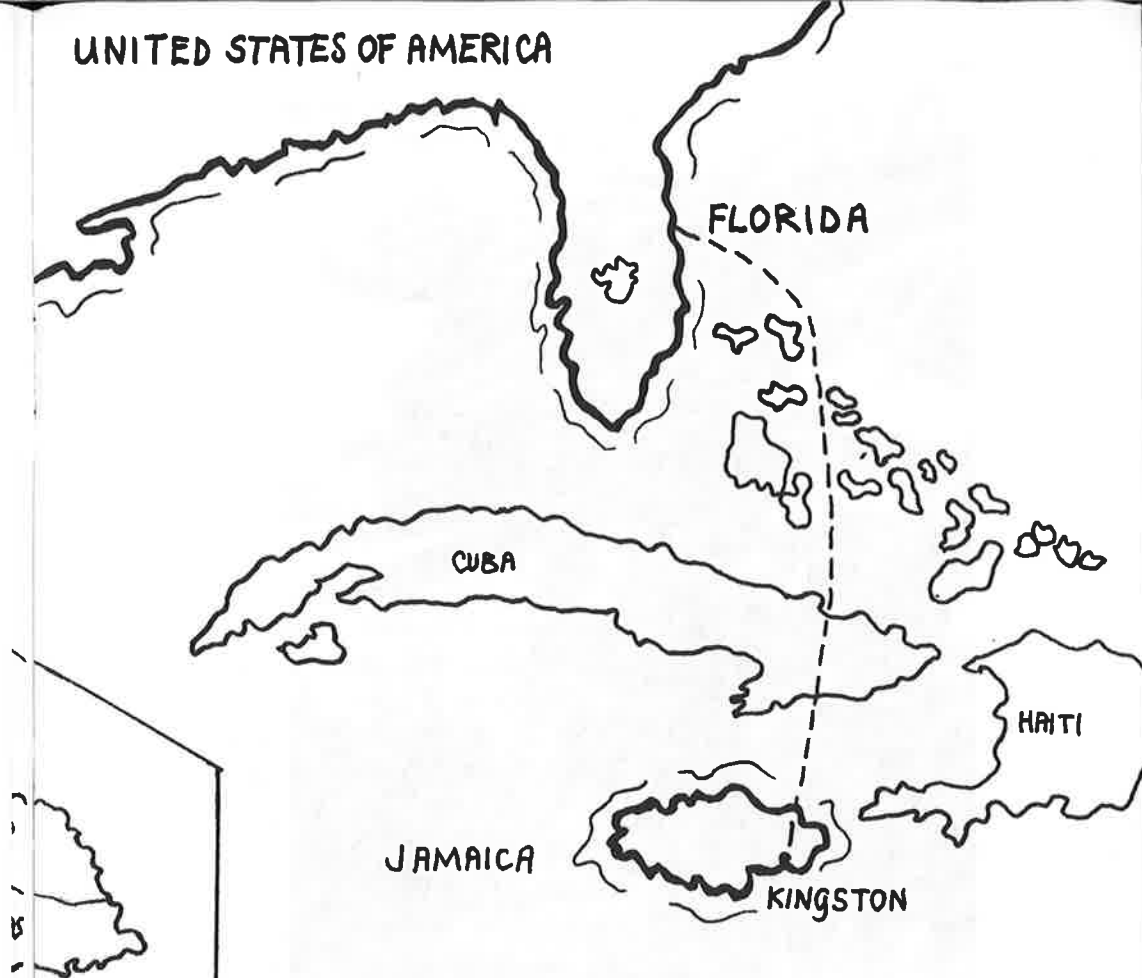
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0 5 10 15 20 25

statute miles



UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



FROM KINGSTON TO FLORIDA



That's the way I used to carry it.  
Two on top and one in the hand.

## 5 Back on the rock

I stayed in America three months.  
Then I went back to Scarborough,  
and I buy pigs.  
After, I start to work,  
to do my little garden for myself.  
Then later on,  
after the pig grow big,  
I sold it  
and buy a bicycle.  
I still hang around in Scarborough there.  
If anybody wanted a day worker  
I go and work with them.  
I work with a person for a week,  
sometimes two weeks.  
You see, our district doesn't have a factory  
or a permanent place  
where you employ for a long while.  
So you have to work a day here, a day there.

