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[Postoffice Workers - (Carriers)]

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Folklore Collection (or Type)

Title Postoffice workers - (Carriers)

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 6/22/39

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Project worker Abe Aaron

Project editor

Remarks

W3608

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FOLKLORE

[md;]

CHICAGO

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis

DATE 6/22/39

SUBJECT American Lives

Post Office Workers - (Carriers)

1. Date and time of interview 6/12-6/13-6/14-6/16-6/19-6/20

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2. Place of interview 47th St. and Cottage Grove Ave. Canal & Van Buren Sts. - Jackson and Dearborn

3. Name and address of informant Several. Initials permitted, names and addresses withheld. M.F., B.D., S.B., H.F., J.C., G.R..

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. M.F. & B.D.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

B.D.

6. Description of room,house, surroundings, etc.

All interviews, except that with A. D., in restaurants, taverns - and in B. D.'s home.

FORM C

FOLKLORE

[md;]

CHICAGO

Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave., Chicago, Ill.

DATE 6/22/39

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SUBJECT Post Office Workers - (Carriers)

NAME OF INFORMANT M.F., B.D., S.B., H.F., J.C., G.R.

I

They're mostly old people in this hotel. They bother hell out of you every time you bring in the mail as if it's your fault they don't get anything.

There was one old goat at the hotel who didn't have nothing to do but sit around waiting for bedtime all day, and he was always concerning himself with the temperature and the calendar—he'd come down early to the lobby some mornings and he'd just chortle with glee if the last day's sheet hadn't been pulled off calendar; he'd rush over to the calendar and pull off the sheet and he'd tell everyone who'd listen about it for hours. He had scads of money.

Lots of people, and especially old people, rich old people like the ones around this hotel, are always trying to raise trouble for the carrier. But I bullcrap them to a million, and they never know it; I've been on a long time, long enough so I really have a neat way of handling them. I can't describe how I do it, I do it, that's all; the trick's mostly to keep agreeing with them and keep twisting their statements inside out as you go along—after a while they think you you're a goof and a goof can get away with anything, almost. You've got to know to laugh a bit, too, ag at their jokes. It's the guys who're smart, smart and agressive, who get in dutch.

Post Office Workers

FORM C

But this old goat—I'm glad you reminded me—he'd just chortle with [glee?] when the calendar wasn't changed; he was normal in most respects, but he had scads of dough.

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One week I was off for three days, and when I came back on the route he wasn't around; he'd fallen from his bedroom window and killed himself. There was one case where there wasn't any question of suicide. He'd just leaned too far out of the window to read the thermometer, and he'd slipped off the ledge while doing it, got dizzy or something. But the funny thing was that everybody in the place was glad he was gone. You could see the smirks on their faces when they talked about it. Most people ought to die before they get a chance to grow old, by God.

II

Three times I've been asked why I'd hanged a WPA check. (leaving it hanging over box instead of handing it to addressee in person)— But I don't hang them, I never do. I ring the bell where it says the guy's name and someone comes out and says he's that guy. But he's not, and he takes the cheek. Then he figures he can't get away with nothin' and puts it in the box. I get a kickback on it.

I had a funny one happen to me the other day.

You know how the Negros live. You'll find a family in a room and a whold colony in a flat. And they're always movin' or havin' to move. Some of them haven't any toilets and some of them don't even have any water. The halls are dark, and even if they weren't you wouldn't be able to tell who lives there from the names over the mail boxes—you ought to see it. You can ride through the neighborhood or even walk in it and never have a hint of the way they actually live, of the kind of dirt and misery they have. I feel honest to God sorry for the poor bastards, honest to God, I do.

I've got a check to deliver to a guy named H. G. His name's not up, but I sort of remembered that an H. G. 'd lived on the first floor so I ring the bells for the first floor. A guy comes out and says he's not H. G. but H. G's brother-in-law; H. G. lives with him, he'll take the check. I give it to him, and while I'm distributin' the reit of the mail for the building H. G. himself comes down from upstairs and [aksa?] for his check. I tell him I'd

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already given it to his brother-in-law. "I got no brother-in-law," he says, so I had to go in with him and get the check. This other guy was standin' there—you could see his lips moving spelling out letter by letter what was on the check.. All H. G. 'd done was move from the first floor to the third.

