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[Newsboys]

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Project worker Abe Aaron

Project editor

Remarks

W3612

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview Newsboys

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words

2890

Jun 14 [?]

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave., Chicago

DATE May 18, 1939

Library of Congress

SUBJECT Newsboys

1. Date and time of interview May 12 through May 17, from 8:30 A.M.
2. Place of interview Informant's home, taverns, handbooks, on the job (the informant, it will be recalled—see form A of May 4th—, is a signpainter).
3. Name and address of informant Philip Marcus 4523 S. Cottage Grove Ave., Chicago
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.

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.)

Form B

Personal History of Informant

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

Library of Congress

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Ave. Chicago

DATE May 18, 1939

SUBJECT Newsboys

NAME OF INFORMANT Philip Marcus

1. Ancestry See Form B of May 4, 1939

2. Place and date of birth “ “ “ “

3. Family “ “ “ “

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

5. Education, with dates “ “ “ “

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates “

7. Special skills and interests “ “ “ “

8. Community and religious activities “ “ “

9. Description of informant “ “ “ “

10. Other Points gained in interview “ “ “

FORM C

TEXT OF INTERVIEW (Unedited)

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

Library of Congress

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron

ADDRESS 5471 Ellis Avenue

DATE May 18, 1939

SUBJECT Newsboys

NAME OF INFORMANT Philip Marcus

I

When papers was a penny apiece was the days when I was selling them. I was a little lad then, and I lived on the streets practically all day, days and nights both. We used to sneak in the burlesque houses or the all-night places on West Madison Street and sleep there. The only trouble with that was the ushers would come around every hour or so and throw the flashlight in your face to see was you awake. You wasn't supposed to go to sleep. Sometimes they three threw us out.

We had a lot of dodges. A penny was a lot of money to us, and a nickel was a hell of a lot. A dime or a quarter was a fortune.

I practically grew up on a pool table.

Here's one of the dodges us newskids used to have in those days for making money.

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You know how a guy is when he buys a newspaper. He's a fan of something or other, baseball nine time out of ten, and he's got the boxscore habit. You hand him a paper, and right away he's looking at the boxscore; he's holding the paper in one hand, reading the scores, and the other hand's stuck out for the change; he takes his change by ear, see, by ear and touch if you get it; he's reading. So me, I lay a penny in his hand if it's a nickel, say, that he gave me. Then I click the second penny on the first and count two.

And the same with the third penny. Each time the penny drops on the other pennies in his hand. But the last penny I hold onto; I click it on the other pennies, but I don't let go on it, and he thinks he's got all of his change. Nine times out of ten he sticks the pennies in his pocket without even lookin' at them, an' that's the dodge.

II

Here's another petty larceny trick we had. We'd pull it at car stops where they had stop lights.

When the streetcar was waiting for a red light to turn, we used to run up alongside the car and the people in the car would stick their hands through the windows for a paper. He'd stick his hand outside the window and maybe he'd have a nickel or a dime in it instead of the change, the penny, and later, when the war started, two pennies.

If he gave us a nickel or a dime, it was just too bad. We'd fumble, we'd try and we'd fumble—boy; we sure had to dig deep for that change—and we'd run along beside the car when it started, but—it never failed—we just couldn't reach him, the car would be picking up speed and we just couldn't reach his hand with that change. It never failed to happen. But I've had guys got off the car at the next stop and come back and make me give them their change. They were wised up, I guess, or maybe they'd sold papers once themselves. Anyway, I've had that happen to me.

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III

The big guys thought this one up. We pulled it every Christmas.

They'd have cards printed up, and they'd sell them to us little fellows for a nickel apiece. Let's see if I remember just what was on those

Somethin' like this:

“Christmas comes but once a year, “And when it comes it brings good cheer; “So open your purse without a tear, “And remember the newsboy standing here.”

Well, we paid a nickel apiece for those cards, and whenever we sold a paper we'd hand the card to the customer. Sometimes it was good for as much as a quarter. But this was the payoff. We always asked for the card back. They'd give us something, and they'd expect to keep the card, but we'd ask for it back; we'd use the same card over and over again—it would cost us a nickel to get another one. We called the big guys the “midnight cuckoos” — I don't remember why.

IV

It's funny what crazy things a guy will do when money's so important to him. I remember once Manuel (the narrator's brother—A.A.) found a dollar bill on the floor of a saloon. I spent the rest of the night going in all of the saloons. I couldn't find a damn cent.

