

[Rivershore of New York City]

[?] and customs - Folkstuff Copy-1 [?] 2

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, New York City

DATE Sept. 21, 1938

SUBJECT STORIES ASSOCIATED WITH LOCAL LIFE AND INDUSTRY, RIVERSHORE OF NEW YORK CITY

1. Date and time of interview Sept 14, and continued on Sept. 21
2. Place of interview Freeman Street and Westchester Avenue, (West Farms Creek.)
3. Name and address of informant Otto Walters, Freeman Street and Westchester Avenue, West Farms Creek.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

X

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

X

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

The setting is the West Farms Creek which winds westward from the East River, and is otherwise known as the Bronx River. At this point the Creek has been widened. Derricks, coal barges, fishing boats make up the shore and water picture. Patches of green on the slope toward the Creek stand out against the gray monotone of the Creek's industrial life and the concrete ramparts of a bridge which crosses the Creek at this point. Directly below the Bridge is a shack, once used as a pier house and storeroom, having now a chimney which climbs out of the wooden wall, and it is here that informant resides. The Creek is about 150 ft wide at this point, its waters are muddy-brown, and the fishing boats, painted white and orange, with trim lines, lie on the Creek like a pink ribbon on a sow's ear,

2

The interior of the shack is chockful of sheer rubbish amidst which the bare necessities of living such as bed, table, chair have to be carefully noted as they have acquired a kind of protective coloration and nondescript quality which, impartially judged, makes them an integral part of the collection of odds and ends.

However there is a good battery radio set in working order; there are several old calendars on the walls, of this year and other years, a tray full of rubber balls, in one corner an enormous heap of old newspapers, several marine pictures on the walls, a boat name plate, Herbert W. On the table in the center of the room is a kerosene lamp, on the far side of the shack a rusty metal bed with blanket and mattress but no sheets; and also in the shack are an ancient orange-colored plush armchair a straight-backed chair, and a stove. There are some half-dozen pails standing on the floor and on heaps of stuff, several

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of them containing water. At the threshold is an overhang of wood and a bench below it, making a sort of portico.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER SAUL LEVITT

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, New York City

DATE Sept 21, 1938

SUBJECT STORIES OUT OF LOCAL LIFE: RIVERSHORES OF NEW YORK

1. Ancestry GERMAN
2. Place and date of birth HAMBURG, GERMANY, 1873
3. Family NO LIVING FAMILY AS FAR AS INFORMANT KNOWS.
4. Places lived in, with dates Hamburg, Germany, (Childhood) City Island, Mount Vernon, and present address.
5. Education, with dates Some primary school education
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates —Has worked around local waterfront, (on Creek and City Island) for some forty-five years. As a boy of 16 worked for a time as plumber. On waterfront he has been boat-builder handyman, pilot on fishing boats.

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7. Special skills and interests

At present acts as caretaker for the McCormack coal Company, which owns most of property on south shore of creek at this point; had no particular except to be near and around boats, working on them and building small boats.

8. Community and religious activities

None at present.

9. Description of informant

Noted at once are bright and sparkling brown eyes. Informant is slightly built, hunched somewhat, in complexion a dark brown like a slow-baked potato, his nose is big, jaws somewhat long, faculties are all alert, and he is pleasant except that he has an animosity for small boys who, he says, "got some kind of wildness in them." When asked questions, he said he was willing to talk but he could barely conceal an agitation and a melancholy and did not do more than answer in monosyllables for about a half an hour after which he spoke at a great rate of speed like someone who has been still for a very long time; and he would not regard cues intended to take him off his main theme which was the astonishing and strange

10. Other Points gained in interview changes that had come over this country and the world since he was a boy and a young man. He exhibited a tolerance in finally stating that he guessed "it was general conditions which are responsible for people being what they are these days. Dog eat dog."

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER SAUL LEVITT

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, New York

DATE Sept 14, 1938 (continued on Sept 21st)

SUBJECT STORIES OF LOCAL LIFE: RIVERSHORES OF NEW YORK.

How do I like living around here? If you like to rough it it's OK otherwise it's better to be in an apartment. I like it alright, I've been here forty-five years, (Informant through first brief interview walks up and down narrow pierways surveying Creek, puffing rapidly on a cigarette down to the last half inch and brushing an imaginary speck of dust off interviewer's tie) I like it alright. Yeah-yeah. Do I feel melancholy sometimes? When I don't feel right I just go upstairs, (indicating flight of wooden steps which climb bank from the Creek edge to the roadway above), and go over to a show. I used to build boats but 'm getting old now, No, I don't want a drink but I used to drink, I'm too old for that now. Yeah-yeah. Too old. How was it around here thirty years ago. There were estates up here. Yeah! it was beautiful. I'm the only one that lives here, I guess, but I hear there's some new-comers up near Starlight Park. Come back sometimes, sure, I don't mind, and I'll give ye' some dope.

On Sept 20, interviewer, who had been there several times without locating informant, clambered across a low tideflat near one shack to a houseboat called Venida, scuttled on flat. Together with friend, he pulled himself aboard via a length of piping slung 2 over the side, and found there amidst wreckage, broken windows, the skeletal remains of a piano and broken bedsteads in what were evidently living compartments, several letters

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be-smearred with river mud and smelling to high heaven, addressed to Mr. X from girls in New York and Virginia.

