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[Packinghouse workers]

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Title (Packinghouse workers) - Marge Paca. Pat Christie, etc.

Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 6/15/89

Project worker Betty Burke

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Project editor

Remarks

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Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A

[??]

Circumstances of Interview

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

JUL 6 - 1939

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 S. Troy

DATE June 15, 1939

SUBJECT (Packinghouse workers) - Marge Paca, Pat Christie, Margaret Huegler, Stella Janacek, Agnes Sullivan, Stanley Kulenski, Helen Wocz.

1. Date and time of interview from May 26 - up to June 15
2. Place of interview Packing house, Union Headquarters Sikora Hall, 4750 S. Hermitage.

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3. Name and address of infor[mant?]
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.

Packinghouse worker

Marge Paca, 24 years old

Irish, married to a Pole union member

Betty Burke

June 15, 1939

Text of Interview

The meat specialties, that is about the coldest place in the yards. That's where they prepare medicinal extracts from meats, for hospitals, I guess. Anyway, they have a room there that's 60 degrees below zero. Nobody is supposed to stay there longer than 3 minutes, but some of the men go in there for 15 minutes at a time.

I used to have to pack the brains in cans. They would be frozen stiff and my nails would lift right up off my fingers handling them. It's always wet there and very, very cold. I had to wear two and three pairs of woolen stockings, 2 pairs of underwear, a couple of woolen skirts and all the sweaters I had, and on top of that I had to wear a white uniform. My own. But I couldn't stand it there, it was so cold. It's easy to get pneumonia in a place like that.

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In cleaning brains you have to keep your hands in ice cold water and pick out the blood clots. They have the most sickening odor. Cleaning tripe, though, that's the limit. Rotten, yellow stuff, all decayed, it just stank like hell! I did that for a few weeks.

Then I worked in the sausage department. In the domestic sausage. We'd have to do the pork sausages in the cooler. Sometimes we wouldn't be told what kind of sausage we'd have to work on and then when we'd come to work they'd say 'pork for you' 2 and we'd have to throw any dirty old rags we could pick up around our shoulders and go to work in that icebox. If they had any sense or consideration for the girls they could let them know ahead of time so that girls could come prepared with enough clothes.

In summer sausage, they stuff very big sausages there. That's very heavy work. A stick of sausage weighs 200 pounds, five or six sausages on a stick. They have women doing that. It's a strong man's job and no woman should be doing that work. The young girls just can't, so they have the older ladies, and it's a crime to see the way they struggle with it. On that job I lost 27 pounds in three months. That was enough for me. It's a strain on your heart, too. Women got ruptured. They pick the strongest women, big husky ones, you should see the muscles on them, but they can't keep it up. It's horses' labor.

In chipped beef the work in much easier. You can make better money, too, but the rate has to be topped, and it's very, very fast work.

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Packinghouse worker

Pat Christie

Irish American-25 yrs.

Betty Burke

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June 14, 1939

Text of Interview

First I was in pickled pigs feet, where they pack and prepare only pigs feet. I'd have to bone them, wash them, wash the jars the stuff came in, and set them up on a table. I'd handle five jars in one hand, a finger holding each one. Quart jars they were, and the girls on that job would rush past each other with ten quarts of glassware stuck on the ends of their fingers, looking like a Buck Rogers creation.

You know how the tops of glass jars are, sharp and jagged edges, and we'd cut ourselves all the time. Then besides that, after that we had to take these jars, filled with pigs feet over to the vinegar table where we put in the vinegar solution. And when that vinegar juice slops onto the cuts between a girl's fingers, wowie! That really hurts!

We had to argue and talk and fight before they furnished us with rubber gloves on that job. And then they only furnish two pairs a week and the girls have to buy at least five pairs because they wear out a couple pairs a day when there's a lot of work.

I got a skin rash working in that vinegar. It splashes in your face and your eyes no matter how careful you are. I got big red blotches all over my face and neck and arms from it. It took me six months to get rid of it and I had to quit that job. They usually put the colored girls on that vinegar job. Me and another girl used to [do?] a lot of talking and they knew we were in the CIO union so they stuck us on that job to get on our nerves and maybe make us quit. Well, it worked, but not until 2 all the girls had union cards, so much good that one was. All the colored girls, they jump at the chance to be in the union as soon as they're asked. It's different with some of them. The Polish girls, some of them they'll say, "Ah, let my husband join. Let my husband go to meetings. Let the men do it, it's not for women to do.' But once they get interested, boy, oh boy, they'll get up and talk their hearts out and they'll fight like troopers for the union. Once they really get the idea and the feel of

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the union, you can't hold them down. Some of the most religious Polish women in the union are the most surprising. They really go to town when they get started with the Union.

