

[Mrs. Whelchel]

LIFE HISTORY

Subject:

Mrs. Sam E. Whelchel,

1391 Miller Reed Ave., SE,

Atlanta, Georgia

Mrs. Whelchel might be described as “good stable peasant stock”. “Reliable” would express her in a word. She is tall, large-boned, and has a definite tendency toward “heftiness”. Though her uncorrected figure is well under control at present, one can see her firmly-bulging calves are but a prelude to ultimate general massiveness.

We found her seated in a rocker on the front porch, comb in hand, finger-waving the hair of her little girl. On the banister beside her was a glass of water which she occasionally dipped the comb. With every movement of her body the chair teeter-tottered over the warped floor boards.

The house itself was a weather-beaten frame bungalow painted green and trimmed in white. It looked none too substantial and the disproportionately large gable that formed the roof of the porch seemed to put a threatening strain upon the slender two-by-four posts that supported it.

“Mrs. Whelchel pretended to a great show of self-disparagement when we explained our visit. “Lord, what's there to write about me?” But at the same time she obviously was pleased that we had chosen her and was just a bit fearful that we might take her mild

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deprecations too seriously. "Well, what do you want to know?" We suggested that she tell us about her family.

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"Well, my husband works over there at the Chevrolet plant." We had seen Sam Whelchel down at the union office. He was a great hulking figure of a man, full of laughter, and much like a big overgrown boy despite the premature grayness of his hair. "He unloads the supplies at the docks and before that he was a buffer. A buffer holds the fenders up against a wheel covered with some soft fuzzy stuff and polishes off the scratches. No, they don't do that anymore. I don't know why; maybe they jest don't care about the scratches.

"Sam's workin' five days a week now. He gets eighty cents an hour and works forty hours a week. But it's seasonal work, y'know. They're going full blast now because the new model's out, but he was off for three months this summer and jest went back in September. Yes, you sure do get behind when there's a layoff. I don't care how long he's been working, if he's laid off for just two weeks it ruins you. Oh, it's bad.

But we're gettin' by. We got two boarders, a couple of men who work over at the plant. We used to rent out that other side of the house; you see there's a separate door. But we jest got these two men now. Yeah, it helps a lot. We tried to make some money on chickens but we jest about broke even - maybe a little more, I don't know. We had about fifty, but we haven't got none now. Sold 'em and ate 'em. We lost twenty, but the eggs from the others made up for it.

"We got a cow too. And a calf. Oh, sometimes I sell some milk, but we nearly use it all. There's a lady up the street that sends down for some and if I got it I'll let her 3 have it, but if I haven't I don't. Sam says he wants to get rid of the cow, but I tell him it don't cost as much to feed her as it would to buy all the milk we need. Why I'd have to buy four quarts of milk a day and that'd be more'n she costs us. I tell Sam two quarts of milk would pay

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for her feed. We're gonna kill the calf, though, in a couple of weeks so's we'll have some meat.

"We've got three children. This is Tommy-Ann; she's the youngest, two years old. That's Bobby in the yard; he's four."

The children had fairly nice features. They were dressed in ordinary play clothes that were undeniably soiled, but no more so than could be expected. Bobby's haircut was of the soup-bowl fashion a thick growth abruptly ending at close-shaven temples and rounded across the back of the head. His left arm was heavily swathed in gauze and supported in a sling. His mother's voice was full of compassion as she explained, "He broke it last week. He was goin' down the back steps and fell all the way. It jest dangled, poor little thing."

"Phillips six; he's the oldest. He jest took the lunches down to his pa and the boarders. Yes, I send 'em down to the union office and they come over from the plant and eat 'em there. It's easier on me that way than if I was to put up their lunches in the mornin'. I don't have to get up so early. If I had to fix 'em in the morning I'd have to get up at five o'clock.

"No, we wasn't born in Atlanta. My home's in Banks County and Sam was raised in Jackson County. Oh, I don't know when 4 Sam first come to Atlanta. It was years ago. And then he went through all the states round Georgia working on one job or another. But I met him here and we were married here. I told him he went all around in a circle and come right back here to find me. No, he didn't have much education. He went to high school all right. I don't know jest how far he went, but he didn't go through it. He jest taught himself his jobs.