Then after that, I leave and go to St. Mary.  
My mother was up there, so I went there.

My father was not home to keep me back,  
so I could go where I liked.  
I stay with my mother.  
I work with a white man,  
my mother employer,  
carry bananas, cut grass,  
sometimes I pick coconut.  
Then I come back in Scarborough.  
My Auntie send for me to go to England.

She want me to come to England  
for everybody coming to England.  
And I used to play around with a lot of girls.  
So they tried to get me out of trouble.  
I didn't have a proper job.  
I was just drifting away.

I didn't want to come to England.  
I want to go to America again.  
But if you live in your family house,  
if they told you to do anything,  
you have to do it.

## 6 Coming to England

So I go and take out my passport.  
You have to fill out a form.  
I couldn't do the read and write,  
so I have to take someone with me to Kingston.  
He do all the write and read.  
I have to pay he.  
I pay £85 fare.  
At that time  
you didn't have to say  
you had a job to come to.

So I came over.  
I fly.  
When I first came,  
I look at all the trees,  
and I said,  
"What's the matter with all them trees,  
they die?"  
Back home, the trees don't drop the leaves.



I went to stay with my brother  
in Tollington Park Road  
I did surprise when I came in this country  
how them sell orange.  
We never used to buy orange  
by the pounds.  
We used to go to the market  
and if we see a orange  
we just take it up and ask the price.  
We buy it by the dozen.  
I never do it anyway  
because we have plenty.  
I bought an orange in Finsbury Park.  
The man put it in the scale  
and weigh it.  
It come to about 13p for an orange.

When I came in this country,  
I see them sell sweet potato in the scale.  
We never buy sweet potato by the scale,  
except by a hundredweight.  
We don't buy it, we sell it.  
My father go the field and dig it,  
wash it and boil it for the pigs.  
So when I came here and see one little one  
selling for 3 or 4 shillings,  
it shock me and I decide not to buy it.

Orange on the tree.





Scrap metal yard.  
They buy the metal and sort it.

## 7 The accident

I came to this country in March 1960.  
My first job – a scrap metal yard.  
I working on a machine cutting up metal.  
Then one Monday morning, the governor asked me  
to help load a lorry with engines.  
I feel my stomach start to pain me.

I went to the doctor.  
He give me some pills,  
and I didn't know the rule of the country to go sick.  
I still went to work.  
I went back to work the following morning –  
the same thing again apply – load the lorry.  
I told him my stomach hurting me.  
He said, take your cards on Friday.

I off work for about four weeks.  
The exchange send me to a job in Caledonian Road.  
That job is building.  
But when I went, it was just me alone working –  
just tidying up after the builders gone.

I work at that job about three days I think.  
When I come home one evening  
my cousin told me that my first employer say  
if I want back the job I can have it.

Why I went back was, it was much nearer to me.  
I did get used to the job.  
I didn't like the building job.  
I heard it was hard in the winter.  
I heard you had to travel round  
and I didn't know the country.  
So I went back the Saturday morning eight o'clock.  
At eight o'clock I start to work.  
I have to take up the metal and feed the knife.  
There are two blades.  
The one at the bottom don't move.  
It stand still.  
Just the top one move.  
It comes down and up, down and up  
and chops the metal.

At nine o'clock the accident happens.  
I had been back in the job one hour.  
I feed in the metal to the machine.  
It have a piece of wire inside of it that didn't cut.  
The rest cut but the wire didn't  
so the weight of what didn't cut  
just pulled my hand straight into the knife.  
I scream out. The foreman come.  
I did have gloves on  
They take me to the Royal Northern Hospital.  
There was lots of blood.  
They take the gloves off.  
Take my coat off.  
I think them must have put me to sleep.

I was screaming,  
and after I don't know what happened.

First time I know what happened  
is when I wake up in hospital.  
I stayed in four or five weeks.  
It was three fingers cut.  
They put my hand in plaster up to the elbow.  
Then I come home.  
I go to the hospital back. They have a look at it.  
They send me to a rest home in Southgate,  
for another four weeks.

After this they take off the plaster  
and look at it.  
Then I went back in another hospital in the city.  
I spend about three weeks there.  
When they take the plaster off  
the tops of two of the fingers were dry and dead –  
no life in it, so they take it off.  
I lose one joint off one  
and a half off the other. They save one.  
It was more than six months before them heal up.