Legible fragments of letters found on houseboat Venida on West Farms Creek:

Lurray, Va.

Oct. 25, 1937.

Dear Mr. X

I will answer your letter which I received just a few minute ago. I was real glad to hear from you. I am well and happy and truly hope when these few lines reaches your hands will fine you and wife well and happy . . . (ten lines illegible) . . . tole me that you loved me and know that you sent me money and wanted to buy me clothes she wont love you so dam good Harry I love you make know different who you marries or what you do. But I have a boy friend that is true to me and he don't ... (illegible)..

you said that you love me if you did you would never marry an other girl that show how . . . you love me don't it? Harry if you are marry I wish you all the happies in the world but there it one think I am going to ask you and if you like me at all you will tell me who has been writing to you and telling you all the think you have been talking about and then I will be sadisfide and when you come in next summer and bring your wife I would love to see but 3 what did you fall for her or her name it is so beautiful I like it but guess she is a luckey girl to get a nice boy like you and Darling I want you to show her the letter that I wrote you to let her know know how much I loved you and to think how you wrote to me it is enough to hurt the feeling of a dog but I am a human as well as you are but you much think I am a dog the way you write to me I am surprise at you Harry I am going to write your wife a letter and tell her how you told me that you love me. And then if she love you I will be happy and always stay happy to think another girl marry the Boy I real and truly loved and please show her the letter that I wrote you I want her to know she is / not the only one who

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loved you. And you can laugh at me all you want to but maby someday I hope you will shed just one tear over me Any way if not throw a brick in on me I want to sleep for ever with somethink that my sweetheart gave me. And that would be the only think that you would like to give me when I die Darling put a rose in my hand.

And think of how you done me and how you have talk to me and think of how I loved you And how that I am gone Harry Darling why don't you set and think of how much you told me you loved and how I told you I loved you too and do you think for one minute I would go out with Any other Boys Harry how can you say that about me when you know better your Self you ought to know that Mother wouldn't let me And you ought to know I wouldnt for I love you I know you will laugh when you read this but I don't care I love you and don't care you know it. but if you are marry I will always love you and I want your wife to know it I will tell her so if I ever see her. So Harry you much have fell in love very quick and 4 learned to love her enough to marry her. So has my heart is broking And you don't like to read my letter I will close for this time hoping to hear from you real soon and a real long letter for I love you to hear from you even if you are marry tell your wife Hello for me and tell her that I love you too hear is some little songs I want you to learn for me and remember me when you ... (illegible). ... good Boy

From your

Friend allway D

5

Tuesday January 14, 1936

Hello Harry,

Received your letter & was more than pleased with it. I will forgive you for not writing that Tuesday night, as I find your excuse satisfactory. I shall see how good your promise is for Jan. 30 & not Dec. 30, I'm not been sarcastic. I'm just correcting you on your mistake you

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made in the date in your last letter. It struck me so funny I laughed all day. By the way I will permit you to see me Dec. 30 that is if my health still holds out. How's the girl friend is she still jealous of you? I hope not! And I hope you used your mannish technique in curing her disease. It always works if you go about it the right way if you don't your just stuck with a dame you can't get off your shoulders. Excuse the slang its just one of my habits. I sure hope you will excuse it. That's enough of that. How's the club coming along? How's are the boy friends and girl friends? [?]

How's your mother & the whole family. I sure would like to meet them that is if I'm not being too bold. I hope they are as sweet as your estimation goes. As they say regardless of how mean a mother may think her son he always has a place in his heart for her. Don't you think I'm right? I hope to tell you I am.

I tried hard to continue writing but I find it impossible as I'm very tired & about to flop in bed.

There isn't anything else to say so I close here hoping you keep your neck clean.

Signing off until my next letter

Station K - I - T - T - Y

P S Answer Soon Hoping soon to hear from you, your friend [????]

6

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Interview continued with informant Otto Walters on Sept. 21.

(Informant was standing near end of the narrow pier which runs some thirty feet out into the Creek and tying rope thrown by a deckhand from the fishing boat Ventura coming in. After tyeing up boat he came forward toward shack and recognized interviewer but

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was ill at ease. He finally opened door of shack. The Captain of the fishing boat who was addressed as "Captain" came along the pier to the shack and in answer to questions laughed and said: "Sure, there's plenty of stories here, and Otto knows a lot of them. You tell him, Otto. I'll tell you the best fish story you ever heard yet. We went out for weakfish up to Execution Light last week and there was a feller on board didn't catch a fish all day. But about the time we were going back he pulled up a watch right through the eye which was nothing because the feller next to him quick as a flash pulls up another watch and what's more it had the right time on it. Yes, Otto knows a lot, he's been around here a long time. Tell him about that scow captain. This scow captain, he liked his drinks you know, and he went off one night and must have gotten a big one on because when he came back—Y'see there's a space between the shore and the boat and he fell in. (Captain is laughing and Walters nods his head). The next morning he comes floating down right here to the shack and Otto fishes him out and there was a lot doing around here. Police and all that stuff. Yeah, Otto's always fishing something out of the Creek, every year there's some boys drowned swimming here. Did you go swimming here? Well, young feller, you're just lucky you're around here, that's all . . . So long as they keep that war and that fighting over there that's all we care about. When they come over here we'll 7 take care of them. Yeah, Otto knows a lot of stories, you tell him, Otto."

