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[Sign painters]

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Title Sign painters. [Begin] : Well, I'll tell you.

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 5/4/39

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Project worker Abe Aaron

Project editor

Remarks

W3610

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

Folklore

Chicago

No. Words

[1650?]

JUN 14 1939

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave., Chicago

DATE May 4, 1939

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SUBJECT Signpainters

1. Date and time of interview 9 a. m. to 1 p. m. (or later) April 25, 26, 27 28; May 1, 2, 3. Since the time was spent with the same man every day, it may be regarded to one interview.
2. Place of interview On the job, wherever he happened to be working at the time; a saloon, a sign shop, a wall board (bulletin), a store front.
3. Name and address of informant P. M. 4——.S. cottage Grove Ave. He will not permit more definite information on this point
4. Name and Address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, houses surroundings, etc.

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CHICAGO

No. Words

FORM B

Personal History of Informant

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

Library of Congress

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave. Chicago,

DATE May 4, 1939

SUBJECT Signpainters

NAME OF INFORMANT P. M.

1. Ancestry Roumanian Jewish. Son of a restaurateur
2. Place and date of birth St. Louis, Missouri, about 1900.
3. Family Wife (German, not Jewish), two adopted children.
4. Places lived in, with dates St. Louis till about ten years of age; Detroit, Mich. till about eighteen; Chicago.
5. Education, with dates Through the sixth grads, beginning in St. Louis about 1908, ending in Detroit about 1915. Apprenticeship in Chicago, 1919 to 1923 inclusive.
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Lived on the streets as a child, selling papers, sleeping in burlesque houses and pool rooms. Then odd jobs. Then laboring till about seventeenth year. Then two years as migratory laborer in the wheat fields.
7. Special skills and interests A good craftsman. Calls himself a "made" painter, not a "natural". A liking for and a good knowledge of Shakespeare. Quotes at length. Self-acquired. Collects books. "Plays the ponies;" a good "handicapper."
8. Community and religious activities Interested in and sympathetic toward reform and radical movements; is active in none. Atheistic. Cynical in respect to group activities of any sort. Younger child named in honor of Clarence Darrow.

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9. Description of informant Tall, lean. Strong, rough-cut features. Laughing constantly. Rabelaisian, in speech.

10. Other Points gained in interview It is not true that every signpainter is a disappointed artist. Himself, he would like to become a cartoonist. "I wish to hell I'd gone to school. I wish to hell I could go right now." Tall tales, folklore, we don't have any. If anyone asks you, signpainting's just an occupational disease. But we get around, that's something."

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words

FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

Address 5471 Ellis Ave. Chicago

DATE May 4, 1939

SUBJECT Signpainters

NAME OF INFORMANT Philip Marcus

Well, I'll tell you. There aren't very many of us. Maybe seven-eight hundred altogether in the city. About seven-hundred-fifty in the union, I guess.

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No, everybody aint in the union. But we got things pretty well tied up. The others snap a job on the sly once in a while, but it don't amount to much. Shops don't hire them and me pull them off the jobs they got themselves when we catch them.

The good ones? Yeh, practically all of them are signed up. What the others get don't amount to much.

I'll tell you one thing about Chicago though. Detroit's tops when it comes to bulletins, and so's Los Angeles, I guess— that's what they tell as anyway—but for all around sign work you won't find any town that beats Chicago. We got good man here. Sure, we have palookas too, who aint worth a s—, but not very many.

The scale? Fifteen smackeroos. But if we get ten we're lucky. Sure, the book calls for fifteen, and if anyone asks, we're getting fifteen, see; only damn few got it. I get it sometime. Depends on who I work for.

We lose too goddam much time. I figure, the year 'round we average maybe eight-hundred to a thousand bucks a year. The sign game's just about done. Too much neon work for one thing. But that's about reached its limit too. What keeps us going now are these beer joints. They fold up so goddamn fast, you wonder why anyone also starts up. The breweries pay for the sign work, so the saloon keepers want a lot of it. They think they're getting something for nothing. There ain't no one harder to work for.

And I'll tell you something funny, while I'm thinking of it. I don't give a goddamn where you go in these damn saloons— and these fellows that run the joints are just one step removed from hoodlums, as rotten a tribe as you want to meet, don't let anybody tell you different—but there we'll be, working away, never stoppin' except to look over some swell job passing in front of the window—say, I was working at Division and State last week, and the girls up there beat anything I've seen, Jesus! But around these joints. Well, there's always at least one drunk who comes along with a story at a signpainter he knew once

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and Christ Jesus was he a good man! - paint like nobody's business! But, you what? He had to be drunk. Yep, couldn't lay out a word unless he was drunk as a lord. Never knew it to fail, you always get that story. But I've got to meet that signpainter yet. These jags! - you wonder where the hell they come from!