III

Talkin' about kickbacks, I get lots o' them from dames on my route who don't have enough to do to fill in their day. One day I got a kickback on an open letter. I'd hung it in the wrong box—I was reponsible, I guess, I don't know—an' the dame [called?] the station. Well, the person I'd give the letter to, she'd opened it, but she claimed she didn't read it, an' I took it myself to the dame who should of got it in the first place an' explained what had happened an, asked if everything was all right. She read the letter an' said sure, everything was all right. When I got back to the station, she'd called up about it an' made a complaint. I told the super, "[if?] she has a beef, let her come in." If we listened to all the complaints we'd go screwier than we do; I always say for them to come in if they've got a beef.

IV

Lots more carriers want to transfer to clerks right now than the other way around. Thay's That's because they're bein' ridden. An' there's no chance for promotion. Take an inspector's job, for instance. They never take a carrier. Clerks want to transfer usually only when the weather's gettin' nice. I was talkin' only yesterday to B. who transferred to clerk a couple weeks ago. The first thing he said was, "Jesus, I'm glad I'm out o' that!"

The fellow he transferred with is startin' to notice the length of the workin' day already. The only thing is, he was sent to my station, an' my station's the worst station in the city; they send them to this station to get fired. S. is gettin' fired. L. will probably follow. There's been so many guys fired out of this station, T. mentioned a fellow to me the other day who'd been workin' there two years ago an' I could hardly remember him.

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They sent N. here to be fired. He'd got along so far on a couple but they finally fired him. I've been tryin' to transfer fer almost a year now. Seems you can't even buy a transfer, these days—I mean, if you're a carrier. It's easy enough if you're clerkin'. An' if your in this station, it's practically useless to try.

V

R. got fired out o' this station. He's a coal salesman now; anyway he says he is. T. was tellin' me about him. He's called about ten times on T. now, tryin' to sell 'im some coal. Finally T. gave 'im an order for ten tons, but he waited an' waited an' that ten tons never did come. Every time he called on T. he talked about the buck 'e'd lent S. when he was workin' at the station. S. owed the buck all right, an' T. kept after S. Finally, he said, "Do somethin', anything! - Jesus! - give me the buck! - anything to got rid of him." S. wouldn't cheat anyone out of a dime, but about this guy, he just wants to see how far he'll go. R. never was a coal salesman; it's just a pretext to call on T. and try to collect that buck S. owes him. S. says if he'll call on him he'll pay the buck, but for T. not to say anything to R. about that. Carryin' does that to a guy, makes 'im batty.

VI

C's clerkin' now; he's detailed down to Donnelly's. There's a [sweat?] shop if there ever was one. I wouldn't want that detail. Those girls work piece work and you have to keep up with them. A girl sits at the conveyor an' puts one page of a catalogue on the piles he they go past, one page, the same page, all day long, Millions of 'em. The conveyors go so fast that girls don't even have time to talk to one another. I don't see how they can stand it without goin' nuts. The clerks from the p. o., they sack these Sears Roebuck catalogues, put the names of the towns an them an' send 'em out; they aren't handled again till they got to that town; it's very economical.

VII

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That old baldheaded bastard, he comes and stands right behind you. That station's as bad as any factory could be. It isn't like that in most of the stations. This place's got a rep all over the city—in the service, I mean. They fire 'em out o' there, one after the other, everyone knows that. They say investigators are comin' out from Washington to look into the situation, especially in that station; but generally because of the now speedup we've got everywhere. But you're always hearing things like that, an' nothin' seems to come of it.

VIII

The carrier's a heel to everyone, the public, the clerks, even to the guys on WRA. There's one fellow I know who quit the service because he couldn't stand it any longer. He isn't even making fifty-five dollars a month; he's not on WPA, He's on relief. I meet him one day; it's snowing and I'm lugging a full pack around, and you know that he says to me? - “Boy, I'd hate to be lugging your bag around”— he's never been sorry he quit.

IX

There're about ten-thousand clerks an' only about three-thousand carriers. The carriers' union's always been weak, the clerk's stronger an' more active, too, an' that's why they aint driven like us. They get things done.

X

For that matter, a clerk does everything but clerk. He fill sacks, drags them around, throws mailk [mail,?] yes, sometimes even cleans up garbage. He does everything but clerk. It's damn few detains you ever need a pencil on.

XI

I remember when I was takin' the exams. There was a big burly lad that ought to've been drivin' a truck or somethin'; he yells out, “Where d'you put your name for clerk on,

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this?" I thought, you big goof, you'd be lucky if you got high enough on the list to get a job carrying, let alone clerking. We Take the exams, but most fellows put down they want to be clerks an' it's harder to got high up on the clerk's list. You sign up for carrier an' hope after you get on someone'll be goofy enough to want to transfer with you. I like carryin', only they drive us too much. They really do; they drive us like all hell.

