

## ["Race Horse Row"]

Beliefs and Customs — Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

\*\*\*

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview 15

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130 Street

DATE March 22 1939

SUBJECT "Race Horse Row"

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant
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
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

## Library of Congress

FOLKLORE

[md;]

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130 Street

DATE March 22, 1939

SUBJECT "Race Horse Row"

RACE HORSE ROW

Now "Race Horse Row" is not a swanky bookmakers establishment where the landed gentry places thousands on a horse's nose and scarcely flickers an eyelash as their choice runs second in a photo-finish.

Oh no—to the contrary, it is the three blocks between 135th and 138th Streets on the West Side of Lenox Avenue. "The Rows", tall unkempt, overcrowded, exorbitantly priced apartment houses seem to scowl down at passersby like an evil ogre.

There we will find a few of the vast army of Harlem's unemployed chancing their nickels, dimes, and quarters in a desperate last ditch gamble trying to raise the rent or food.

The stores around lure prospective buyers with flaming red signs, shouting out "bargains" in meats, most of which is unfit for human consumption. The groceries are old and stale;

## Library of Congress

the eggs are listed “Fresh from nearby farms” but in reality cold storage. There are vegetable stands and cut rate stores with everything cut but the prices.

2

The block between 136th and 137th Streets on the East side of Lenox Avenue facing “Race Horse Row” ironically enough is Harlem Hospital.

The casual observer, on this warm sunshiny afternoon sees a stream of toilers, domestic workers, with roomy bags containing their working paraphernalia; the coal worker sprinkled with flecks of the grimy material with which he labors, professionals with their brief cases all wending their way, presumably to their homes.

The keen eye detects more than the aforementioned; it sees neatly dressed, furtive looking men walking hurriedly up and down the blocks, in and out of stores, glancing quickly at pieces of paper and writing as they scurry. One of the men passes close to a hopeless looking woman and hands something to her, and whispers from the corner of his mouth, “Killer” Bogart style, “Yo hoss was secunt—even money. What cha want in 'd' nex'?”

The woman says “Dig me later—got a li'l figgerin to do.” She goes around the corner followed by five or six other women. The runners hurry on their way dropping a word here and there to persons who have placed bets with them. You can tell by the expression on a face whether the wearer has won or lost. A smile equals a win— a look of abject despair almost invariably equals a loss.

I watched the women until they had secluded themselves in a doorway and then I quickly made my way to that same spot.

They were dividing the winnings. The little woman who had collected the bet was saying, “[Heah?] Mary—your dime gits you twenty. Macie, your quarter gits you fifty. Your dime gits you twenty. Mae Lou and let's see, Kitty your thirty gits you sixty, an' my nickel gits me

## Library of Congress

3 ten. Where the hell did I git this extry dime?" She puzzledly held a dime in her palm. A little woman of about sixty snatched the remaining dime snorting, "Ah 'clare Mae Lou you fuggits me evah time. Ah b'lieve you sup'm a'gin me! 'Clare Ah does."

"Honey you ain' nevuh been so wrong—How you 'speck I got sup'm a'gin you w'en you is de one whut giv us de hunch to play de hoss an' save us all", expostulated Mae Lou with a hurt expression on her thin face. "Yo' dream 'bout yo' dead gram'ma sho' brung us luck", opined one. "Ah us dead set on dat fav'rite "Dead Ready".

"He's 'dead' aw'rite—an' ready fo' de glue fact'ry." "Who we gwine play in the nex' race?" asked Mae Lou. "I walk way up in de Bronix t'day—didn' git no job. On'y had one nickel. Thought I'd play today and git sup'm. Nickel ain' nuthin'"

"Yeh, les git together" The women dug into their bags and pulled out newspapers with the varied and vague selections of the so-called leading handicappers. Their brows take on heavy frowns as their lips move and they slowly mumble the names of the horses.

"Well ah think we oughta play 'White Hot' said Macie slowly. "Das a good name." Mae Lou thought differently, "I think we ought to play 'Veiled Lady' cause I et pig feet las' night and dreamed some funny, crazy things. I dreamed dat I was at a fun'al an' some mo' crazy mess. But y'all know dat w'en yo' dream bout fun'als dat dey's got to be ladies an' w'en dey's ladies at a fun'al dey got to have veils w'en dey's moanin', aint dey?"

4

"Mae Lou's right," chimed one "dat dream is clear as day. 'Veiled Lady' is de hoss allright"

"Come on y'all" said Mae Lou quickly putting her paper back in the bag, "better get our bets in. Near pos' time—thirty-eight de pos'. Hits thirty-three now. Come on."

"Y'all kin play who y'all laks but ah lak 'White Hot', said Macie—an' ah gut fif' cent an' ah'm gunna put it on his nose. Macie left them to place her bet.

## Library of Congress

“Kin ya bet dat,” said Mae Lou. D’as de way hit is wid some people—w’en she had huh li’l quarta she wuz glad to play in wid us. Now she gut nuff to play by huh se’f she gits real independent. We still gut nuff to bet tween us. Les play ‘Veiled Lady’ in de belly.” (to run second.)” The runner heard a low whistle and looked up. A woman leaning precariously out of a window on the top floor dropped something down wrapped in a piece of paper which was deftly snatched by the bet taker. He gave her a knowing nod. The next ten minutes seem to be an eternity as far as the betters were concerned. Some of them shifted nervously from foot to foot, others blinked and twitched spasmodically, some walked to and fro.

Macie came back, but got the cold shoulder from her buddies.

“If dis’n wins—a pot o’ greens and po’k fo’ me” said Mae Lou cheerfully.

“If he doan win—whut?” asked Macie,

“I won’t ast you for a looie” (cent) said Mae Lou angrily. Her buddies nodded agreeably.

5

“Y’all bes’ stop stabbin’ (playing long shots) an’ play hosses dat figger. Dat ‘White Hot’ don’ win his las’ two races an’ kin win a’gin”, said Macie philosophically.

The runner breezed by. The women waited with bated breaths. He almost passed the women, who looked at him with sinking hearts. He saw Macie and stopped, “Ah—you had a half on ‘White Hot’ did’n you?” He starts giving her first, some change, then two crumpled bills. ‘leven foty (eleven dollars and forty cents, for two dollars) de win. Git cha two-eighty for fifty cents.”

Mae Lou asked timidly wetting her lips ‘Veiled Lady’ git second?” “Nuthin’—out de money”, he answered cruelly as he went on his way.

## Library of Congress

“Ah sho' lakked dat “White Hot””, said Kitty, “Ah com' nigh playin' him ef it had'n been fo' Mae Lou an' her “Veiled Lady’.”

She looked angrily at Mae Lou, and the ones who lost their last, thoroughly agreed with her, because they “sho' lakked that 'White Hot’”. They left Mae Lou. The “runner” caught up with them as they were moving. “What cha want in de nex'?” The little woman who had been the first to attack Mae Lou, asked Macie sweetly “Whut we gwine play honey? Ah gut a thin.”

“We ain' gwine play nuthin” said Macie, “Un thu, you better tek that thin an' buy yu'se some hog ears—or sup'm else to eat.”

They blended in with the other passersby and were quickly swallowed up.