

[Folklore of Drug Store Employees]

Beliefs & Customs - Folk Stuff - 4

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 29 1/2 Morton Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 28, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore of Drug Employees

1. Date and time of interview February 25 - 7 to 10 P.M.
2. Place of interview 29 1/2 Morton Street
3. Name and address of informant Eli Seigle 125 E. 13th Street New York City
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. None. Contacted informant as part of group in LIFE cafeteria, Sheridan Square, N.Y.C.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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Brought informant to ny home.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 29 1/2 Morton Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 28, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore of Drug Employees ALL NIGHT STORE

How I got into the drug trade was an accident. Like most of the things I got into. You know, one thing leading to another, and so on, ad infinitum, like they say in Latin. From high school I was interested in Chemistry - studying formulaes and mixing things. Well, so I spent a couple years learning the drug trade. But for a while the closest I got to being a pharmacist was soda jerker in a drug store up in Harlem. Then later I got a job behind the prescription counter in Central Pharmacy out in Queens — The section they call Richmond Hill, between 110th Street and 120th.

Listen, plenty goes on in a drug store. Especially if you work nights. This was an all night store, the only one in the district. Any prescriptions filled at night you charge double. Well, you can do that, see — after all anybody wants attention in the middle of the night's gotta to be ready to pay for it. It's the only place you can get it, see. So a customer can kick, but what's he gonna do?

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Listen, plenty goes on in a drug store. In prohibition they used to peddle booze. I never done it myself. I never went in 2 for that stuff, but I see plenty of it. Well, why not? A shot of good rye is the best medicine yet for whatever ails you. The counter man has the blanks, see, and if he's in cahoots with a doc who wants to pick up a little extra, he'll sell a book of blanks, signed by the doc, to a legger, who fills in for how many cases he wants to take out, and it goes under the prescriptions. On an R.X. you're covered, see, and if any questions asked, it's the doc takes the rap. An R.X. is the prescription blank — comes from 'Recipe' — that's Latin, 'Ray-cee-pay,' means 'Take Of This' so many grams, etc., Latin you know.

Everything sold across the counter — that is the prescription counter — is supposed to have the doc's signature. It's illegal to counter-prescribe, but it's done all the time. Any store keeper is out to sell his goods — why not. If there's no doc connected with the drug store, the counter man does the prescribing whenever he has the chance. Naturally. Look, I'll til you about a smart guy. This guy found his way around alright. He was the druggist there in Richmond Hill. He didn't have a doc on the string to boost his stuff, so one day he decideds to be a doc himself. So he buys a white smock and a stethoscope, and he fixes him an office in the back, and he's all set. He'd diagnose patients, and write out prescriptions, and everything worked fine. As far as I know he hasn't killed anybody yet. When in doubt about a case, he always played safe and prescribed a placebo. That's something that doesn't make any difference here or there — I mean it can't cure you of anything, just make you feel like you're doing something for whatever ails you, and even that makes you feel better, see. Placebo, that's 3 Latin — means 'I Please.' A doc will give it to a patient usually who thinks there's something wrong with him when there isn't. Purely psychological, you know. It's either in a bottle or it's a capsule, and usually it's pink. I don't know why, but usually it's pink — a cheerful color, I guess.

Funny things happen, I never saw so many screwy people as when I worked in that all night store. One night a guy comes in and I think he's giving me the wise act. He say's he

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wants some Aphrodisiac. Aphrodisiac, well that's Greek — comes from a dame, Aphrodite — must have been hot stuff. Aphrodite lost her nightie — Well this Aphrodisiac is a dose of pep or something, see - makes a man of sixty act like twenty. So this old guy asks me for this stuff, and I decide to have a little fun with him. Nothing doing at that hour, you know, the place is quiet, and this guy comes in and I figure I'll do a little horsing around with him. So I says, having trouble with the girls? And he gives me the glassy, and he says, me with the girls, go on, do you know who I am? I'm a Cantor. Cantor, Cantor, I says — you mean you're Eddie Cantor. So he says no, and it turns out a cantor is some kind of singer in a Jewish congregation. Imagine. Then I says, well what's eating you, you gotta a hot daye? And he says, imagine this! He says the stuff is for his wife. So it turns out since he's a cantor he only works three, four days a year — on Jewish holidays — and he don't make much, and his wife finally gets sore, and she goes on strike. So the fellow figures to fix her with an aphrodisiac. Screw people.