The machine didn't have any guard.  
It should have a guard.  
I have to get a lawyer and I get £850.  
I never heard anybody speak  
about such things before,  
so I don't know if £850 is enough.  
The lawyer gave me the money  
and I put it in the bank and I make it up  
and in 1969 I bought a house.  
I still prefer to have my fingers than the house.

I did left handed.  
I used my left hand with everything.  
After the accident  
I start to use my right hand  
and I get used to do everything with my right hand.  
My family used to curse me about left handedness.  
They call me left handed crabs.  
When I learned to use my right hand  
I did feel proud.  
I still do.

After I get better, the exchange tell me  
to go back to the same place to get another job.  
They could only have me back in the same job.  
They have nothing else.  
The exchange sent me to a job  
in a shop in Holloway Road.  
I went to an interview.  
I couldn't answer the questions.  
I couldn't read and write  
and fill out the form.  
I could do the job.  
Then the exchange send me  
to Kenwood in Hampstead.  
Kenwood is a big park  
with a museum in the house in it.  
In the summer  
they have concerts by the lake.  
The job was to work in the gardens.  
I didn't want the job  
because it was too little money.  
Anyway I said I'd try it for a couple of weeks  
and I've been there till now.





Me in the trailer ramming the leaf down.



## 8 Reading and writing

It was when I came to England  
I realise my dad was right about reading.  
Well, in England it's important.  
Everything you need to do in England  
you need reading.  
If you going to a factory  
you have to fill out a form  
If you walk down the street you see writing  
and you want to know what is it.  
When I go to work and I sit down  
and see everyone reading paper  
and I cannot read it,  
I feel small.  
When I have a letter to write  
I have to ask someone to write it.  
If I have a letter came to me  
I have to ask someone to read it.  
If someone read it to me  
I don't get the understanding.  
I feel something is leave out.  
Now since I start to learn to read,

when I see a letter  
I can make out some of the words.

Starting to learn happened like this:  
I was sitting down watching the television  
Sunday afternoon.  
A lady come over  
start about reading and writing.  
When she start to talk about read and write,  
how you make the words,  
I put my hand on my jaw  
and thinking about it.  
It look easy.  
When she finished she give you the phone number.  
Then I write it down the same time.

Monday morning I went to work,  
my employer ask me if I watch the television.  
I told him yes.  
He say, "Why you don't have a go at it?"  
I didn't really interested at the moment.  
I didn't answer when he say that to me.  
So he say to me "You hear what I say?"  
I say "Yes, I do."  
Then he say, "Why you don't go and learn to read?  
It don't cost you anything to go."  
So I said to he, could he phone for me and enquire.  
Then he phone up the B.B.C.  
Them ask where I live. He told them.  
They give him the address of this place.  
The Reading Centre.  
And that's the way I'm here.  
I've been here two years now.

I feel I'm getting on good,  
and I would like to keep it up.  
All I want is a little encouragement.

When I come in this country  
I did very lonely,  
and I very happy  
since I met my wife.  
We get married twelve years ago,  
and have a family.  
I am very happy in my life.  
I have two daughters.  
Them going to school now,  
and them reading very nice.  
I don't want them to stop,  
not even half day from school.  
I didn't get any  
and they must take it now.

## 9 Going back home?

My mother lives at Saint Annes,  
Scarborough P.O.

It's in the country.

Where she used to live  
it take away.

Now she lives with her sister.

She would like to build a house  
for herself,

but she don't have the money.

She looking for help from me.

She would like me to come and look for her  
before she die.

I would really like to go back and look for her  
because it's a long time since I don't see her.