XII

My wife comes home with a story the other day. D's wife is tellin' her about her husband bein' called to work in the post-office not long ago, at fifty bucks a week an' his pay's goin' up five a week after six months. She tells me that line o' bullcrap an' looks at me as if to say, "An', why can't you do that, if S's husband can?" Hell. I ask around an' find out he's tempin'. (working as a part-time temporary substitute clerk—A.A.[P?]) He's lucky if he's knocking, out twenty bucks. What do you suppose he was doin' before? - workin' in one of these chain shoe stores. How much could he have made workin' for out of these outfits? Imagine handin' out the line o' crap they do, especially to mailmen, who know conditions.

XIII

The only time there was life in that damn postoffice was when them Goddamn temps were there. That was because they could tell the boss to go to hell.

XIV

I've been clerkin' a little while now, I finally managed to make it. The thought of a uniform is very funny to me now. I was a boy scout. I was an usher in a theater. And then I was a mail carrier. If I had to be in uniform again now, I'd quit the service. A fellow in uniform is always stereotyped.

XV

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I'd like to take an exam for one of those Washington jobs. Jesus, when they call you to work on one of those jobs, they treat you as if you were a man. When they tell you to report, they tell you by telegram. Here, they herd you around like a bunch of cattle. I remember when I was taking the exam.

There's a little fellow there, and they line us up at the elevator. He gets sore as hell. "Look at them" he says, "look at them; they're regimentin' us already." Sure, it's funny, but it's pathetically funny, because there's more truth in it than you'd ever guess.

XVI

It takes a congressman and a senator, at least, to make you a field foreman. The opportunities in the service are very limited. For example, there's only one field foreman to about thirty men. Policemen have one in ten. And the firemen, I think, have a lieutenant to every eight men.

XVII

The guys are always gripin' about their jobs, but what the hell, I say they're better off than most guys in private industry—an' look at all the guys who don't have no jobs at all. Sure, the drive us all right, an' I don't like it no more'n the next one, an' I'd like to see somethin' done about it. You'd think the government would set an example; but it don't; it drives the hell out o' you in the service, just like anyone else. But where else can you be sure of a job for life long 's you keep your nose clean. What would these guys do if they did lose their jobs, quit or get fired or somethin'? What are they fitted to do? An' even if they're fitted for somethin', what the hell! -they'd find out soon enough there aint so damn many jobs floatin' around where they'd make nearly as much. They get around an' they know that as well as I do; you notice there aint so many of 'em quittin, don't you? - they're holdin' on all right, [byu?] you bet they are. If I lost my job today I wouldn't even know where to start lookin'

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for a job—I was thinkin' of it only the other day; I was feeling so damn lousy when I come home.

XVIII

This job's sure got me down. All I want to do when I get home at night anymore is take off my shoes an' lay around till it's time to go to bed. I don't even want to read anymore. The wife says I'm gettin' old. I aint thirty yet.

XIX

Are you in the service?

No, I didn't think you were. You don't have that beatdown look.

XX

Most of the fellows are always in debt. Sometimes, of course, it's because they have their share of hard luck. But it's so damn easy to get credit when you're in the service.

XXI

That credit union—between the Irish and the Jews, they've got things sewed up; they're out to make money.

XXII

There's one temp in the station now, an Irish lad, who hates Negroes. He's so dark himself, he almost looks like a Negro himself. He's always saying something or other that he thinks is funny to the Negroes in the station, things like “Move over, it's gettin' kind o' dark around here.” We fixed him last Christmas though. We sent him two presents. We went down to a butcher shop and bought a big mangy bone and a smoked fish. We sent each one in a separate package. The bone was marked “From the Bishops of Forestville

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Ave.,” and the fish “From the Chamber of Commerce of Vincennes Ave.” But the best one was the one the little Negro newskid pulled on him outside the station. The kid said, “Hey, mister, ya want a Defender?” He went around kicking packages and mailbags out of his way all day. He kept saying, “That's the last straw, that's the last straw,” and he blew up because we wouldn't stop laughing at him. He's sure wacky.

XXIII

A. sets stiff every night. He comes to work with his face absolutely cut to ribbons. But willing to work though. He'll work like a horse.

