

**[David A. Lawrence]**

[????] Wash 9 - 21

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St. New York City

DATE September 6, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW FOR FOLK MATERIAL - David A. Lawrence

1. Date and time of interview

9/6/38 4 to 6:45 P. M.

2. Place of interview

Informant's room

3. Name and address of informant

David Arthur Lawrence 257 W. 111 Street.

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

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Mrs. Julia Talbot (another informant) 257 W. 111 Street.

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

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

Small bedroom off from the other six rooms of the modest apartment. Both informant's room and his landlady's apartment clean and filled with articles and pictures fashionable a generation ago. The informant's desk covered with writers' manuals, printing ink and notebooks. Pigeon-holes of desk filled with items which later proved to be old newspaper and magazine clippings. These clippings referred for the most part to Negroes and the history of New York from sometime in the 1880's until the present. There was a large, expensive-looking radio in his room. There was a stack of books on a trunk in the corner of the room. Hanging on a hook behind the door was a bulging brief-case filled, he told us, with two manuscripts. Novels which he has been unable to get published. The bed stood almost in the center of the room and was the only available place for the worker to sit, the informant occupying the only chair in the room.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 22nd St., New York City

DATE September 6, 1938

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### SUBJECT INTERVIEW FOR FOLK MATERIAL WITH DAVID ARTHUR LAWRENCE

#### 1. Ancestry

Father born in Guadeloupe; a French West Indian. Mother born in Pennsylvania; an American Negro.

#### 2. Place and date of birth

Summerville (?) N. J. June 10, 1867.

#### 3. Family

Widower, living apart from relatives.

#### 4. Places lived in, with dates

Came to New York from New Jersey when he was six years old. Has lived here ever since.

#### 5. Education, with dates

Grammar school education in New York; high school education received in Brooklyn. (According to informant no high school in N. Y. until 1893 or 1894.

#### 6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Worked as a butcher's helper and worked in a restaurant. Is unemployed at present. Writing has been his hobby since he was "so high".

#### 7. Special skills and interests

#### 8. Community and religious activities

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None now. Of advanced years and spends his time reading and writing. Is by denomination a Presbyterian.

### 9. Description of informant

Well-built and of medium height. Has a few gray hairs, regular features, chestnut brown in color. Very well preserved, appearing to be no more than 50. Arms and hands surprisingly young looking. Keen eyes

### 10. Other Points gained in interview

Not working because of loss of job but expect to get employment again. His family is long-lived and he expects to live as long or longer than an aunt who died in 1909 at the age of 83. He has a remarkable memory and appears to be as youthful in his thinking as in physical aspect.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St., New York N. Y.

DATE September 6, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW FOR FOLK MATERIAL, WITH DAVID ARTHUR LAWRENCE.

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When I first came to New York, Negroes were living downtown. I lived first on Cornelia Street and then I moved uptown as the community grew. 110th Street was the end of the city. When I was a boy I used to go fishing on the East River where 135th Street is now. That was all open ground then. Just before I got here (before he was born) they (Negroes) lived all down on Bleecker Street, lower 6th Avenue, Greene Street, Houston Street, all down in there.

I came to New York when I was a little fellow. There weren't any high schools in New York then. There weren't any high schools here until 1893 or 1894. DeWitt Clinton's the oldest high school here. They had business colleges - Bryant and Stratton-where they went to get what they'd get in high school. A business education that was, though. I believe Bryant and Stratton was the name of the school.

Teachers brought their students from all over to see the World Bldg. It was the highest building in New York. It was ten stories high and you could see flat roofs as far as you could see. (He stretched out his hand when he described the picture of the city from the World Bldg.)

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You couldn't go to high school in New York then. You had to go to Brooklyn and Newark to go to high school. Brooklyn had one high school, and Newark had one. There might have been another high school in Newark. It was 1893 or 4 when they had a high school in New York.

