The WPA, Chicago, and Narratives

Exploring 1930's Chicago through the Federal Writers Project

Instructions:

I. Select one of the following stories:
   a. Packinghouse Worker
   b. Post Carriers
   c. Cab Driver / Vaudeville Actor
   d. Steel Worker

II. Read your narrative and fill out the graphic organizer. Be sure to examine the full original on the LOC website and note the interview data.

III. Find a WPA poster that would have been applicable to your interviewee and explain the reason for your selection.

IV. Examine the "Conducting an Interview" handout. Turn to a partner and conduct a brief interview.

Link to Collection: http://www.loc.gov/collection/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection/

Packinghouse http://www.loc.gov/resource/wpalh0.07050418/?st=gallery

Marge Paca, 24 years old
Irish, married to a Pole union member
June 15, 1939

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.

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.

Helen Wocz
May 26, '39
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 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.

May 26, 1939
Told by Helen Wocz, an Armour worker, 26 years old, of Polish descent, American born. 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.

Post Carrier http://www.loc.gov/resource/wpalh0.07030417/?st=gallery

Initials: M.F., B.D., S.B., H.F., J.C., G.R..
DATE 6/22/39

They're mostly old people in this hotel. They bother hell out of you every time you bring in the mail as if it's your fault they don't get anything.

There was one old goat at the hotel who didn't have nothing to do but sit around waiting for bedtime all day, and he was always concerning himself with the temperature and the calendar—he'd come down early to the lobby some mornings and he'd just chortle with glee if the last day's sheet hadn't been pulled off calendar; he'd rush over to the calendar and pull off the sheet and he'd tell everyone who'd listen about it for hours. He had scads of money.

Lots of people, and especially old people, rich old people like the ones around this hotel, are always trying to raise trouble for the carrier. But I bullcrap them to a million, and they never know it; I've been on a long time, long enough so I really have a neat way of handling them. I can't describe how I do it, I do it, that's all; the trick's mostly to keep agreeing with them and keep twisting their statements inside out as you go along—after a while they think you you're a goof and a goof can get away with anything, almost. You've got to know to laugh a bit, too, ag at their jokes. It's the guys who're smart, smart and agressive, who get in dutch.

Three times I've been asked why I'd hanged a WPA check. (leaving it hanging over box instead of handing it to adressee in person)— But I don't hang them, I never do. I ring the bell where it says the guy's name and someone comes out and says he's that guy. But he's not, and he takes the cheek. Then he figures he can't get away with nothin' and puts it in the box. I get a kickback on it. I had a funny one happen to me the other day.

You know how the Negros live. You'll find a family in a room and a whold colony in a flat. And they're always movin' or havin' to move. Some of them haven't any toilets and some of them don't even have any water. The halls are dark, and even if they weren't you wouldn't be able to tell who lives there from the names over the mail boxes—you ought to see it. You can ride through the neighborhood or even walk in it and never have a hint of the way they actually live, of the kind of dirt and misery they have. I feel honest to God sorry for the poor bastards, honest to God, I do.

I've got a check to deliver to a guy named H. G. His name's not up, but I sort of remembered that an H. G. 'd lived on the first floor so I ring the bells for the first floor. A guy comes out and says he's not H. G. but H. G's brother-in-law; H. G. lives with him, he'll take the check. I give it to him, and while I'm distributin' the reit of the mail for the building H. G. himself comes down from upstairs and [aksa?] for his check. I tell him I'd already given it to his brother-in-law. “I got no brother-in-law,” he says, so I had to go in with him and get the check. This other guy was standin' there—you could see his lips

moving spelling outletter by letter what was on the check.. All H. G. 'd done was move from the first floor to the third.

The carrier's a heel to everyone, the public, the clerks, even to the guys on WRA. There's one fellow I know who quit the service because he couldn't stand it any longer. He isn't even making fifty-five dollars a month; he's not on WPA, He's on relief. I meet him one day; it's snowing and I'm lugging a full pack around, and you know that he says to me? -“Boy, I'd hate to be lugging your bag around”— he's never been sorry he quit.

There're about ten-thousand clerks an' only about three-thousand carriers. The carriers' union's always been weak, the clerk's stronger an' more active, too, an' that's why they aint driven like us. They get things done.

I remember when I was takin' the exams. There was a big burly lad that ought to've been drivin' a truck or somethin'; he yells out, “Where d'you put your name for clerk on, this?” I thought, you big goof, you'd be lucky if you got high enough on the list to get a job carrying, let alone clerking. We Take the exams, but most fellows put down they want to be clerks an' it's harder to got high up on the clerk's list. You sign up for carrier an' hope after you get on someone'll be goofy enough to want to transfer with you. I like carryin', only they drive us too much. They really do; they drive us like all hell.

The only time there was life in that damn postoffice was when them Goddamn temps were there. That was because they could tell the boss to go to hell.

The guys are always gripin' about their jobs, but what the hell, I say they're better off than most guys in private industry—an' look at all the guys who don't have no jobs at all. Sure, the drive us all right, an' I don't like it no more'n the next one, an' I'd like to see somethin' done about it. You'd think the government would set an example; but it don't; it drives the hell out o' you in the service, just like anyone else. But where else can you be sure of a job for life long 's you keep your nose clean. What would these guys do if they did lose their jobs, quit or get fired or somethin'? What are they fitted to do? An' even if they're fitted for somethin', what the hell! -they'd find out soon enough there aint so damn many jobs floatin' around where they'd make nearly as much. They get around an' they know that as well as I do; you notice there aint so many of 'em quittin, don't you? - they're holdin' on all right, [byu?] you bet they are. If I lost my job today I wouldn't even know where to start lookin' for a job—I was thinkin' of it only the other day; I was feeling so damn lousy when I come
home.

