

[The Private Life of Big Bess]

N.Y. Prostitution There [?] would probably shape up better in a collection - a survey of a particular area or city- Beliefs & Customs - Folkstuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview 10

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

DATE November 11, 1938

SUBJECT THE PRIVATE LIFE OF BIG BESS

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant Social-Ethnic Studies: Life in Harlem Presented by staff-writer Frank Byrd.
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

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

NOTE: Present address of "Big Bess" (also known as "Scrappy") unknown. However, she can be contacted for further interviews at one of the following places — a basement place in W. 126th. St. near 7th. Avenue; at Joe's Place, 136th. Street and Seventh Avenue; or at Harlem Haufbrau, Lenox Avenue between 119th and 120th Streets...

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

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SUBJECT THE PRIVATE LIFE OF BIG BESS.

To most people, Harlem , wild orgies , and prostitution are synonymous. There is some actual oundation foundation for this fact. Many of the newspaper stories about so called goings-on in Harlem, however, are greatly exaggerated. It is true that Harlem probably has the greatest percentage of prostitution of all the five boroughs but the community itself is essentially a quiet, peace-loving, law-abiding place. Prostitution, to a great extent, is segregated to lower Lenox Avenue and that section of Harlem sometimes referred to as the Latin Quarter that extends from 110th street and Central Park North to 116th street, and from Fifth Avenue on the East side to Morningside Avenue on the West.

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Evidences of the “oldest profession” crop up in the most unexpected places, however, and almost every uptown street has known it at one time or another.

Women of minority races and economically bankrupt groups have always been exploited by materially stronger groups. Negro women are no exception to this rule. Many of them are forced to semi - or full - time prostitution in 2 order to have a place to sleep. This is nothing new to them. Many of their mothers before them were in the same predicament. This fact alone, makes the subject not only living but almost legendary folk study material. For that reason, I have undertaken the recording and reporting of some of the impartial facts regarding the activity in the “profession” in Harlem today.

The following is the first of what hope will be a series of personally related experiences of Negro girls in the racket.

This is the story of Big Bess — Lenox Avenue Bess, the cops call her- the gal from St. Louis with a “blues” all her own. Of courses you don't know her and it probably won't mean anything to you, but it makes all the difference in the world to me because I've been trying to figure her out ever since she hit this town.

Bess came to Harlem about sight years ago: just appeared out of nowhere, and her life, when she leaves the Avenue at dawn, has always been a puzzle to everyone. That is, it was until last night. What happened to make her break that long silence is more than I can understand. She was drunk, it's true, but that's nothing new to Bess. She's always drunk, more / or less. Drinking, with her, is like eating or sleeping. It's the most natural thing in the world. At any rate, it never seemed to make any difference before. Usually, when she's out on a bat, she sits at the corner table in the back of Red's place and stares mournfully off into space.

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Last night, however, she broke a precedent of long standing. She invited me to sit down and have a drink with her. It was a peculiar thing. For a minute, I couldn't believe that it had actually happened. It seemed more like a dream than a reality, yet there was no getting around the fact that the 3 place was Red's Joint and that it was Bess, the hardboiled, (who walks her beat rain or shine) inviting me, a man, to share her table and, what's more, have a drink at her expense.

Now Bess has never been known to give away anything in her life. At least, that part of her life that has been spent in uptown New York. She's especially tight on men. They are, it appears, her pet hate. Yet, she makes her living by being nice to them. In fact, hardly a day passes when she doesn't sleep with at least a dozen.

But that's getting ahead of my story. This baby that's supposed to have a heart that would make Hard Hearted Hannah look like an angel of mercy, breaks down and confesses to me that she's lonely. Lonely! Can you beat it? Well, you could have floored me with a feather. I sat there too dumbfounded to utter a word: hanging on the ropes, you might say, waiting to see what would happen next. Then she began to talk — about herself, and if you think you've been through the mill boy, just get a load of this baby's memo's. Here's some of it straight, just as she told it to me:

“You know, kid,” she said after the first couple of drinks, “I'm lonely tonight. Damn lonely! This business of mine makes you like that sooner or later. It's a tough racket and it's got so a girl can hardly make a decent living anymore. Too many girls. There ain't enough business to go around. In fact, it's lousy. There was a time when a girl could go out there and pick up a coupla hundred a week. But that was a long time ago. You gotta do some tall hustling to even get by nowadays. In the first place, the cops are getting so they want almost half you make for protection. Well, I don't mind kicking in with a few dollars now and then but this business of hustling for somebody else is a different story. Of course, there are a lot of cops who will let you off easy if you are willing to do them a little favor when they're off duty, but most of them can't be trusted. I know a kid who was run-in by a cop

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only 4 last week and he's one of the very guys she's been paying off to for the past coupla years. Anyhow, the last time she went out with him, he turned around and pinched her for soliciting. Now she's cooling her hips in jail. The trouble with that guy was that he was sore because he thought she was giving too much money to her pimp instead of to him.