When the Brooklyn Bridge was opened you had to pay three cents to cross it until it was paid for. When they opened the bridge everybody went to see it. The pickpockets cried 'Bridge sinking!' and there was a stampede. They say it was the pickpockets. It took them 14 years to build the Brooklyn bridge and these bridges (he gestured toward the window) go up overnight. You had to pay three cents to cross the bridge. There were three sugar barrels of pennies. Do you know how many pennies in a barrel? (Upon being told that

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the worker did not know, he continued.) I've asked a lot of boys how many pennies in a barrel and they don't know. There's \$22,000 worth of pennies in a barrel. The World had a contest on it. I was in it — a bunch of us got in it. Some fellows and I changed a dollar into pennies and put them in the bottom of a sugar barrel, and do you know how much of that barrel those pennies covered? It covered a little piece of the bottom. We got tired of trying to figure out how many pennies it would take. A woman won the contest. She came closest. She was a school-teacher; I guess that's why.

No. New York isn't like what it was then. There was good times in those days.

(He was asked about the games which he played when he was a boy.) They played games - the girls played games — but I was a boy and I didn't bother with playing any games. The boys had their games and the girls had theirs. The boys played ball and went fishing.

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It wasn't like now. Boys and girls didn't play together then.

I had a book of old songs I just threw out the other day. All those old songs. "A Violet from My Mother's Grave". All those old songs. I kept the book up to last week and threw it away. The room is small and I accumulate so much junk.

I had an uncle in Libby Prison...I don't know where it was. Someplace down South...It was either for escaped slaves or to keep them from escaping. They used to talk about the Libby Prison a lot. They used to tell us stories about it...They used to talk about slavery. Some of them tried to forget about it. Some of them didn't care. They'd talk about it. Slavery's a mark on the white man. It's nothing for the Negro to be ashamed of. There were white slaves. Jews were slaves. They're making the Jews slaves more than ever over there now. My grandfather got to Pennsylvania on the Underground Railroad. My

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father was a black Frenchman. He was born in Guadeloupe. My mother was born in Pennsylvania.

(At this point the informant showed the worker his family Bible. The Bible was printed in 1822. Its pages were yellow and brittle. On the front cover written in fine, faded script were the informants grand-parents' names: Robert and Eunice Hampton and the date 1822. In the space provided just behind the New Testament title page were the records of the birth of his maternal aunts. Part of the record was destroyed by an aunt who did not want the record of her birth to remain in the Bible. The informant gave no explanation beyond "I guess she just didn't want it in there". Besides the names of his grandfather and grandmother (Robert Hampton and Eunice Marsh) was the statement "married 43 years". The births were recorded in the following order:

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Daughter Phebe — February 23, 1821

Son Josiah — January 14, 1823

Son Simeon Marsh — October 30, 1824

Daughter Jane Firman — May 29, 1826

Daughter Mary — February 14, 1827

Daughter Emmeline — August 2, 1829.

The remainder of the record was missing because further names had been on the page which one of the informant's aunts had destroyed. The informant had written in four names, minus the birth-dates, in an effort to keep the record complete. There were two or three pages of written material following the birth records but the writing was so indistinct with age that the content could not be ascertained. The informant thought that the writing had probably been done by the minister of the church which his grandparents

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had attended. The signature at the end of the writing was Rev. Sandeporte, as far as the informant and the interviewer could determine.

The informant stated that he had almost thrown the Bible away when he had thrown away the old song book. "I've been trying to find somebody who might buy it but I haven't had any luck. I'll keep it, though."

Throughout the Bible, there were folded bits of paper which were filled with four leaf clovers. "I used to walk over on the East Side and pick them up. Over by Poe's — I think it was Poe — birthplace. There're a lot of four-leaf clovers this time of year." After showing the interviewer the clovers, the informant took two clippings from between the pages of the Bible. "These are Sunday School lessons I had when I was about six or seven."

One of the clippings had a poem on one side and an illustration and on the other were the questions and a verse which was titled the "Whisper Song". The page had been cut so that it was impossible to tell whether the questions and answers were for home study or for group reading. For instance, one of the questions was: Who was Jeremiah? The answer was: A prophet. There was no indication that there had been a text from which the answer could have been ascertained.