L. gets stiff every night, too. But he's not like A. A. Gets into fights somehow all the time, but it's all in the nature of fun to him. L. gets the tar kicked out of him because he's the sort of guy who, if you leave your wife alone for a minute in the tavern while you go to the can, he'll come up to her and make a pass at her.

C. gets into fights because He's drunk and so's everyone else and it just happens. L. gets beat silly by the boys who're sober. L's or the way out. I guess C. is too; they drink too much.

XXIV

They sent P. to this station a couple of weeks ago so's to fire 'im out o' the service. M. an' me, we see him for the first time, an' we both say at the same time, “Boy, look at that bar fly,” an' we started to laugh. He's so goofy because he's always drunk. He's even goofy enough to pay for C.O.D.s himself when the people aren't at home or 're short o' dough.

XXV

When we were temps, on payday they'd never give us our checks in the morning. If they did we'd get drunk and siappear disappear and they'd never find us. The subs now, they're

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the pride of the service. It's so tough getting work these days, half the lads subbing are college boys, who've graduated.

XXVI

There's a guy we don't like very much—no one likes him—who was put on one of the toughest cases in the station. So we go around singing, “Someone Had to Carry Number —, That's why S. S. was born.” We yell it.

XXVII

Did I ever tell you about one of the elevator operators down at the main?

I'm in the elevator an' someone says somethin' about a steady job. “Steady jobs!” he says, “steady job!” an' slams the door shut. He slams the lever an' says, “My brother-in-law's always talkin' about my steady job. He makes anyway twice what I make, an' if he wants to, he can lay off a week an' not notice it. I'm goddamn sick an' tired of hearin' about steady jobs. What's a steady job anyway? Only somethin' to bury yourself in, that's all. Ya get tired o' hustlin' an ya want a steady job. But what the hell ya gonna do about it? Ya got a wife an' kids an' ya gotta keep your steady job.

XXVIII

This guy, he lives way over his head. He'll take some punk girl out an' blow a fortune on her. If you want to put on a front, why, Christ! - put it on in front of strangers, not in front of people you know.

XXIX

When we were temps, being in uniform, we'd never have to pay for smokes or eats or drinks. But when payday came....Why, when payday came I had a sheet a paper a mile

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long, with 5¢ I owed to this patron, and a dime to that one, and 15-20 cents to someone else.

It used to be a point of honor with us not to pay carfares. We had lots of trouble with conductors. Because we didn't have the full uniform, only the hat. One fellow used to wear an overcoat- imagine delivering mail in an overcoat. Some of the conductors wanted us to pay fare if we didn't have the full uniform. Especially on Sundays. I used to start out early to make sure I'd get to work on time. If I got kicked off one street car, I'd take the next one.

D. once were a white linen suit while drivin' truck. People who saw him though someone was stealing a gov't. truck, and calls began to come in about him. Why, they had inspectors out looking for him. He only had a date and he didn't want to change.

F., the first thing he did, was lose his badge. We told him a WPA crew'd found it in a gutter; he was always drunk and in a fog; he would remember up to a certain point but that was all.

XXX

You'd be surprised the number of women who live on streets next to the Negro neighborhood who keep big vicious police dogs. I've been bitten twice delivering mail to them. Some of the carriers won't go up to the door; they make the women come out for their mail. Most of them are old maids anyway.

XXXI

When you want to transfer, you go down to the union office and hand them your name. If you're a carrier, you go to the clerks' and they say, "Sure, sure, we'll take care of it." But they don't. They forget all about it. If you want to transfer, you have to find a man to transfer with yourself. The union won't do anything about it because it means losing a member.

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XXXII

Some old dame, she calls me from four doors away. "Carrier," she says, "come here." Imagine that: carrier come here! -pursing up her lips and being prim and commanding about it.

Me, I say, "If you want to see me, come over here."

Finally she comes over. She says, "Do you have my check today?"

I say, I don't know; I have WPA checks and old age pension checks, wait till I get to your door and I'll see. If you stop and look through your mail for anyone who stops you, you'd never get through, you'd soon be in a hell of a mess. We get hell if we do it. But that isn't what gets the dame sore. She says: - she says (she draws herself up straight and indignant) -she says: "An old age pension check! A WPA check!" She snorts. "I work for the Board of Education !" she says, "I'm a teacher !"

I knew who she was then and I said, "No, I don't have your check with me, it's in the relay box."

So she wanted me to get it for her.

But I couldn't do that, not till I'd got to it on the delivery. That'd be an hour or so, I told her. "Very well," she says, and she walks away—she's sore as hell, too.