Speaking of pimps, they're just as bad as the cops. I've never seen a lousier lot of bums in my life. I never got an even break from one since the first day I went into the racket. They're all alike. They put you in some cheap, two dollar joint or send you out to pound the pavements, then take every dime of your money and think you oughta like it. Once in a while, they go out and buy up a lot of hot clothes and act like they're doing you a favor by buying you some beat-up stuff with your own money.

I'll never forget the first pimp I had. His name was Charlie and I met him one night at the restaurant where my aunt had got me a job. That was in St. Louis. I was eighteen then and I lived with my aunt. My old man and old lady had died when I was just a kid. Anyhow, this guy Charlie looked like a good guy. He was a big black boy with a wide smile and a lot of gold teeth that flashed at you every time he opened his mouth. He was a swell dresser too, and free with his money. He gave me fifty cent tip the first night he came in there. After that, he used to come by every night for about two weeks. One night he asked me to go out with him. I went, and it wasn't long before I found out what a swell lover he could be. After that, I was a set-up for him. So when it finally dawned on me what his game was, I had reached the place where it didn't make any difference to me. I was willing to do anything he said. So I left home and went to live with him.

Not long afterwards, he put me in a two - dollar joint. I didn't like it there and told him so, but he always kissed me or petted me and said that 5 after awhile I wouldn't mind it at all. When he was nice and madelove to me like that, I forgot all about everything else and the only word I knew was 'yes! He could have made me do anything.

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I worked there for about seven months and one day one of the girls got drunk and told me to wake up and get wise to myself: that I was only being a sucker for Charlie and that he had four girls working for him in different houses about town. When I asked him about it, he told me to go to hell and mind my own business. Then, when I tried to leave him, he beat me up and gave me a couple of black eyes. After that when I came in at night, he took all my money and told me he'd cut my throat if I tried to hold out on him. He even used to come to see the woman that ran the house so he could find out how much I was making. This way, he was able to cheek up on me. Sometimes, though, I got a good customer who slipped me an extra five or ten. I kept this money and hid it until I had enough to go away. Then one day while Charlie was at the club gambling, I got on the train and went to Chicago.

I had never been there before and, at first, it was tough learning the ropes. But one night I went down to one of those black-and-tan joints on the South Side and got to talking with a girl who was one of the entertainers there and who, finally, broke me in right. She offered to introduce me to some of the boys but I told her I was through with pimps and wanted to be on my own. This good resolution didn't last long though and after three or four months, I wanted someone of my own in the worst way. It's awfully tough going home to an empty room night after night like that. If Charlie had come along then, I think I would have even gone back to him.

That's when I started drinking. It was the only way I had of passing the time. Night after night, I wandered from one cabaret to another, just drinking or sitting and watching the dancers. It was while I was out on one of these bats that I met Johnny. He was an awfully nice feller but it didn't take 6 me long to find out that he was in the racket, too. He wore alot of flashy clothes and spent money like it was water. I was too wise to fall for that gag, though. They all do that at first. Making a flash, they call it. That's just a bait to make a girl fall for them. So, when Johnny pulled this stuff on me, I told him to nix out. I wasn't

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interested. I liked my new freedom too well. But he must have seen something in my eyes that told him how lonely I was.

Every day, after that, he used to send me flowers, candy and presents. He treated me like I was a lady. Once he sent me a ring and when I had it appraised, the man told me that it was worth two hundred dollars.

The next time he came to see me, it happened. I just couldn't hold out on him any longer. He was so nice to me. He was that way for along time — But I knew it couldn't last. His way of doing things was just a little different, that's all. So, when he began hinting that he needed money, I told him he could have every cent I made. There wasn't any need for him to kid me. I knew what he wanted and was willing to give it to him. It didn't matter to me any longer, anyhow. Having money didn't matter, I mean. All I wanted was him, but I soon found out that that wasn't as easy as it sounded. There was too much competition for him. Everywhere we went, the girls I knew, and some I didn't know were making a play for him, right and left: especially some of those who made more money than I did.

