

[Negro Laundry Workers]

Beliefs and Customs - Negro 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 Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 15, 1939

SUBJECT Negro Laundry Workers

1. Date and time of interview February 10, 1939
2. Place of interview 254 West 120th Street, N.Y.C. Evelyn Macon
3. Name and address of informant Same
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. United Laundry Workers Union C.I.O. Harlem Labor Center 312 West 125th Street New York City
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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(Use as many additional sheets as necessary, for any of the forms, each bearing the proper heading and the number to which the material refers.)

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 15, 1939

SUBJECT Negro Laundry Workers

I rapped on the door at 254 West 129th Street, and a head poked through the door and suspicious eyes greeted me "Well?"

The greeting was rather abrupt but I was not to be daunted by any such trivial, "I would like to speak to Miss Evelyn Macon please."

"Frien' uh huhs?"

"Well-yes"

'Don't soun' like it. I'll see if she's in - to you.'" she flounced heavily down the hall.

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A tired-eyed, alight girl came to the door and smiled “Do come in. My landlady is suspicious of people who come looking for me at night - especially after the little trouble of a few weeks ago.”

She led me to a tidy little room, after learning my mission. It opened into a closed court which did not allow for much fresh ventilation but she did keep it as neat as could be.

I sat in the one chair; she sat on the bed. Evelyn produced cigarettes. “Smoke?” We both lit up and she deliberately blew smoke through her nose and calmly began, “So you want to know about conditions in the laundry where I work? Well - they're about one 2 hundred times better than they were two years ago, and they're still far from ideal.

First, let me tell you how conditions were two years ago - before our shop became almost one hundred percent Union, U.L.W.U. C.I.O. We only have one girl who is non-union in our shop now.

Before we unionized, I worked as a press operator. Slavery is the only work that could describe the condition under which we worked. I It was, at least fifty-four hours a week, speed up — speed up — eating lunch on the fly, perspiration dropping from every pore, for almost ten hours per day. When you reached home sometimes I was too tired to prepare supper. I would flop across the bed and sleep two or three hours, then get up and cook and then fall back into bed immediately after eating - you know how unhealthy that was.

The toilet at our place wasn't fit for animals, much less people, and there was but the one for men and women. When I complained the boss said “there ain't many places paying ten dollars a week now, Evie.” That ended my protests, because I didn't want to get fired.

The girls who worked in the starching department used to sing spirituals to enable them to breathe standing ten hours and sticking their hands into almost boiling starch.”

“Boiling?” I interrupted.

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“Almost. It’s so hot that they have to put camphor ice on their hands before they can put them into the starch. Cold starch is better but hot starch is cheaper - and you know the bosses, she winked. “As I said before the starchers used to sing, “Go Down Moses,” “Down By The Riverside,” and God the feeling they put in their singing. As tired as we were those spirituals lifted up our spirits and we joined in sometimes. That was too much pleasure to have while working for his money said the boss, and the singing was cut out.

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But, that was where the boss made his mistake. While singing we would forget our miserable lot, but after the singing was cut out, it gave us more time for thinking — thinking about our problems.

One day a fellow applied for a job at our place as a sorter and got it. We didn't think he would be there long because he certainly did no speed up like the rest of us. The boss saw him and asked him if he was sick. He said no. The boss told him he would have to work faster. He laughed at the boss and told him that a man was a damn fool to rush during the first hour when he had seventeen more staring him in the face. I guess the boss felt like firing him but he was a giant of a man and as strong as an ox. The boss let him slide. But he caused the boss to hit the ceiling when the lunch hour came. The boss came out and yelled “on the fly,” which meant for us not to stop for lunch, but to eat while we worked, as there was a rush.

“Bruiser,” the new fellow, picked up his lunch and went out. The boss raved and cussed almost tearing his hair out because “Bruiser” had caused the work to slow down. In exactly one hour Bruiser was back.

The boss charged up to him bristling with rage demanding “What the hell do you mean by going out to lunch during a rush?”

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Bruiser laughed at him and said he always ate his meals on time, we were sorry to see him go but the boss paid him and fired him.

That night when I got off and reached the outside a big man came up to me smiling. The face seemed familiar but I walked faster thinking he was trying to flirt with me. Then I recognized Bruiser. He said his main objective in getting a job in our shop was to see the lousy conditions in our place. He said he was a 4 C.I.O. organizer and he gave me a leaflet stating that he was trying to unionize our shop and that there was to be a meeting the following night.

As disgusted as I was with my lot, I don't have to tell you that I was the first one to reach the meeting. Almost everybody was there for the meeting within six months everybody had joined with the exception of one girl. She wouldn't join and when we persistently tried to recruit her she told the boss.

The boss was frantic. First he tried to intimidate, then he offered to start his own union "with the same stipulations in our C.I.O. contract, but we were not to be tricked by promises. We held our ground. He fired some of us - the rest walked out and we threw a picket line round the place. We had the one "scab" and the boss imported others, protecting them by sending them to and from work in cabs.

They messed up so that the boss called us back to work at union hours, union wages, and better conditions. "That's my story," she concluded.

"Why did your landlady lookeupon me with suspicion?" I asked.

"Oh, she smiled. "You know the bosses are die-hards even though the union is in our shop they still try to intimidate me into getting the girls to join the shop union. I told him to jump in a lake. He attempted to get loud and my landlady had her hubby put him out, since then

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she has been leary of anyone asking for me unannounced. I tell her when I'm expecting company.”

“So, it's like that, is it?” I asked.

“Yes, It's like that,” she smiled.