And the Mexican women, they're all fighters. They know their rights and they fight for all they can get, every time. A boss can't say boo to them, they'll come right back at him. You know sometimes the foremen try to push them around, and call them Negroes. There's nothing makes them so angry and they won't let anybody get away with that, if he's the super himself. They're very proud of being Mexican.

I worked in Cudahy's and Wilson's sausage. Wilson's that's a wet floor, and greasy. The meat is put in a stuffer, a machine and then three girls on each side of the table where the sausages come out, they link it and then at the end of the table are the women who hang the sausages on the cages. Those sausages weigh a lot, the smallest is about twenty pounds. Then one woman would have to carry a full cage away to a different place. They'd have a Negro woman to do that, she'd have to pick up sometimes 200 pounds on a cage, up off the floor and lug it around. I did that for a while and sometimes I'd have my finger joints out to the bone and that's no exaggeration.

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Packinghouse wkr.

Margaret Hueyler

German, American born,

21 years old

Betty Burke

June 13, 1939

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Text of Interview

I do all kinds of trimming of meats in the cook room. Like boning tongues, slicing the tongues, things like that.

There's a conveyor belt that comes down over our tables. It comes from a half floor above us where they cook the meat. The men up there dump it and it comes down to us steaming hot. We have sort of rakes and we have to rake the meat off the conveyor onto our tables every so often and no matter if our tables are full or not. Otherwise we'd clog the line and the belt would have to be stopped and then a lot of confusion and bawling out.

In boning the tongues there's two small bones in a beef tongue near where it's cut off and I have to stick my finger in there and sort of work it so I can pull those two little bones out. I have blisters on my fingers from handling that hot meat all the time. You don't know how awfully hot that meat is, just boiling. Sometimes nobody could touch it, not even the old hands, you know, the old ladies who've been there so long their hands are tough and calloused all over. Then the boss would come around and holler at us to get busy and we just had to, whether we could stand it or not. You can't protect your fingers in any way because it's a delicate operation and you've got to be able to feel quickly with your fingertips. You can't do it when your fingers are tapid.

In lots of the trimming jobs you have to use a knife. I like those jobs better than boning because I hate to have my hands looking like red lobsters and all blistered up all the time. Of 2 course, there's plenty of accidents with knives, too, but at least if you cut yourself you can get it taped up and it doesn't hamper your work so much as blistered hands do.

I've worked for Armour's two years. Not steady, though. I've been laid off twice, so far.

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Packinghouse wkr.

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Stella Janacek

Bohemian, 20 years old union member

Betty Burke

Text of Interview

I'm in the soup room. That's where they have the vegetables for different kinds of soup made. I peel about every vegetable under the sun, slice them up and make them ready for the soup vats.

I used to peel 90 pounds of potatoes an hour, now they've got a machine they put the potatoes in and they're partially peeled so a girl can do 350 pounds in one hour. Nobody likes potatoe peeling though, because you have to work so fast and sometimes you'll get these great big potatoes that weight a couple of pounds apiece and after you spend your time peeling it you slice it and it's all black and rotten inside. You have to throw it away and you don't get paid for the time you spent on it and that happens often and cuts into your pay, believe me. They scale all that kind of work.

I peel onions, too, great big onions, half rotten and they smell so bad, and I set there with tears just streaming while I do that job. You can hardly keep your eyes open on that job, and you keep blinking away the tears to see what you're doing with the knife. It doesn't do any good to wipe your eyes, you just have to sit there and cry, and keep working. It's really funny to watch, if you don't have to do it yourself.

That's all I do there. I haven't been in Armour's so very long.

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Packinghouse worker

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Agnes Sullivan

Irish, 24 years old union worker

Betty Burke

June 6, 1939

Text of Interview

I can do quite a few jobs. Here's how they work in the stuffing room. I used to be a packer. On that job they usually have one scaler to three packers. The scalers weigh the meat and then the packers stuff it in the cans. On the fancy meats where the meat has to look nice, like tongues, we don't handle them much with our hands, we have one of those wooden sticks, you know, like the doctor uses to look down your throat with, and we pack them in neatly with that. But with most of the meat we just stuff it in the cans with our hands, we know just about how much should go in each can.