V

The newsboy was always a good source of information in those days. Like the cops are today. Since the automobile come in, you'd be surprised to know how many kinds o' questions are asked of the cops. But the newsboy was the original. You could find out from us almost anything you wanted to know, where the saloons were—only you didn't have to ask much about them—, the location of the gambling joints, the whorehouses, almost

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anything, from the location of the First National Bank to the best place to get a piece of tail cheap.

VI

Did I tell you the one about the time we tried to get the bathing suits, and didn't?

You know what an island showcase is? This was twenty-twenty-five years ago. You've seen these stores with two big show windows outside the door and the door set way back, maybe fifteen-twenty feet or so. Well, in that entrance, between the windows up to the door, the stores used to have high glass showcases—they were almost locked, with a padlock—they they were called island showcases.

They were permanent showcases that stood in the lobby. You still see some of them.

Well, this was in the summer. There was three of us that always palled around together. There was Harry and Benny an' me. Harry wasn't around this time though. There was a place about a mile away, in the Italian neighborhood, where we used to go swimming. It used to cost us a penny apiece. It was hot as hell that day I remember, and we wanted to go swimming like all hell. Only we couldn't, because we didn't have no bathing suits. In this here island showcase I'm telling you about, Benny an' me, we saw something that just fit the bill, bathing suits, lots of them, all kinds, and we went over an' looked them over an' picked out the ones we wanted—one one for Harry too; Harry wasn't with us, I think I told you.

The payoff was the padlock on the showcase wasn't locked; so Benny an' me, we made out plans, which ones to get an' everything.

Well, it was a long vigil. All evening and till about four o'clock in the morning. We knew enough not to take any chances. Every time we were ready to raid the case someone

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would come stragglin' along, sometimes some cop on the beat, sometimes some palooka out walkin' the streets—it wasn't till about four before we got the chance we was lookin' for.

So we rushes over. The padlock ain't locked, an' we take it off an' go to open the case. An' I'll be a son of a bitch! - the goddamn thing had an inside lock, an' it was locked! We was so mad we started to cry, both of us. We stood there blubberin like a coupla babies. Jesus.

VII

Believe me, us kids used to be on the lookout; we was ready for anything. An' there wasn't very much got by us either.

I remember once I was in a one-armed restaurant—the place did a thriving business, an' along about midnight, 'specially when it was cold, we used to go in to soak up some heat. They used to kick us out, but sometimes we'd buy some coffee—and, an' then they'd have to let us stay a while anyway.

Well, as I was sayin' I was in there one night—it was maybe twelve-one o'clock—when a guy comes in with what looks like a laundry package under 'is arm, an' I'm on the make as usual, alert. It looked like a laundry package, but it was all wrapped up nice an' I figured it wasn't no laundry. He got him something to eat; and 'e walked over to a seat; an' this package, he sat on it.

Me, I go buy myself a cup of coffee, an' I sit down in the seat right next to him. I keep dawdlin' an' dawdlin' over my coffee, an' I almost don't make it last. I figured maybe 'ed forget that package. I kept busy readin' one of my papers. It must've been along about one o'clock in the morning.

Sure enough, when 'e gets up, 'e forgets to take the package, an' quick as a flash I grab it an' put it in between my papers, an' then I walk out. When I open it up a few blocks away,

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there's a classy silk shirt. I figure it must-'ve cost seven-eight dollars, maybe ten. I couldn't do much with a thing like that.

But I get a bright idea. It won't do me no harm, I figure, to be on the good side o' one o' the circulation men, an' I offer it to 'im. He likes it an' he says, "what do you want for it?"

I wasn't figurin' to sell it; I'd meant to give it to 'im, figurin' it wouldn't do no harm to be on the good side of 'im that's all. But when he said that, me, I say, "We'll call it a hundred an' fifty sheets." That'd be about ninety cents. No! - in those days the war was on an' the price was raised to a penny, to us kids. A dollar an' a half was all I got for it, in papers.

VIII

There was a certain code among us kids, an' the guy who didn't live up to it, that was just too bad for him. You observed it, or else!

One of the things was, you couldn't sell on the corners where the big fellows was. There wasn't stands in those days, they just piled the papers on the curb an' put stones on top of 'em, an' every busy corner was held down by some big guy. Us little kids, we ran around the streets, an' we wasn't allowed to sell on any o' those corners. If we did, we had to buy the paper back from the guy whose corner it was; an' besides that, he'd boot us a good one.

We were little kids. The women, especially, would buy from us in preference to the big guys, not realizing, o' course, what they were lettin' us in for. I remember one time. I sold a paper an' I had to buy it back. But I got a kick that time that hit the bull's eye. It was so terrific I felt it for days. But not only that. Every time I saw that guy, I would feel that kick.