Right after I met him he go on as a lineman for the telephone company. Before that he was - what do you call it? - you know, fixed furniture up at the Western Union office here. Yeah, that's it, a refinisher.

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“Yeah, I finished high school. I went to Piedmont High School up at [Demorest?], Georgia. Now don't put that Piedmont College; I wisht it was. I finished in two years - I had had one year before that - and I got five more points than I needed to graduate. The children? Well, I jest hope we can send 'em through high school. ‘Course if any of 'em shows any special talent, we'll try to give 'em some kind of training.

Maybe a business school or somethin'.”

A visit from the insurance collector turned the conversation in that direction. “Yes, we got two policies on the children - two on each of 'em I mean. We're trying to catch up now. We hadn't been paying none since December. Sam comes under the group insurance at the plant.

Yes, there's a doctor there too, and they've got a nurse that comes around. She's nice, but I don't bother with her much. Whenever the children're sick I call a doctor. She came around when they had the measles, though, and mopped their throats and helped with their 5 medicine. It was nice too when I came back from the hospital when Tommy-Ann was born. She made regular visits.”

“Yes, we own the house. There's seven rooms. Sam's pa built us a sleepin' porch. We used to live up by the school, back over there on the hill. The lady what owned the house told us we could rent it for fifteen dollars a month for a year, but we hadn't been there six months before she told us she was gonna raise it to twenty-two-fifty in two weeks. There's somethin' I want to tell you. I don't know whether you're interested or not, but - - - we used to have a car but we ain't got it now. When that woman raised the rent we jest didn't like it. It wasn't so much the money - - ‘course that meant somethin' too - but we jest didn't like her doing us that way after a-tellin' us we could have it for a year. Well, we'd been wantin' to buy a house so I jest talked to Sam about it and he figured it was time to do it too. But I said there was one thing sure - we couldn't buy a house and have a car too. You jest can't buy gasoline and have a house too. Sam thought about that and then he said, ‘Well, I can't

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live in a car, so I'll let the car go and get me a house we can sleep in.' So we went down to see the real estate man and got a list of places they had for sale. And do you know, this is the first place we come to and I like it. 'Course we looked at some others, but I liked this one. The yard was nothin' but red gullies then, but it was near the plant, so we got a FHA loan and started the payments. In a little while now we'll jest be paying nine-fifty a month on it. Sam fixed up the yard. There used to be steps here in the middle of the porch, but he tore 'em down. He dragged those cement steps up from the walk and put 'em there at the side of the porch.

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We like it better that way, it's shorter across the yard."

We asked if we might go through the house and she agreed quickly, surprisingly enough without any of the expected apologies for the looks of things.

The living room was small and, although sparsely furnished, seemed overcrowded. There were three chairs, two of which were rockers dragged in from the front porch to protect them from the winter weather. There were also three tables, two of the small half-circle type. On each of these was a vase of dwarf chrysanthemums crawling with ants. On the lower shelf of one was a large brilliantly-colored glass pumpkin. The bigger table held a 13-inch world-globe, made in the modern manner with brown oceans and gray continents. Mrs. Whelchel beamed, "I was hopin' you'd ask me about that. We got it with a set of books Sam's buying for the children. It's the Book of Knowledge. Oh, the set costs eighty dollars and we'll have to pay four dollars a month forever. We couldn't afford it but Sam had been wantin' to get 'em some sort o' books and the man jest came at the right time, so Sam said he'd go ahead and do it. We could have got a shelf for the books instead of a globe, but we decided on a globe."

The floor was covered with a cheap linoleum square patterned in flowers predominantly red. Several tin cans and a battered coal-bucket holding planted geraniums, ferns, and

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[coleas?] were ranged along the baseboards, obviously brought in to protect them from impending frosts.

The remainder of the floor was littered with children's toys, papers, and cardboard boxes.

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The walls were in a sad state, being of bare plaster poorly applied and badly cracked. "We painted the walls when we first moved in. They don't look it now, but we did." They were, however, clean in comparison with the dirty bedraggled net curtains which sagged unevenly at the windows. In two corners of the room hung what-not shelves holding porcelain cats and dogs and a "Donald Duck", a pine cone turkey, and other knick-knacks from the five-and-ten stores.