Johnny was a good-looking brown-skinned boy with dark, wavy hair and eyes that did something to you. He was a nice boy, too. He had been to college and knew how to talk in that smooth easy way, so different from the rest of those roughnecks around Chicago.

It wasn't long before I knew he had another girl. Johnny was like that — ambitious — always wanting more than anybody else, and the best of everything at that. I was jealous and started playing around with some of his friends just to make him sore. One day he came home mad found one of them there with me. That night, he left. There wasn't any quarrel and he didn't beat me. Johnny was like that; always the gentleman. He was the only man I ever had who didn't beat me. He didn't believe in leaving enemies behind him. It was always his policy, he said, to part friends. When he left, he gave me a beautiful ring: a lovely diamond. I've still got it. It's the only thing I've got that's never been in the pawnshop.

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Bess held up a finger and Red came out from behind the bar and filled them up again. It was about the tenth time he had done that. When she sipped a little of her drink, she went on in the same low, confidential voice.

Being without Johnny was worse than I thought it could be. It finally got so bad that I went to him and begged him to come back to me but it wasn't any use. He had moved in with a little Spanish chick by the name of Consuelo. She worked in a ritzy joint and made a lot of money. If it had been anybody else, maybe I wouldn't have felt so bad about it but I never did like that little dame, even before I knew she was after him. She used to hang around the cabarets once in awhile, acting snooty and showing off her clothes.

When I thought of her with Johnny, I was almost crazy with jealousy. Once I went on a wild spree and didn't go to work for more than a week. When I finally showed up, another girl had taken my job. After that, I didn't try to find work. Instead, I just lay around drinking with a lot of bum friends who came around and sponged on me. When I got broke, none of them would lend me a dime.

One night when I couldn't stand it any longer, I went to the club where Johnny gambled and asked him to give me some money. He told me that taking money was his business, not giving it. I was so mad I went crazy I guess. That same night I got lousy drunk and waited in Lulu-Mae's place where I was sure he would meet Consuelo after she got off from work. When he showed up, I asked him once more if he would come back to me. He only laughed at me and I was so mad that I went half crazy. I opened my pocket-book and pulled out a little gun that I had been carrying around with me. When Johnny saw it, he dived after me and I pulled the trigger. The next minute, he grabbed his stomach and fell forward on his face. That's all I remember except that the cops came and took me away with them. I didn't care. If I couldn't have Johnny, I wanted to die, anyhow.

I told them that I didn't want a lawyer but they gave me one just the same, and he told me a lot of things to say but I wouldn't say anything. He was smart, though, and got the charge

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reduced from murder to manslaughter. When it was all over, they sent me up for ten years. But after doing five of them, I was paroled. Not long afterwards, I came to New York. That was eight years ago.

Well, New York's just about the same as Chicago as far as the racket's concerned, only it's harder to fix the cops here and especially the Health Department M. D's. who examine you when you're picked up on the streets. I've spent a lot of time on welfare Island 'taking the cure'. Even when I'm able to beat a soliciting rap, these doctors slap a positive-label opposite my name and the Health Department won't let me go until I'm O. K. Sometimes, it takes three, four, or even six months. In Chicago, it was different. All you had to do was get a smart lawyer who knew the ropes or a fixer who could put a few dollars in the right places for you. That way, you could get a negative label whenever you needed it.

I'm getting sick and tired of this life, but what can I do? I don't know any other kind of work and even if I did, where would I find it? Besides, once you get accustomed to seventy-five or a hundred dollars a week, it's pretty hard trying to get by on fifteen or eighteen.

Christ! I never did anything to deserve a life like this. God knows, 9 all I did was to fall in love with a man! There is a God, ain't there? I'm not sure that there's anything anymore except cheap women and cheating men and hell on earth. Or maybe there's a heaven and I'll go there someday.

God! I'd give anything to know what'll become of me!"

Well, boy, when I saw the pitiful look on that babe's face as she sat there trying to figure things out, I almost felt like bawling, myself. Instead, I put on the proper New York face and nodded to Red who was leaning on the bar.

"Bring the next one on me, Red." I told him.