It's piece work, and you have to go very fast. You have to handle the rough tins and just can't keep from cutting yourself all the time. Sometimes girls would have all their finger joints taped up because of so many cuts.

Then canning hot tamales. That's a dirty job. You know they have to put in a lot of that hot sauce over the tamales. You have to scoop it out of a vat with a wooden ladle and if you get any of that hot sauce on your skin it burns like fire. You can't touch your eyes with your fingers no matter what happens, unless you want to burn your eyes out. It's a sight to see, especially when it's real busy, the girls working with the sweat dripping from their faces and they can't take time to wipe themselves with a handkerchief and they don't dare brush the sweat off with a sleeve because that stuff splashes on their clothes.

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Whatever they put in that sauce, it's so strong it even eats into the girls' clothes, makes it come apart and you can't hardly wash it out. It stains everything. Ruins your stockings. That job's no good. They had what they call a safety plan. They'd plaster the walls with placards saying "What's Your Hurry?" 'Safety Pays' and things like that. And they know when a girl's on piece work or even on straight rate she's got to produce or else. They give you a certain bonus if you produce over your rate for a certain length of time. You can't work for a bonus and follow their safety rules at the same time, very well, and they know that.

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Packinghouse worker

Stanley Kulenski

Polish, 28 yrs. old

Betty Burke

June 3, 1939

Text of Interview

What do I do at Armour's? I'm a tractor man, miss. I run one of them tractors that haul out the finished products packed and ready for the freights and trucks. They used to have one man doin' the checkin' and drivin' a tractor on one job. That's what they had me doin' a couple of years. Run me ragged. Now they got regular checkers on steady.

I ain't got a steady job, see. I been working there longer than some of the guys they put on steady checking, guys that used to be tractor men alongside o'me. The company knew I was a union man so I wasn't in on it when same of these other guys got promoted to checkers. I didn't put up a squawk, see, because I didn't want to be a checker at the time.

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I didn't want the job anyway, for the reason, driving a tractor, they don't expect so much from you, the job has less responsibility attached to it. If you're a checker it's easier for them to get something on you. They're out to get a union guy any time, Armour's is, and the way they do it is, a checker can only do so much work and then he's bound to make mistakes because he won't be able to handle the volume of orders and all, it'll be comin' in so fast. So they'll keep swampin' him with work until they pin enough mistakes on him to can him. I figure to keep on this job at Armour's 2 so I aint kickin' just now. I got a job to do for a while yet. And wait'll they find out I aint the only guy in the union. All them checkers are union guys. Will they burn! Most of the tractor men are union, too. It won't be long till we get our contract out of Armour's. That's what we're counting on when Lewis hits town.

My address? What for? You wouldn't kid me, would you, sister? Oh, sure, I understand! You just tell 'em Sikora Hall, Union headquarters, anybody wants me can see me there, when I'm not workin'. Sure I got an address, but that ain't so hot, sister, comin' 'round to union meetings for addresses. Get yourself into trouble doin't that. Somebody might get the wrong idea bout your business here. It ain't healthy for Armour spies and stoolies, I'll tell you that. That's alright, I know you're ok, I'm just givin' you some good advice about askin' union members their addresses, that's all.

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Packinghouse worker

Helen Wocz

Betty Burke

May 26, '39

Text of Interview

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I can't talk to you much about work. I guess it's about the same wherever you go, if you have to make a living and take care of children and home, it's hard work and there's never no end to it.

At Armour's in the canning rooms where I worked on the night gang we would go to work about three o'clock in the afternoon and finish sometimes 11 pm, sometimes 12: or 1: am, in the morning. That was in the winter time and when we would get out we used to stand out there freezing and shivering on the corner and we'd have to wait sometimes hours for a street car to take us home. At night like that it's always colder than in the day and the wind and snow would blind us and sometimes when a street car would come it would be so stormy and dark they'd go right past us and we'd just be ready to die, but we'd have to stand there just the same, and wait for the next one. Every half hour they would come, but if it was a big snow storm then it would take hours. Sometimes the girls couldn't stand it, it would be so cold and they would go across the street and go in one of the saloons to keep warm. But most of the time we'd stay outside because it isn't very nice in those saloons, you can understand. Once it was 4 o'clock in the morning before I got home, because of a big snowstorm, and I was sick and had to stay in bed the next night and when I came to work after that the forelady always picked on me when there was somebody had to be laid off because she said I wasn't dependable and stayed out from work that time and she never forgot about it. I hated her. She was Polish, too, but she was a mean devil.