But the chief architectural feature of the room, which held and appalled the eye, was a large double-decked mantelpiece, backed with a broken mirror. Its shelves were littered with various objects; a picture of the two older children, a tumbler from which dangled several strands of wandering-jew, a red statuette of a dog, an empty aquarium, and, on the upper shelf well out of reach, a Bible. Leaning against the mirror was a picture of several butterflies hovering above a clump of reeds. Highly colored, they reflected light in a manner which, though gaudily real, was nevertheless peculiarly metallic. We had noticed the same quality in a smaller picture of a ship which hung on the wall.

"I did 'em," said Mrs. Whelchel, smiling broadly and quite pleased with herself. "We been studying how to make them at our Home Arts Class.

Now, it don't cost nothin' except for the materials. It's a WPA class and we meet up at the school. Our Women's Auxiliary of the Auto Worker's Union has a Home Arts Committee and I'm chairman of it. We used to have the class down at the union hall, but that room's so dark and you can't heat it well and it seems like the men want it all the time, so's we asked the Parent-Teacher Association 8 if we could meet at the school and they said yes. We have classes twice a week from ten to one in the mornings. I haven't missed

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but one and I sure hated that, but there's so much to do, what with the children and the housekeeping and the Auxiliary. And tonight I've got to go to a quiltin' party. Monday night we're giving a supper here to demonstrate a set of aluminum-ware that Sam and I are trying to sell some of. We have to have eight couples, the company won't let us do it for less.

We went into what might be called a dining-room, but the incongruous furnishings indicated that it served a number of purposes. There was a green drop-leaf table toward one side of the room, and, by the window, a smaller table such as children use for their play-parties. "Sam's pa made that for the children. The other table isn't big enough for all of us." Placed in the middle of the room, so that we had to weave our way through, were an electric washing machine and an electric ironer. In one corner was a massive electric refrigerator with an old-model portable radio perched atop it. We remarked on these conveniences. "Yes, I couldn't do without 'em. There's always so much washing', and that ironer will do Sam's pants jest perfect. We sure do like that frigidaire. Sam says we'll never go back to a ice-box, no matter what else we give up." A negro maid was shoving the furniture around in an effort to scrub the floor. "She lives here. We got a back room for her." Out of earshot in the bedroom she continued: "I've been trying to find a white girl to take her place, since we want her to live right here in the house, but you can't find a good white girl for that sorta work."

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The bedroom was that of the boarders. The twin beds were neatly mad and covered with yellow candlewick spreads. "I make those too, but I didn't make those. I make all our clothes, even Sam's workshirts." She was wearing one of her own home-made garments, an olive-green cotton dress with cherry-red buttons. Although over-done with too many gores and pleats it was excellently sewn, with fine-stitched seams, cuffs, and hem.

She brought out some more of the pictures she had made. They were principally flower and bird designs, traced and painted in transparent colors directly on the glass. "It's called

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'Gypsy-glaze' painting," she explained. "You see, I put this gold or silver paper behind them and....." Her voice trailed off as she became absorbed in the effect thus produced. "The silver's better," she decided, "...the gold kills the green."

Taking advantage of her preoccupation, we made observations of the room. The one window afforded little light, so that the ever-present wall cracks did not show up so startlingly. In one corner was a table well hidden under its load of newspapers, union sheets, and Grier and Swamp-Root almanacs. Across the room in another corner was a two-doored wardrobe, flimsily constructed of some light-weight wood and stained a bad mahogany. Directly under the window was a comparatively modern foot-pedal sewing machine. "Yes, I sew and do all sorts of things in here in the daytime. The men don't care; they only want it at night." Their further indifference to the niceties of good housekeeping was indicated by the state of the mantelpiece. It was literally piled with trash; soiled handkerchiefs, wadded sheets of paper, an overturned glass from which spilled several 10 stubby pencils, two small tin boxes, and a large cardboard match box so piled with cigar and cigarette butts, charred matchsticks, and ashes that they overflowed onto the mantel and even down upon the hearth.