I would like to go back

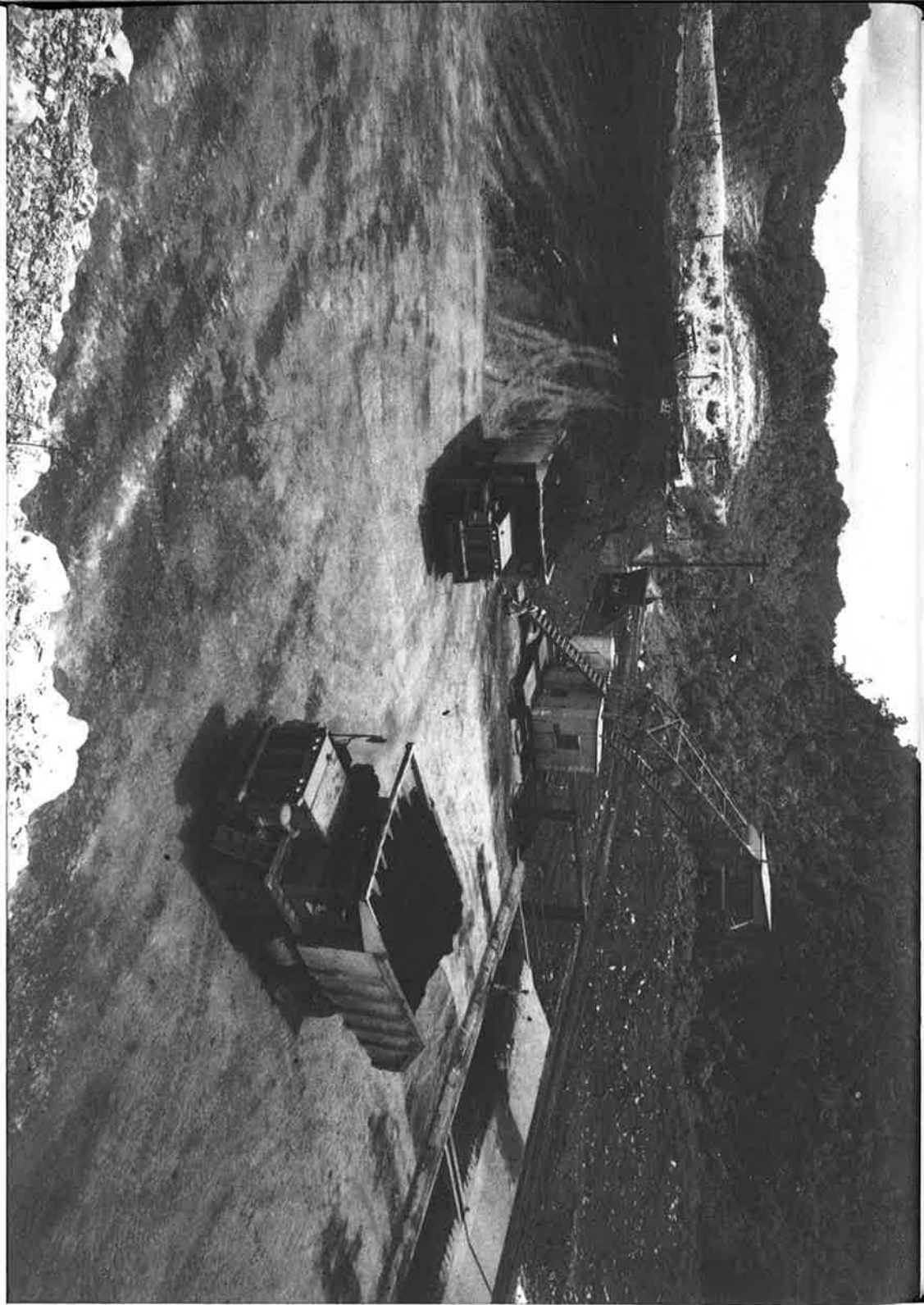
and see the district where I born and grow up,  
where everything mess,

because of the bauxite company.

They take bulldozer and turn up the land.

I would like to see all my family.

I would like to see Jamaica.



I would like to go back now and stay,  
My body getting old now.  
I think everybody should die on them born spot.  
There is two reasons  
why I would like to go back home.

I was in this country since 1960,  
and I don't see what I'm working for.  
I go to work every day,  
and have nothing to show for it.  
If I in Jamaica,  
I wouldn't draw a pay packet every week,  
I would working for myself.  
I would be doing farming.  
I like farming.  
That's what I can do.

But I can't afford to go back now,  
that's the truth.

They take bulldozer and turn up the land.

## Afterword

This is work we do over one year and 6 months.  
We start off  
and it growing more and more.  
Then it getting interesting.  
So we decide to put it together.  
I am telling Jud about my life  
and she just write it down.  
I like to do it  
and I hope other people like to read it.

Isaac & Jud.  
March 1978



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