

[Chris Thorsten]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 12 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 1, 1939

SUBJECT Chris Thorsten

1. Date and time of interview January 31, 1938 From 1PM to 3PM

2. Place of interview

Union hall, International Association Bridge Structural Steel and Iron Workers 247 East
84th Street New York City

3. Name and address of informant

CHRIS THORSTEN "lives somewhere uptown with his girl friend"

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

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

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

This union is housed in the Labor Temple building at 84th Street. Union Hall where men sit around is a bare loft some 30 by 50 feet. Three huge windows. Stacks of wooden folding chairs in a corner. Three long plain board tables on which men are playing cards. A few wooden benches along the wall. A small bulletin board with a few yellowed notices near the entrance. No other written or graphic material around the place. No other furnishings. Thirty or thirty five men sit around, some playing cards, others sitting alone. A few talking. There is a remarkable lack of talk. The men when they do talk, speak low and their mouths hardly open. Their voices seem to be pitched to the same note. Even the men playing rummy and pinochle on the tables, do not talk any more than the game demands. They are dressed for the most part in black or dark gray work pants, same color shirt, leather windbreaker and a cap. They have a common expression no matter what the cast or complexion of their features. The faces are solid, hard and set in straight deep lines. All have the same firm and taut quality about them. The postures of the men are also the same. They all have abnormally long backs and low waist lines. The line of the body breaks at the waist and then there is a long curve from the base of the spine to the back of the neck. The talk whatever there is of it is mostly about current events, the Hines case for one. You got a different reaction here than you usually got from a group of unemployed men. There is no sullenness, no resentment, no nervous tension, no moaning, easy confession talk, no plaint. There is a quiet, hard-waiting, a methodical sitting alone or with other men and looking at the floor or the ceiling and waiting. There are no postures of defeat or helplessness. No one sprawls around languishing. They sit or stand with a minimum of shifting around, movement or expression.

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FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 1, 1939

SUBJECT Chris Thorsten

1. Ancestry Scandinavian

2. Place and date of birth

On board a fishing boat moored to a dock in New Orleans some 51 years ago.

3. Family

“My step-mother was no good. She was a bitch. My step-father was all right. When I lfet home he gave me some money and a little pack. My father died at sea coming into New York. My brother was killed at sea too.”

4. Places lived in, with dates

5. Education, with dates No formal education.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Structural steel worker. Also Captain of fishing boats. Contractor in sand blasting business.

7. Special skills and interests

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8. Community and religious activities

9. Description of informant

200 pounds, 6 foot 2 flat, hard muscle. Back is bent in a long curve, no hips, long thin legs, hands are twice the size of ordinary man's hand, fingers abnormally thick and straight. A huge head sitting squarely on a lean young neck. Face set like iron but immensely amiable. [Clean?] gray eyes, fine well proportioned features solid and sharp. Reddish tan complexion, deep set eyes, graying blond hair.

10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE February 1, 1939

SUBJECT Chris Thorsten

I remember one job. It was the Parcel Post Building 43rd and Lexington Avenue, you know the one. I worked straight through five days and four nights. We made money in those days. I was with the hoisting gang. The oney time we got off was two hours for breakfast 1 hour for lunch, one hour for supper and one hour at night. Then I went into the saloon and I went to sleep. They couldn't wake me with a sledge hammer. I felt kinda ashamed

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of myself that I couldn't take it. Fallin asleep and all that. We wuz loadin 32 ton girders on that job. My friend Charlie Walker wuz workin with me. He wuz hookin on in the raisin gang. That wuz a good job, we made money on that job. I been in this racket 32 years. You wouldn't believe I wuz 51 years old. Take a good look. You wouldn't believe it would you. It's a hell of a racket.

Now take that Sixth Ave. ol job. Tehy're rushin that job. Plenty of man get killed there. The first man gets killed standin on the railroad tracks. Friday another man gets killed. The burners don't wanna go down. Down by Canal Street the first man was killed. They dropped a whole load of steel.

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I was on a job once and my friend George Morgan got killed. We're just sittin there jokin you see. He was tyin on a safety railin on the scaffold and a beam rolled. The next mornin we had to go over and work where he fell down. I had him in mind and I got stuck between a beam and I landed in the Good Samaritan Hospital. Three verterbrae broken and the collar bone. Here you can feel the bump where the back was broke. Go on feel it. You aint an Iron worker unless you get killed. He Sam I'll knock wood. I was never on a job where we lost a derrick. Yeh I know plenty of booms fold up. Everybody knows Lehman is behind this Sixth Ave. el job. They can't get men from the Union to go down there. Well they're rushin it. A man don't have time to watch out for himself. There'll be plenty of men killed before this job is over. If I had mondy money I'd put it in steel. They figure these things. Take a building like the Chrysler Building. Who gave the estimate on that? Take the Empire State Building. Who's gonna give the estimate on that. Take the designer. He's gotta know. What I mean is this. When they get up to the 86th floor. There's some tonnage in that bldg. and somebody gotta know where to put it. There was oney two of our men killed on that job. Men hurt on all jobs. Take the Washington Bridge, the Triboro Bridge. Plenty of men hurt on those jobs. Two men killed on the Hotel New Yorker. I drove rivets all the way on that job. When I got hurt I was squeezed between a crane and a collar bone broke and all the ribs in my body and three verterbrae. I was laid up for four years. I'll tell

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how I got hurted. There wuz an airplane factory cross the way from where I was working. The motors were runnin and you couldn't hear a thing. I had a sign up there and I was leanin over the rail and squish I got caught between the beam and the rail.

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Once down in Maiden Lane we wuz workin and we wuz singin dirty songs. You know It ain gonna rain no more no more. You know, I can't tell ya. Ya know, Mary went to the grocer to buy herself a duck, that kind of stuff and they had to send the cops up to stop us from singing because they could hear us. That place is like a canyon.

Once down in Georgia two colored ladies wuz walkin along the street. They see some of the boys comin out of the saloon. You know. Foolin around. One colored lady says to the one. Ya see dem guys. On Friday they walk a narrow little plank away up in the air and on Saturday, the sidewaik aint wide enough for them.

They drink like hell. There wuz Three Star Hennessy. He threw his card away and went snakin. Another place I worked there wuz two genuine snakes.

We aint got any stories around here. All we got is hard luck. If they'd give the damn work back to the contractors, we'd all be workin. I don't get this W.P.A. WPA set-up at all. You take Sam here. They fired him on the WPA for drinkin once or twice. That aint no way for them to act.

I ran away from New Orleans when I wuz a kid. Yeh I'm an old herring catcher. What can a man do if his whole family is herring catchers?