

**[“Betty”]**

TALES-ANECDOTES

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 10 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 West 135th Street, New York City

DATE November 29, 1938

SUBJECT “Betty” —[Social Ethnic?] Human Interest Story

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant Submitted by staff-writer
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.

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NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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ADDRESS 224 West 135th Street, New York City

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SUBJECT "Betty" Social Ethnic Human Interest Story

Luigi's speakeasy did an all night business but you had to know what to say before they'd let you in. Whenever the bell rang, Jimmy got up and peeped through a little hole in the door. Well, he did the same thing the night Betty walked in. It was the first time I had seen her, I won't forget it. She was the kind of girl men fight for ... and like it; but on a Harlem police blotter, they had "prostitute" scribbled opposite her name. Not that she looked like one. Her eyes were a pale, lovely blue; her hair, soft and brown; and she had the sauciest two lips in the world. Another odd thing about her was the fact that she never carried a watch. I suppose it was because time meant nothing to her. She was in love. The boy's name was Bill.

When Jimmy opened the door, Betty, eyes sad, pocket book under arm and looking tired, hesitated in the doorway before walking to the far end of the room. No one looked up apparently but several pairs of eyes followed every movement of her graceful body. Movements emphasizing primitive appeal and simple loveliness.

"Ofay in a Harlem hot spot peddling her youth away for a nigger man", a party of white and colored people whispered.

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"How's things, Joe?" Betty greets the bartender.

"Hie ya, Betty," Joe says without looking up. "Note for you".

She lights a cigarette and casually unfolds the piece of paper. Her features light up. Business...more money for Bill who understands her and needs her.

Drawing her coat a little more closely near the waistline, Betty walks briskly toward the door. Her walk now is alive with rhythm and vitality. Sam, the taxi-driver, follows. He has that something closely akin to a sixth sense. It tells him whenever Betty wants him to drive her places and, if necessary, collect for her. Both of them disappear into the dark street. Jimmy closes the door behind them.

Girls like Betty, they say, are all alike. Perhaps they are. I don't know. But I do know she was a Wellesley graduate.. and all girls are not Wellesley graduates.

Betty came to Greenwich Village to write. They brought her to Harlem to get "local color". Well, she got it.

Bill was working in a night club, one of those dingy, smoky little basement places. You remember them. Betty liked him and he saw in her all the things he had missed in other women. He sang for her. Afterwards she went home to the Village with her friends. The next time she came to Harlem, she came alone. The place had "got" her, as they say. There'was something about it she liked.

Cigarette smoke, fast living and basement gin put an end to Bill's love songs. He left for Arizona. Betty hoped he might get over it but she knew that wasted lungs are not cured overnight.

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It cost her \$200 a month to keep him in a sanitarium there.

For a long time she was able to sell enough stories and piece out her income with a little ghost-writing here and there, but when she finally had to look for a job, she found they were scarce.

That, of course, was before she began coming to Luigi's. After that, she didn't have to worry about bills and money. She always had more than enough.

Men loved Betty. When she smiled at them, they did anything she wanted. Many of them wanted to marry her but she only looked at them with a little amused smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

A hijacker once gave her two truckloads for a kiss. A boy from Park Avenue lost a \$1000 bet on her. He thought she'd say "yes" when he asked her to marry him.. and she knew his family was one of the oldest in the Social Register. On a week-end party once, she fought a man. He insulted her. He thought she'd be flattered instead.

Betty had to have money..for Bill. So she got it. Nothing else mattered to her. Men brought it to her and were happy because it made her smile. Even though it was a long time ago, I can still see her smile.

But the reason I tell you this is because she came to Luigi's new place on the Avenue last night and it was the first time I had seen her since the old days. She certainly was not the same carefree Betty I once knew.

Bill, of course, did not come back.

"He was too far gone", the doctors said.

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The kid is still very good to look at and while she was perched on the stool at the bar, one of the men who used to know her walked over and said something. She shook her head, meaning “no”. Then he pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and showed them to her.

I could see her reflection in the mirrir mirror and what her lips said was: “I don't need it.”

The man went away puzzled. He couldn't understand such a complete change. He couldn't, of course. He never knew about Bill.