We noticed the nice gas heater in front of the grate and recalled a similar one we had seen in the living room. "Oh, we find it cheaper than any other heat. Yes, much cheaper than coal. We've got three of 'em. They keep the house plenty warm. Of course in real bitter cold weather.....but then nothin's no good then." We remembered the holes we'd observed in the dining-room floor, clean-out right through the linoleum as if for pipes, but we wondered about their being bored in the middle of the room. Of course the cold air rushed in through them and they should have at least been plugged, but at the time the Negro maid was using them as drains for her scrub-water.

The other front room, which opened through a separate door onto the porch, was merely a catch-all for odds and ends of furniture, rags, newspapers, broken toys, and empty picture frames. Placed in a "corner", but actually well-nigh filling the small room, was an old

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fashioned iron-framed bed, its bare mattress lying askew and drooping down to the floor. Piled upon this was the slats and side-boards from yet another bed. Its head and foot-pieces, over-bearing paneled affairs of dark-stained oak, were jammed up against the front door. The springs, originally stacked along side them, had slid comfortably to the floor, thereby pushing the Books of Knowledge, still encased in their shipping crate, half under a pile of 11 discarded clothing. The marks of the avalanching springs were scored deeply in the plaster, adding their scars to those of the omnipresent cracks. Mrs. Whelchel was at perfect ease among the confusion. She even managed a sentimental touch. "That bed," she said, "is the only thing Sam's got of his mother's. We did have Bobby and Tommy-Ann usin' it out on the sleeping porch until he broke his arm, but we were afraid they'd bump each other, so we put it in here and gave him another baby-bed."

She led us back through the house and out onto the sleeping porch. She was obviously very proud this and was pleased with our praise.

It was well-constructed in an ell-shape. It was all of white pine, unpainted, and still smelling freshly resinous. But like the rest of the rooms, this, too, was over-crowded and disordered, decorative arrangements being completely sacrificed for lazy convenience. In the main part of the room were two baby-beds and a large one. A third baby-bed stood in the "ell" extension, and beyond this, it's white enamel surface gleaming in the sun, was a huge automatic water-heater.

"And here's the bathroom," Mrs. Whelchel was saying, leading us into a narrow partitioned cubby-hole which housed the commode and a cemented shower. "When we bought the place it didn't have no bath and the toilet was just a lean-to built on the back of the house. One of the first things Sam did was to install the toilet and then we fixed up the shower. We don't like a bathtub."

On our way back to the living room we passed through the 12 kitchen. In a word, it was messy. Here plaster had completely given up the struggle and had fallen off in great slabs

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exposing the naked lathes. A few small hairy chunks still clung desperately and threatened any minute to fall into the sink which was already piled with dirty pans and dishes and [?] of water-soaked bread. On the table were sticky knives and spoons where three children had but recently helped themselves to peanut-butter and jelly. In strange contrast to the otherwise disreputable furnishings was the new white "modernistic" gas stove.

"Oh, nothin's all paid for, but we pay a little each week and if Sam don't get laid off it'll be ours some day."

This brought us back to the subject of her husband's job and, seated again in the front room, Mrs. Whelchel went on talking, her fingers busily crocheting a coaster. "Things was bad over at the plant before they got the union started. Sam's been with 'em for six years next February and he knows. Oh, they weren't as bad as some places I've heard about, but until they got the union the men had to do pretty much what they told 'em. You know the strike was in 1935. Yes, it was excitin' all right. Sam slep' in the plant six nights. He slep' in the tire racks. You know they're two decks and ever time the man up above turned over Sam says all the dirt and stuff would fall in his face and eyes.

Yes, we had the Women's Auxiliary then and we run a kitchen down at the office - the union office. We packed baskets of groceries for the families that didn't have anything to eat and we made 13 clothes for the children. Dues? Well, I only pay a quarter a month for the Auxiliary and sometimes I don't think its worth that, but Sam has to pay a dollar-and-a-quarter to the men's union. He said something about the quarter being a assessment for the charity work or somethin'.

Oh, yes, I think the union's all right; it's good. They couldn't do without it now. 'Course they have all their squabbles 'n everything, and they fight among theyselves, but Sam says it's a real [perturection?]."

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“Well, if you must, but come back to see us again. Come out Monday night for the supper if you can. Sam and I'll be glad to have you.

Don't know as I've really told you anything, but you're welcome to it. Goodbye. Yes, goodbye, goodbye.”