IX

This is about that code again. The corners, the good spots, I told you about — the big guys who were on them, they'd make up with one of the younger fellows in the newspaper

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salesroom before going out on the street to buy them out at about midnight or one a.m. when the final lull begins. One of the big guys would say to one of the little guys, "Hey, punk, wantta buy me out tonight?" An' the little guy, if he said yes, it was his ass if he didn't, no matter how many papers the big guy had left over. Only this time, it was the wholesale price, not like when ya got caught selling on a corner an' had to pay what ya got an' take the swift kick besides. No matter how often ya sold on the corner, there'd be the big buy standin' right behind ya, an' ya got what was comin' to ya; right then or maybe later—ya always got it.

Well, if ya didn't keep your promise to buy the guy out, it was too bad. That was the code.

I'd made a deal with a guy; I'd said I'd buy 'im out. Along about twelve o'clock, when I looked at all the papers he had left, there was more than I thought I could sell. But there wasn't two ways about it, I hadda buy them, an' I did. But I started to bawl.

While I was standin' there cryin', I sold all them sheets. There I was, bawlin' like hell, an' I ended up askin' all the other kids when they straggled by if they wanted to sell me any o' their sheets, sayin' "If you're stuck I'll buy some," and cryin' like all hell all o' the time.

X

When I was sellin' papers, if there wasn't anything startling we could yell about to help sell the papers, we always got around it this way: we'd look all over the sheet lookin' for a story from Washington, anything at all, no matter what it was, an' then we'd yell like hell, we'd yell:

"Read all about the White House Scandal! All about the White House Scandal! The White House Scandal! Read all about it!"

XI

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Did I tell you about the time the three of us were locked up the same night, Manuel an' me an' Izzy? (Brothers of the narrator—A.A.)

I was the oldest an' Izzy was the youngest. Izzy's dead now. How he happened to be with me that night I don't know, because he was a real little guy. This happened about—well, about two o'clock in the morning I guess.

Well, when one-two O'clock in the morning rolls around a copy happens to see Izzy—he's standin' off by himself to one side—an' because he's so little, picks him up. Manuel says to me, "You'll get hell, Phil, if you don't get him." An' that was right, because I was the oldest one an' I was responsible. So I goes to the station.

I say to the desk sergeant, "I'll take him home, I'm his brother," but the desk sergeant picks me up too. While I'm standin' there, the sergeant says to one of the cops, "there's a kid lookin' in the window. Go out 'round the back an' bring 'im in." So there was the three of us; it was the big roundup; and away we went to the cooler.

They called up the old folks, an' my mother came down to get us. She talked to the sergeant to lecture us so we'd come in off the streets at night, an' he made his lecture so good, especially to me, my mother got sore at me an' wouldn't take me out, only Izzy an' Manuel. She refused to take me out an' I was left there for two-three days.

XII

The prize one is the one about the time the two cops searched me for money an' couldn't find it on me. I was eight years old then. I run away from home.

I was hustlin' papers; it was on a Sunday, an' me an' another kid, we was workin' a roomin'-house neighborhood. Two guys call me up. One of 'em's got a Sunday hard-one, an' he wags it at me. Me, I'm on the make, but not that way, an' I take a look around. I spy a purse that belongs to one of the lads an' I take it. When I get downstairs I show it to the

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kid who's workin' with me, an' he wants a cut. I wouldn't give it to him. There was about twelve dollars.

I took the money an' the purse an' the rest of the stuff that's in it I throw in an alley. There's a wind blowin', an' all the papers that was in the purse blow away.

Pretty soon, along comes these two lads runnin' after me, an' there's a couple o' cops with them. "He's the one, he's the one," one of the lads says, pointin' to me, an' one o' the cops, he grabs me, an' the other cop grabs the kid's that with me. I play dumb rummy, an' I don't know what the hell they're talkin' about. But the other kid, he owns up he saw the purse an' the money on me, an' they start searchin' me.

Well, they go through every inch o' my clothes an' they don't find nothin. The two lads, they don't care so much about the money, they say I can keep that, only they want the papers that was in the purse, papers that was important, and railroad tickets. I just played dumb. But the kid who was with me, he'd seen the money, an' I called him a liar an' told the cops, "All right, I took the money, huh? Then I oughtta have it on me? Why don't you find it then? If I aint got it, then I couldn'ta taken the purse, could I? An' they couldn't find the money. So after a while they let us alone, an' we go about our business selling these papers.