On the night gang shift there's always a lots of rats. They don't come out in the daytime so much because there's so many people working and the trucks and the noise keeps them away. But they come out at night because it's quieter and run on the floors and even sometimes along the tables, especially where it's warm, like in the cook rooms. They run up and into the barrels of meat that the girls have to cut, and we'd hate to put our hands in deep in the barrels for fear we'd touch a live rat instead of a piece of meat.

Some of the girls wear those overalls, you know, to keep from getting so dirty and for warmth in some of the chilly rooms. Sometimes a rat would get into the trouser leg of a

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girl and it would scratch and scramble and bite, trying to get out and the girl would be screaming and fainting and naturally the other girls would get so frightened it would start them screaming for the men. Once a girl had a rat, a great big thing it was, run up her leg and she was doing work that had to be done with a knife and she let go of it so fast it shot across the table into another girl's face. It made a deep slash and the blood just poured and here was the one who did it in a dead faint half on the table and sliding off. She was bit in three places by this rat. It was like a crazyhouse that time, girls crying and screaming, the men chasing the rat that had gotten out and was squealing and running along under the table, and girls sitting and standing on the table trying to keep their legs up in the air. Nobody was fit 3 to do any more work that night, with all that excitement. Every time an accident happens like that, the girls get so nervous they can't work. But the worse thing about that time is that the doctor was gone and there was nobody but one of these nurses who don't know how to patch up a sore finger right. It was about 12 pm when that happened and the doctor only stays until 11pm. The way they fixed this girl up at the plant they left her with a big scar on her mouth and cheek.

That's the worst I ever saw there, but accidents are always happening there, all the time.

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Industrial Folk Lore

(Comment)

Betty Burke

May 26, 1939

Told by Helen Wocz, an Armour worker, 26 years old, of Polish descent, American born. She is Catholic, attended a parochial grammar school and her one ambition in life, until she was forced by family poverty into the yards at the age of 16, and was to become a

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nun. At 16 1/2 years, she married a yards worker, has five children now. Considers herself fortunate in that she was able to conceal her pregnancies and worked in the yards until the 6th month of carrying each one of her children. The rule at work is that pregnant women cannot stay on the job but as Helen says, "there's lots of women who can't afford to lay off and so they do all kinds of things to fool the bosses and keep on. If you work for a woman boss it's easier to get away with it, because she'll feel sorry for a woman. But a man gets mad if he finds out you're pregnant and still working, and he'll sand you home right away."

She has her mother living with her, making 8 people in five extremely small rooms, no bath room, outside toilet in the yard, and their rooms are on the second floor. For the smaller children there is a slop bucket on the back porch, emptied twice a day into the privy downstairs. Her mother is a tubercular, and is supposed to be taking treatments in a city clinic, but because someone must take care of Helen's house and children, she rarely has an opportunity to get to the clinic. Besides the t.b. her mother suffers some sort of mental derangement which Helen says is due to 'change of life'. Notwithstanding all this, the house is kept clean by the mother. Pretty shabby, worn out rugs and 2 linoleum, beds in every room except the kitchen, no closets, but clean.

Helen's greatest worry at present is the fear that her husband will lose his job at Armour's, since there is supposed to be a new rule in effect that husband and wife cannot both hold a job there. Neither of them have any seniority having both been laid off many times. She has done work in many of the yards plants, but never could get work lasting more than a few months at a time.

She is a member of the union, thinks a lot of it. Being very religious, she laments the fact that in her church the priest has told the women to remain away from union meetings, saying that the union leaders are atheistic. If only she could induce the priest to come and see for himself he would not say that, he would see how good the union is for the yards people, but she is afraid he won't listen to her and she doesn't like to have him displeased

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with her. So now she stays away from union meetings. She just pays her dues and tells her husband, a union member also, to bring her back news of what goes on.

She has not time to go anywhere except to church about three times a week. Doesn't like to do her shopping outside the yards neighborhood. Her children are sickly, but they've never seen a doctor yet, for which she thanks God. She hates all she's ever seen of doctors, never could afford a decent hospital when she had her babies, the County's all she had, and it reminds her of the stockyards, the way they treat the women in the maternity wards, there.