You're right, there's something for you, the way the people look at us. Now take the average, I'd say it's with admiration.

How do we react? Well, Jesus! We're normal, aren't we? We food it to 'em.

Like the time I was doin' a bulletin out south on Halsted. Some guys are standin' anound watchin' us. Ever notice how a guy's mouth comes open sometime when he forgets himself watchin' something? Well, there're these jags gapin' like a bunch of kids when the old lady's about through makin' the candy, and out of them pipes up with, "Say, that's a pretty big sign you guys are painting, aint it?"

So we get to jibber- jabberin', an' you know me, old Annanias himself, I say, "You guys ain't seen nothin'. You remember that big one we did outside the New York airport for the airplane passengers to read, don't you, Lou?" Lou was the helper on that job. He's a pretty good man. But he's too mechanical, his work doesn't have any swing. (The word is not taken from the current musical craze. It refers to style and individuality in work. A signpainter can walk about the streets, look at signs, tell who did the work, what shop and what man. This applies particularly to gold leaf jobs.-A. A.) So most of the time he's a helper. He says, "You mean the one where me used a washtub of black for the eyelashes?" "Hell, no," I said. "That was a small one. Don't you remember that job where we used ten tons of lead just for the period?" I couldn't keep from laughing, the way they ate it up.

But these saloon-keepers, they're the ones that are the real phonies. No one likes to work for them. Of course, we work for the breweries, not for them, but they're gettin' something for nix, so they want a lot. When we give extras to a saloon keeper, like putting his name

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on or something like that, we say, "Okay, here's the egg in your beer." When one guy sees a saloonkeeper coming, he does this (gestures, spreads arms wide, brings right hand to front, bring tips of thumb and index finger to indicate a space of about 1/4 inch). That means, "big sign, small letters." Then we stop shooting the s— and keep quiet till he's out of earshot. We don't like to talk to them unless we can help it. We do that, by the way, whenever anyone we don't like comes along. It means freeze him out, ignore him, don't give the bastard any encouragement."

Talkin' about this "egg in the bear" gag, reminds me of something I pulled last year about this time. A saloonkeeper kept botherin' and thinkin' and I couldn't think how to get out of it. Then I got a bright idea. I said, "Look, I'm mixin' the two coats in this pail, I'm givin' you your extra coat; what're ya gripin' about." He didn't catch on till about six months later. The Jerk.... But at the some time you have to keep that in good humor, because you don't find jobs hangin' on trees these days. Anyway, after about six mouths or so, he comes bellyachin' for that extra coat of paint. Did I give it to him? Hell, no! I told 'im to go s—— up a straight stick. They don't pull that kinda crap on me.

The signpainters are always grouching. No work, some guys are too good and too hungry at the same time, like S..... who works for A..... That bastard will work till maybe two o'clock and finish a job and then call up all the shops in town trying to get in an extra two hours so's he'll get a full day. But you can't take anything away from him, he's tops, and not only that, he's fast: me, I'm better then average, if I do say so myself, I but compared to S.... I'm just another punk trying to get along. Aren't we all?

The Union? Sure it's against the rules. No, he's not supposed to do it, and if anyone reported it he wouldn't get away with it. Every trade has someone who's known as tops, I guess. And every trade has someone who's got a rep for being hungry for [do-ra-me?], We've got both in one man.

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And Jesus is he dumb when it comes to anything else but painting signs. He's as dumb as the guy who was looking over my shoulder one day when I was working in R's shops, last winter. You know how we lay out with chalk without measurin' or anything, and I guess it looks pretty good to someone who doesn't do it himself. Well, this guy's lookin' over my shoulder I'm paintin' away, an' pretty soon I come to the end of the sign an' I've got everything worked in, good as if I'd laid every letter out with a rule before starting. That jerk looks and says, "Gee, you're lucky." "Yeh?" I says. I notice his mouth is open and he's admirin' as hell. He nods his head. "You sure was lucky," he says, "that sign was just long enough." It was a pretty big sign. I had to lay it on the floor to work on it. I just about busted a gut. R. says, "Some folks sure do things funny." Jesus.

Now this guy, R. Is he a screwball? He's taking singing lessons. One day we're all standing around. It's a Saturday. We don't work, but we came down to get our money. R., he's always screwing around trying to pay off as late to possible, always singing the blues. But this time is the payoff, he's singing songs for us— that jerk. So in comes a collector with a summons for R. He didn't pay a bill, and they were suing him. I say, "Why don't you sing for him, R. ?- he's the guy you ought to be singing for." R. didn't feel so good.