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Another time here comes a guy in got something in his eye. This guy is a doc, but he don't mention it to me. Me, just a dumb bunny behind the counter and a doc comes to me with a bum eye. He says he trys to get it out himself, but can't do it, and it's hurting him like hell. Three times I go over his eye with a piece of cotton dipped in boric acid, but it doesn't work. This is serious, I tells him, you oughta see a doctor. Nothing doing, he says, try it again. So I go over his eye again, but it doesn't come out. Then I give him a long lecture about how his eye is in danger unless he get's that speck of cinder out, and to let me call a doctor. I figure I'll drum up a little business for our doc, see. The guy stands there and takes it, listens patiently, but he won't let me call a doc. Naturally. He's one himself, but I don't know it at the time. Well, finally after trying it again, I get his eye clean. Then I prescribe him some drops to soothe his eye, and I charge him 75 cents for a 20 cent dose. This is a night case see. And he pays for it and not a wimper out of him, thanks me and then hands me his card. I look down and see 'Dr. so and so' — Jeez, did I feel funny. So he shakes my hand and walks out with a grin on his mug. He says he t

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Listen, once I saved a man's life and once I killed a guy. No kidding. Work in a drug store and you handle life and death. Alpha and Omega, like they say in Latin.

One night a guy comes in doubled up with pain. He gives me to understand it's a simple case of indigestion and wants me to prescribe something for him. So I goes behind the counter and I start to make up a dose of salts with magnesia. But out front I hear the guy begin to moan and groan till he gives 5 me the shivers. So I says to myself, this fellah has got something wrong with him besides constipation. I want to call the doc, but he won't hear of it. I catch on he's not long on dough, and afraid it'll cost him five bucks. So I says to him, look, I says, I'll make a deal with you. Let me call the doc, and after he examines you, if he says you need nothing but a physic, I'll pay the bill myself, and if it's something really serious, which I don't doubt I says, then you can pay it. But man, I says, that stomach ache sounds to me like appendicitis. Well, after an argument, finally eh says O.K. and he's doubled up with pain, and I calls the doc. The doc comes down, and the guy was so sick, we had to lift him into the back to get him on the couch. So the doc starts feeling his side. And he says, my god, you got a busted appendix and its perforating. You're going straight to the hospital. The guy starts squawking, but this doc don't pay no attention. He put him right in his car didn't even wait for the ambulance, and he was operated at the hospital within twenty minutes. They didn't think he'd live. But the guy pulled through all right and he's a hail man today. Couple months later he came in and thanked me for saving his life. Forget it, I says, it's all in the day's work. Just like that, I told him.

But one time I killed a guy. Well, he committed suicide, see. But I sold him the dope. It's a mistake anybody could make under the circumstances. Look, in comes a guy in the middle of the night. A little bit lit up. Asks for paraldehyde. I make him up the legal dosage - one ounce. Then he gives me an argument he wants four ounces. Four ounces, I says to myself, that's enough to drop a guy, and I tell him nothing doing. It's 6 alright, he says, I'm a physician, and he pulls out a card. Well there's no law against selling any amount of Paraldehyde to a licensed physician. But something tells me to be leary of this guy

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just the same. I figure to show him up, and so I start asking him certain questions. How much of this and how much of that to make up a correct dosage of a certain drug. And he gives me the answers alright. Well, I figure, maybe this fellah is a doc — what's so funny about it. Anyway, I ask him for his license, but it turns out, according to what he said, he's from Boston and naturally doesn't carry his license with him. Look, I says to myself, this guy knows all the answers, but he could have looked em up in a book. I'll give him a test question — something you can't find the answer to in a library. If he gives me the straight of it on this one, he must be a doc. I asked him for the correct dosage of digitalis. That's something even most doctors don't bother to know. O, a teaspoonfull, he says. Oh, oh, I says to myself, a teaspoonful, huh — enough to kill a horse. I tell the guy he's crazy and to be on his way. But he doesn't budge, and he says, well, look it up in the dispensitory, sonny. I think I'll have the laugh on him, and I go and look up the dosage on digitalis. And strike me dead, what do I find — 'Digitalis can be administered in as large a dose as one teaspoonful, in extreme cases...' Well, that makes him right and me wrong, doesn't it? So what can I do? I give him the four ounces of Paraldehyde. Charge him double, and call it square.

So next day, what do you think. I get a visit from the coroner. The guy was a doc alright, but he bumped himself off just the same. I gave the coroner my story, and every work of it was true — so he had to admit he would have done the same.

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In a way, I killed this buy, but nothing came of it. Naturally. Can you blame me? I only followed my best judgement. Can a person do more?