A little later I'm crossing the street and she sees me, I haven't been to the relay box yet, but she thinks way be I have and comes on over. "Do you have the check now?" she asks me.

I said, "No, lady, I don't have your check yet. I haven't been to the relay box yet. I have my mail to deliver."

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You know what she says? She says, "Well, I can't wait any longer. I'll tell you what I want you to do. When you get my check, I want you to wrap it up and put a piece of string around it. The people I live with, they wouldn't steal it, but they are nosy. I want you to wrap it up and make a package out of it."

How in hell did she think I was going to do a thing like that?

XXXIII

One day I tore a woman's blouse right off her. It wasn't my fault; it was hers. She wanted her WPA check. I had it all right, but she couldn't wait. She sees a government envelope sticking out of the pouch and she says "That's my check," and she reaches right over my shoulder and grabs it. I grab it right back. She snatches it again and when I go to take it from her she steps back and I grab hold of her blouse instead and it tears in my hand. I got a complaint on that, but I talked my way out of it all right.

XXXIV

The last ten days I've had eleven complaints. Seems like we spend half our time these days arguing with people at the windows.

A guy comes in and wants to know what I did with his check a week ago Tuesday. And the dumb clerk at the window, he'll come back and say, "So and so's out there. What did you do with his check Tuesday of last week?"

I deliver maybe ten to twelve thousand pieces of mail in that time and he expects me to know what I did with that piece of mail a week ago Tuesday. All I know is, if I had it I delivered it. Someone in the apartment accepts it and then finds out it's not for him—probably knew it in the first place—and then hangs it.

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But what you can't beat into their dumb heads is the fact that in these boarding and rooming houses—you'd be surprised the crappy joints that call themselves hotels—you have to hand all the mail to the lady who runs that joint, or leave it in what they call the office. They seem to have the idea, that if they don't get their mail—especially when it's checks, the carrier's holding it.

But it's funny sometimes. These rooming houses. The landladies know just when the checks are due and they're out there to grab them. They get the rent out of those poor bastards before they give up the checks. Sometimes you find a landlady and maybe four-five WPA workers all waiting, and they start fighting with the landlady right off, even before you hand over the checks—they ask you for them and so does the landlady and they all begin screeching at you and at each other, all at the same time. You have to hand all the mail over to the landlady; she's the householder, and she distributes it to the guests. Guests! -that's a funny one.

XXXV

I've got a refugee from Germany on my route who meets me on the corner every day. He's a swell old duck, and funnier'n hell. He's always so damn anxious to hear from his family over there, he begins to hop up and down when he sees me coming. He doesn't ask for his mail ahead of time, though, just begins hopping from one foot to the other when he sees me. I tell him if I have anything, and then he walks down to his house and waits for me there. He's funny and pathetic, both, at the same time. He's an old man. A couple times I wanted to give him his mail at the corner, but if I did someone would be sure to see me, and I'd have to do it with everyone; I'd never get my mail delivered.

XXXVII

The men in the service and the guys on the police force, they're the aristocrats down in the Negro neighborhood.

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XXXVIII

They're always catchin' someone stealin'. I don't know why they do it; they know they'll get caught sooner or later. An' guys with years of service, too, even twenty-thirty years of service, they still try it.

XXXIX

That goof L., 'e's gettin' punchier every day, 'e' gettin' really wacky. 'E's a big goofy carrier. We was standin' at the registry window one day, an' he was signin' for thirteen registers. But 'e' didn't know how to spell "thirteen", so 'e turns around an' asks me. I tell 'im an' suicide. There've been three fellows killed theirselves outta our office the past few months. L., he says, "I wouldn't commit suicide." Ya oughtta see 'im talk—'is shoulders keep jerkin'. I think 'e's goin' goofy. "E says, "I wouldn't ever do that; there's too many women around." 'E says, "If I was to get fired from my job an' I couldn't find nothin' else, I wouldn't bump myself off. Nossir. Ya know what I'd do? -I'd get me a big wooden beak an' put it on my nose an' follow the horse like the birds. Ya notice they're all fat an' happy.

XL

The fellows believe so many guys commit suicide because of the pressure of the work; they're bein' pushed around. Let's talk about somethin' else, huh?

XLI

One old guy, every year, the day before Christmas he tips the carrier two bucks. But he doesn't care what carrier he tips. The first one he meets when he goes out on the street is the one he tips. S's been on the route for years. Three times in the last seven years the guy's tipped someone else, but S. didn't happen to be on when he came out the day before Christmas.