

A cultural adventure

Haitians forge new life after refugee ordeal

By Shirree Iden
Staff writer

On a quiet, unpaved street of brick, block and frame houses in Southfield, the hand of terror is still felt thousands of miles from the Haitian dictatorship. Two young men, speaking no English, but terrified of being photographed for an American newspaper, tell their story.

Both are named Emmanuel. Emmanuel L., slender, dressed in a faded jean suit, speaks first. Through an interpreter he tells how he left Haiti on Aug. 24, 1980, in a large, but old sailboat called "Nativity." Emmanuel was one of 155 people crowded onto her decks. He paid \$100 for the trip.

"Nativity" made it to Cuba in four days, then stopped for repairs. Then back onto the open seas where the ships sprang many leaks and sank. Emmanuel was lucky. "God was with me," he said. He climbed to the top of a mast and rode it down into the sea. Others lower down in the ship were not so fortunate. A passing plane saw the ship in distress and dropped life belts. Emmanuel clinging to one for nearly two hours and was rescued by the Coast Guard. Sixty-two persons survived the sinking of "Nativity" Ninety-three died.

IN MIAMI, Emmanuel was helped

by friends and got a job as a bus boy. Later, he was laid off and became one of many unemployed refugees in the Miami area, part of a grim statistic. Emmanuel P.'s passage to Miami was like a cruise — compared to that of his friend. On Dec. 12, 1980, he left Port Au Prince, Haiti, on a motor boat. His trip to Miami was uneventful. Unlike Emmanuel L., he never found a job at all.

Both men came from poor farming families in Haiti. Emmanuel P. was born in Central Haiti, his father still struggles there at farming, earning about \$140 a year. Emmanuel L. comes from the south of Haiti where his family still lives. They also earn about \$140 for farming with knife, machete and bare hands. Today, both men are in Southfield, living with Haitian families who are helping them start over.

Their help comes from the Michigan Haitian Association, a non-profit organization set up to help Haitians who come here remember their backgrounds. The association is eight years old and works out of one of those small houses that Southfield street. "We're looking for office space now," said Raphael Bolivar. He and Andres Civilus direct the organization. It is in Civilus' home that the temporary office is housed.

HAITIAN PEOPLE began to come to this area as much as 25 years ago, Bolivar said, but in the past seven years the influx has speeded up.

"In 1968, there were five Haitian families in Detroit," he said. "Now we have 52 families in the Detroit area and about 120 families in Michigan." Among the immigrants are doctors, nurses, statisticians, engineers. But "Most work for the Big Three (automakers)."

Bolivar, who has a law school education earned in Haiti, is an independent insurance agent and has been here 12 years. Civilus came here 10 years ago. In Haiti, he obtained two years of college education and had worked for the Tourist Department.

His three children live with him. One attends Southfield High School and the others Brace-Lederle School. Both men agree that after providing food and a place to stay, their most important aid must be to help Haitian newcomers learn English.

"Haitians are French speaking," Bolivar said. "We encourage them to immediately register for basic English, usually at the International Institute. "THESE TWO guys (the two Emmanuel) speak no English at all," Civilus said. "They're going to classes

four days a week." Haiti and the United States are principal trading partners, which import and export from one another, Bolivar said.

"In Haiti, they have some cultural exposure, such as the Johnny Carson Show and Kentucky Fried Chicken."

"But what's quite different are the working conditions. We have a Coca Cola plants and are big manufacturers of baseballs, though soccer is the national sport. But where an American worker might make \$5 an hour producing baseballs, a Haitian makes \$2 a day and has no benefits whatsoever, no unions."

One of the common abuses is that factories train employees at no pay for six months, then send them home and say they'll be called, Bolivar said. "Then they simply take on more trainees and work them for six months. There's such a great scarcity of jobs that people are forced to do the training stint, hoping against hope for a job."

Haiti is an extremely poor country, two thirds of which is mountainous and unarable. Her people have a long history of emigrating to places like the Dominican Republic and Cuba for work.

"BUT MANY were killed by the dictators in those countries," Bolivar said.

"We've also had a series of disastrous storms on the island. Usually the U.S. helps, but the money doesn't get to the people who need it."

When Haitians are forced to leave their land to try to support themselves, they are forced to leave their few possessions behind.

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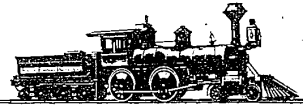


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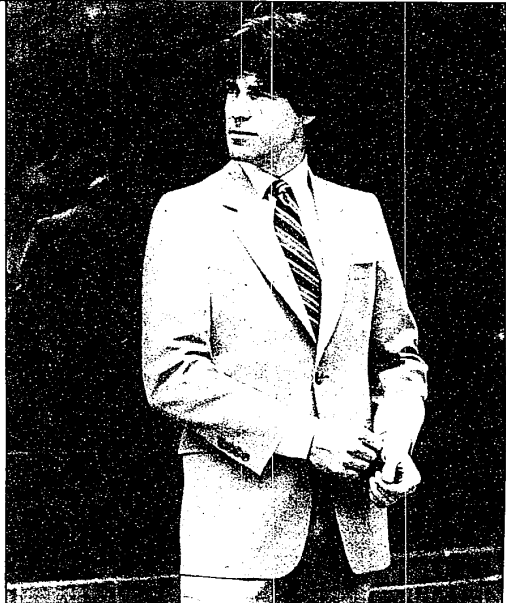
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