But you take R., now, just as an example. He's got him a shop, a few guys workin' for him when he's got the work, and for all he knows he'll be out on his a—tomorrow or the day after. I lost my shop in 1932. That was my own fault though. The nice thing about having a shop, though, is that you're your own boss. That's why I contract most of my work; I get along about as good as average. Signpainting? - well, today, it aint an occupation, it's an occupational disease. That's what I call it.

No, I don't want to be tied up to any one shop. Because I've got contacts and accounts from the time I had my own shop. Snapping like this, I make more than if I only worked for someone else. Of course, a job like one with the Daily News, say, would be regular and you'd make more out of it, day in and day out. But then you do the same sign over and over again, all day, every day, and you lose your touch and can't do anything else. Workin'

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with General Outdoor has it's gripe too; first sign of slack and out you go. Me, one day I'll be working on a bulletin, the next on a wall, the the next on a window, the next on a truck, or on showcards, or what the hell. Did I ever tell you the story of the signpainter who sold two-three kits a day, be cause he couldn't find work?

You know what a kit is. (A signpainter's kit is a high, rather wide, relatively narrow box, about about 1' 6" to 2' x 1' to 1'6" x 6" to 9", with a sliding roll-away front, containing small compartments of various sizes and shapes in which are stored the essential items for every possible type of job the signpainter may be called upon to do. With good materials, gold leaf, and silver, paint, brushes, etc., etc., it may easily be worth as much as two-hundred dollars, seldom less than seventy-five.-A. A.) Well, this guy-I don't know how old this story is; I heard it when I first started as an apprentice, and I still hear it every once in a while—this guy, he can't find no job. So he gets him some boxes. You know the kind that beer comes in, the bottles. And he cuts them down and fixes them up and paints them black, so they look just like a kit. Then he goes around to the saloons. He's broke, he ain't got a pot to spit in, his wife is in rags and starvin and so desperate she's even threatenin' to go out sellin' it, and the kids, Jesus the kids! So he spreads it on, thick. He even cries when it comes time. So this kit he's carryin' around. It's all he has left in the world. It's his bread, if he ever should maybe get him a job. And it's worth dough. He doesn't want very much, only a couple o' bucks, that's all. An' he sells the kit, if he can't borrow on it, two-three of them a day. To me it don't sound so damn funny, but you want to hear what kind of stories we tell, and we tell that one-as long back as I can remember.

And there's the one about the guy who's out of work an' thinks he'll maybe do better for himself if he starts beatin' around the country. So he goes down to the union and gets him a traveling card, throws his kit in the old jallopy and away he goes. Well he goes plenty far and what he finds is pretty damn small pickin's. Finally he gets him a job, a good one. It's a big job, and he wants it like right now I's like to lay that dame across the street. Look at that! Boy, she's good enough to eat. Aint that somethin'! Well, the jobs for a big garage man. This here garage man, he sees how things are, gets the lay of the land quick, and

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jews down the price to practically nothing at all. So, all right, the guy goes to work on it. He gets enough dough to buy him paint and such, and doesn't even have enough left over to eat on. Pretty soon he gets hungry. The sun's hot as a bitch in heat. It's close, the guy can hardly breathe; he's been on bread and water for days. Naturally, he's a little nervous an' forgetful an' liable to make mistakes. The big spot in the sign is for the word "vulcanizing." And damn if he doesn't leave the z out of vulcanizing. He's got to think fast. He wants to let the garage man look at the sign, get his dough, and blow. So he gets an idea. He takes cardboard, prints "paint" on it in big red letters and hangs it over where the z would be. Then he gets the garage man to come look at the job. He gets his money and he blows. Only one thing I forgot to tell you. This sign was a bulletin out on a country road at the city limits, that's what makes the story good—no call to put "wet paint" on that.

We don't have any stories about guys from other towns, not that I can think of right now anyway, except maybe about the guy from Los Angeles. You know, those fellows out on the coast get big ideas, because maybe they think they come from Hollywood or something like that; they like to plan crazy layouts and think we don't know what the score is. We have fellows in this town that have more and better ideas than they ever heard of, at least when it comes to signpainting. Except on bulletins maybe, that's all. Well, this guy, he comes in from Los Angeles an' talks himself into a job. Not with a shop; he snapped one. But he forgot to get a transfer; [or?] maybe he wasn't even in the union out here, I don't know. So the business agent pulls him off the job. Then he tries to get half the guys in town to finish the job for him. It'd mean a fine for any union man who touched it. We went out to look at it. It wasn't a bad layout, nothing extra though; but it was the lousiest goddamn work you ever saw. That was about the size of his big ideas. For quality, the Chicago work is good; yes, I'd say it's a lot better than average. And I've been around.