Me, I'm fellin' pretty smart an' laughlin' to myself at this kid. An' I was plenty sore at him because he'd snitched. So I get back at him. I roll down the sleeves of my shirt an' pull the money out. I'd flattened the bills out an' rolled 'em up in my sleeves. Seein' I was only about eight years old then, I don't know how the hell I got the idea to do that. "See smarty, "I said, "if you hadn't been so smart an' gone an' snitched, I'd give you a cut outta this. But you know what you can do, don't ya?" An' I put the bills back in my sleeves again an' rolled them up.

While I went in a house to sell a paper, this kid, he runs back an' gets the cops an' they pinch me. I was sent to the detention home, the reform school for a while for that.

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XIII

This swimmin' pool I was tellin' you about. We used to go there in a crowd. It was about a mile away, in an Italian neighborhood, an' it cost a penny to swim there. One day I missed the gang an' I thought they'd went down to the swimmin' pool, and so I goes on down by myself, figurin' that I'd be seein' them there. Well, they wasn't there when I got there, an' they didn't come; but I figured they would, so I hung around a long while. Pretty soon the other kids, they notice I'm there all by myself, an' they start gettin' tough. I get my clothes on in a hurry.

Pretty soon I start walkin' away, real bold, not noticin' how these here Italian lads are gangin' up on me, pretendin' not to see. Then they start stoppin' me, an' they shove me an' bradish pocket knives that they all seem to've got. Me, I look around for a way out.

Near to the swimmin' pool, there's a candy store, an' I slip in there. I hang around a long time tryin' to figure out how to get o' this mess I'm in. When the guy starts lookin' at me too hard I buy a penny's worth of candy an' go on hangin' around in there until I figure he's ready to throw me out even if I did spend a penny. The Italian lads are hangin' around outside—they know I've gotta come out sometime—an' I still don't know what to do.

When I get out on the street again, they're all standin' in a crowd not far off. Well, I don't have time to think, an' I don't know what to do, so I do something' without takin' time to think. I step right up to them an' say, real tough, "So yuh wantta fight, huh?"

They say, "Yeh. Sure." They wantta fight.

"All right," I say, "I'm willin' to fight yuh." An' I call out, "Hey, gang, These guys wantta fight." An' I start to callin' them by name. There's lots o' people on the street up ahead an' these Italian kids don't know but what maybe my gang is up there the way I'm lookin'.

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So I keep sayin' "Ya wantta fight?" an' I keep callin' to my gang that I pretend's up ahead, an' all the time I keep edgin' around them till there's none of 'em in front of me, all behind. Then I call out real loud to one of the fellows I pretend's up ahead of me an' start to run like hell. They're so puzzled that for a minute there they don't know what to do, an' by the time they decide to chase after me I'm runnin' with a good head start. I didn't stop running' till I'd got all the way home.

XIV

One of our favorite stunts, if a guy didn't have anything smaller than a nickel or a dime or a quarter or something like that was to plead we had no change. Then we'd go to some convenient saloon—there was always a saloon handy—and these saloons, they all had two entrances. They guy would watch us go in one entrance an' stand outside it waitin' for us to come out with his change. But we'd slip out the other entrance an' go lookin' for another guy who needed change for a nickel or a dime or a quarter or somethin' like that.

XV

There was another way us kids used to raise money. We'd go to the market an' get these big empty barrels—not the casks, but barrels. Us kids could roll them easy, an' they were light enough so the bigger guys, they carried them. They rolled nice an' easy, an' the meat-packers, they paid us a nickel apiece for them, five cents a barrel.

Naturally, we couldn't find enough of them, so we started stealin' them. We'd steal them from one meat-packer an' sell them to another.

We was always on the make. We had to be.

XVI

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I made friends once with a kid who had a swell home. I can still remember it, the home I mean, an' the mother; I don't remember the kid at all. An' I don't remember how I came to make friends with him. All I remember's his home an' his mother.

Well, I remember one day I was playin' with him, up in his home. Gee, it was a swell layout. It was up on the third floor, a flat on the third floor, an' we had a little puppy that we was playin' with. That's the first memory I have of bein' happy. I guess we was makin' a lot of noise.

Anyway, after a while, the lad's mother comes by, an' she says:

“Why don't you children throw that dog out o' the window?”

She didn't, mean nothin' by that: she was only jokin', tellin' us to be more quiet. But me, I'd never been in a house like that, or seen a woman like that, an' I'm so happy an' so anxious to please, I pick up that goddamn little pup and' walk over to the window an' throw it out. Holy Jesus! I c'n laugh about it now; but you can tell the sort o' kid I was. I can still see that pup fallin' down to the street. It was a pretty cuss. Jesus.