(After "Captain" left, informant and interviewer sat in shack. It was quite dark. In answer to questions, informant merely replied categorically for some fifteen minutes, and then without answering, rummaged through pile of odds and ends and emerged with a brown manilla envelope containing photographs. Photographs were dated in back in crayon and pencil, dates covering years 1882-down to some five years ago.

We had good times years ago. Yeah-yeah. Yeup. It's different now. What do they do now? Dog eat dog. (Goes out to shout at boys on bank and drives them off.) Boys are wild now. They don't get a licking, that's what. That's what they did years ago. A licking. Fathers and mothers don't count no more. Yeah-yeah. They're not supposed to give 'em a licking these days. That picture? Yes, that's me in the middle. (Picture dated 1890, showing

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several people grouped about a pierhouse and facing camera broadside is a rowboat with three young men in it. The people on the pier are wearing bowler hats and high collars. On the wall of the pierhouse are signs reading New England Pies. Boats Rented. The young man in the center, in picture is wearing a cap with visor, shirt, and pants rolled to knees, and he is sitting on pier with legs dangling in boat.) What happens around-here. Nothing much happens now. We used to have times around here, nice times. We had lots of young people coming here. The girls were different. Don't tell me they weren't different. They were quieter and maybe they used a little powder but not like girls today. I tell you it's different today and I don't know what's going to happen. (Whenever informant makes reference to 8 "today" his face grows longer, he becomes fretful and peers out on the Creek.) The automobile did it. Yeah-yeah. And the movies, don't forget the movies.. Where do you think they get their ideas from. Holdups. Yeah-yeah. The movies. Beer five cents and seven cents a pint. You could get a meal for 20 cents and raise a family on 20 dollars a week. Now a man needs forty-fifty dollars a week. Can he get it? Yeah, that's right, and he can't get it. (Pulls out studio photograph from bag, showing young boy about eight years of age, with curly dark hair in Little Lord Fauntleroy style). That's one of my sons, they're all dead, he'd have been thirty six years old today if he lived. (Informant runs out to chase off boys playing on bank of Creek). It was nice here, it was all wooded, you bet, very nice. (Shows another photograph, this one of three young fellows about eighteen years of age). They worked for me. Do any of them ever come around to see me? They're all dead. They were good boys. I had my own boat here, (shows picture of small motorboat with canopy over it, and name-plate near bow, Herbert W). Nice times those were. Yeah-yeah. Well, sure lots of things happened around here. Some old songs? I remember them but I can't sing. You know them all. Sure. They play them songs now only different. I guess I'll keep on living here. Feller took a girl out in a rowboat before he went off to the War. I mean the Spanish-American War. They looked nice. Now it's dog eat dog. About this scow feller that the 'Captain' mentioned? Oh, they're all alike, most of them aint' married. This feller that fell off was Irish, he wasn't married. That boat out there? (interviewer points to Venida). Up to four years ago that was used. Yeah. Parties on it and they roomed people.

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Right there on the boat that's right. I had a sailboat when I was a young feller maybe eighteen.

9

It's not like the automobile. That's something you have to work with. Sure an automobile is alright I once had a car myself fer business but nowadays a man won't walk he gets in a car to go two blocks and what's more he don't own the car. When I was a plumber in Mount Vernon I had to walk seven-eight miles to work, seven to six at night. Yeah-yeah. There's no fishin in the Creek now there used to be all kinds, weakfish, flounders, these fishing boats go up a ways as far as Execution Light. (Asked about picture of three men with background of Creek and wooded shore) True blue, old friends of mine, yes that's me on the left. My father had a boating place up at City Island. That was different now its restaurants and streets it was nice once. Yeah-yeah. This wasn't the Bronx once it was Morrisania, Melrose, West Farms I walked from 110th Street. I guess I'll go to a show there's no use hanging around here. No, you're not keeping me but I'm going to a show later.

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NEW YORK

FORM D Extra Comment

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace New York

DATE Sept 21, 1938

SUBJECT STORIES OF LOCAL LIFE: THE RIVERSHORE OF NEW YORK CITY

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Above the shack, at three o'clock in the afternoon high school children from the nearby James Monroe High School march across the Bridge. The entire area is a residential community, and the new and still expanding east Bronx community has grown up around this shore. Reminiscences of informant cover a period in which population was mainly Dutch, German, Irish living in one and two family houses. Sailboating and ice-skating, church festivals and other social activities associated with rural and suburban communities were carried on. Of all this small community past which was still to be found as recently as twenty years ago within the environs of New York City not a trace remains in this area. It is an apartment house and two and three-story brick house development having a predominating Jewish population with the local Pelham Bay line of the Lexington Avenue subway running on an elevated track above the Creek.