The first lesson which the informant showed the interviewer consisted of questions and answers and the "Whisper Song" on one side. The one verse of the song was as follows: In the dark and stormy day, Lord, on thee, I call! Thou wilt keep me from all harm, Thou wilt hold me with thine arm, Lest I fall.

There was no chorus and from the position of the song, it appeared that it was sung following the question period. On the other side was the lesson proper. It was a poem, "Keeping House". It was illustrated with a picture of two small girls, one with a doll in her arms. The scene was an outdoor one. The poem follows:



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“Keeping House” Lilly and Nell are keeping house, Under the maple tree; And despite the cares Which seem to be theirs, They are happy as they can be. Through the leafy branches, spreading wide, The bright-eyed birdies peep- With the folded wing, As the mammas sing While rocking their dolls to sleep. But what will you do, my little ones, When winter comes, and the snow - When sere and brown Your roof flutters down On the carpet of turf below? 6 When your listeners leave for a fairer clime And the days grow shut and bleak— Ah! then you will hie To the home close by, And a warmer shelter seek. Thus may it be at the close of life When the winter of death draws nigh; May a welcome shine From our home divine, Our permanent house on high.

The text of this lesson was: “Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.”

The second lesson which the informant showed the interviewer was largely devoted to the story of “The Ugly Chick”:

“What makes it look so sorry?” said little Nannie, and Tommy smiled and said, “May be it doesn't feel very well.”

It had always been an ugly chick. All its brothers and sisters, and there were nine of them, were round and fat and happy, but this one was poor and moping, and always looked as if it had some thing on its mind and nothing on its stomach. Poor little thing! It was picked at and pushed away when the food came, by the other chickens, and even the mother hen did not seem to care much for it.

Tommy was often called the little doctor, because he wanted to help any poor creature in pain, and so it was not strange that his heart went out toward the poor, ugly chick. What do you think he did? He took it in the house and made a nice warm bed for it. Then he fed it and petted it, and never plagued it, and by and by it began to grow strong. One day he

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carried it back to the old mother hen, and you would hardly have known it from the other chicks, so plump, and smooth, and brisk it had become!

Whether the story ended there or had been continued on some page which the informant had not kept, the interviewer could not discover.

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We had Christmas Eve night at the church. We celebrated Christmas Eve night there. You know colored folks are not going to get up in the morning so we had the tree at church on Christmas Eve nights. The tree was decorated and there were small gifts. The boys got something like knives and the girls got dolls. The Germans were good at being Santa Claus and we thought Santa Claus was a German ... We believed in Santa Claus just like the children do now. We believed it for awhile and then we didn't.

There were ice-cream festivals, fairs and bazaars under the auspices of the church. We played all kinds of games then. They sold things. People brought all kinds of things to the bazaars.

They used to scare us with tales about black magic. We heard all kinds of stories about black magic and witches. They used to tell ghost stories and Indian stories. We saw the Indians on Staten Island when Buffalo Bill brought his Wild West. We saw Pawnee Bill's Wild West. I used to see Indians all the time. They used to scare us with stories about Indians, too.

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE New York

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NAME OF WORKER Dorothy West

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St., New York, N. Y.

DATE September 6, 1938

SUBJECT INTERVIEW WITH DAVID ARTHUR LAWRENCE

Mr. Lawrence had talked at length, although not entirely about his past. It was his dinner hour, and the interviewer prepared to leave. She asked if she might call again within the next days. Mr. Lawrence said that she might drop in anytime. He was very friendly to the interviewer and asked if she wanted the material for a story. The interviewer took this opportunity to take out the form[?], Notes had already been taken on yellow paper and the informant had shown no objection to this. However, when told material was not for the interviewer's personal use but for the W. P. A. Writers' Project he he showed some reluctance to divulge anything further. Whereas he was at first agreeable to a second visit, his attitude thereupon changed. The informant did, however, finally promise to "think back" and try to remember specific games, songs which he sang when he was a child and the stories which his parents told him. The interviewer will call on him again next week.