When we were temps, being in uniform, we'd never have to pay for smokes or eats or drinks. But when payday came....Why, when payday came I had a sheet a paper a mile long, with 5¢ I owed to this patron, and a dime to that one, and 15-20 cents to someone else.

Cab Drivers http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh000040/

NAME OF WORKER Abe Aaron
DATE 7/7/39

This is a guy who's hungry, too hungry fer 'is own good; 'e won't work only nights, b'cause nights is where the money is; nights is when ya play the drunks, 'n' 'e's the kind o' guy who'd roll 'is own mother fer a jit.

This guy, 'e picks up a drunk. 'E takes 'im to wherever the hell 'e's goin' an' the freight's maybe seventy cents. The fare forks a sawbuck an' the cabbie, 'e gives 'im thirty cents change. The drunk, — 'e aint so soused as not to know somethin', — 'e says "Didn't I give you a ten dollar bill?"

"'Nope," the guy says, "ya give me an ace," an' [Ie?] flashes a buck so's the drunk c'n see for 'imself. So the drunk, 'e says, "Oh, all right," an' that's all o'that.

The trick's to hige hide the dough 'soon's ya get it, an 'ta keep an ace in yer hip pocket all the time, so's ya c'n flash 't easy 'f ya want. An' not ta try it on no one but drunks. This same guy, 'e got a fare once what's never rode in a cab before. This fare, 'e had two week's pay on 'im, an' 'e wanted ta make all the saloons in town in one night. Ya can't help gettin' a laugh outta this one.

This guy, Davey, 'e drives 'im from one tavern to another. The fare gets pretty slap happy after while. Then, when 'e's doped up enough, Davey, 'e says to 'im, "Hey, the bartender, 'e's got 'is eye on you, you better gimme that dough T. S. y're flashin' t' take care of for ya." An' 'e gives Davey the dough. Not only that, there's foureighty change from a fin layin' on the bar what b'longs t' the fare. The bartender, 'e's got 'is eye peeled all right, an' 'e's wise t' what's goin' on. 'E says t' Davey:
"Aw right, slub, come across."
Davey,, 'e never bats an eye, 'e just says, "That's your out," and 'e means the four-eighty wheat's layin' on the bar from the fin. That don't satisfy the bartender an' 'e walks over t' the window t' look out an' see Davey's cab. But Davey, 'e's parked so's the bartender can't read 'is number, an' Davey cracks, kiddin' 'im, "What's the matter? - can't ya get mynumber? - can't ya get my number?"

The drunk, 'e's fallen asleep,, an' Davey lugs 'im off t' the bus an' drives off. After a while, 'e wakes the guy up. 'E says, "Come on, come on, it's time t' go home," an' 'e takes the guy t' his house. 'E leaves 'im there, sittin' on the porch lookin' after 'im; 'e leaves, and, 'e's got the sixty-five dollars in 'is pocket.

Take some guys, they're cheap. Ya know what?—they'll have "em a date with a dame an' meet 'em in the lobby o' the Sherman. They ride the El an' at Randolph they take 'em a cab so's ta pull up in style. It don't cost 'em hardly no more'n a flag pull.

Vaudeville http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh000076/
Place of origin Chicago, Illinois Date 6/14/39
Alfred O. Philipp

VAUDEVILLE IN CHICAGO.
Time - 1919 PLACE “The Corner.”
“Meet me at Dearborn and Randolph.” The Midwest edition of New York's famed Times Square. For Chicago also had its theatrical business district, a small area which housed the offices of the booking agents, vaudeville circuit heads, managers and producers, theatrical publications, music publishers, and other swivel-chair functionaries who were never seen by the audience during these gala days of variety. For in 1919 vaudeville was truly an important industry in Chicago.

Morning 'til night (say 10 a. m. to 5 p. m.) the sidewalks on the northeast and northwest corners of N. Dearborn and W. Randolph Sts. were crowded with vaudeville performers. There were acrobats, aerialists, singers, dancers, ventriloquists, jugglers, animal men, dramatic sketch artists, piano teams, dialect comedians in all classes, wire walkers, trick cyclists, sister teams, trios and quartettes, pantomimists, trick cartoonists, novelty musical acts, monologists, soubrettes and prima donnas, mimos and entertainers in all the infinite variety which was Vaudeville.

In Times Square they loitered on the curb in front of the Palace Theatre Bldg.; in the Loop they stood in front of the Woods Theatre Bldg. In New York they assembled in groups before the new Annex Bldg., in Chicago they congested the sidewalks in front of the Delaware Bldg. In 2 both places the acts were essentially the same in character and content, however different were the names and billing matter they gave to the office boys in the booking offices. The seething pot of vaudeville was constantly boiling. To-day the Juggling Jarrows might be standing in front of the Palace Theatre Bldg., in New York; while the Balancing Belmonts are in front of the Woods Theatre Bldg., in Chicago. Five or six months hence the Juggling Jarrows will be in Chicago, while the Balancing Belmonts are in New York. You've got to go where the work is, and if you land a contract you've got to travel according to your route. This was vaudeville in 1919, and the railroads prospered mightily.

From the foregoing it must be obvious that the chronic curbstone ornaments comprised but a small fraction of the veritable army of Showdom which cane daily to this corner. And the great majority of the daily sidewalk contigent consisted of small time vaudeville performers from Chicago's near North Side rooming house district. The term “small time” is here employed in a broad sense to include all acts not playing “Big time” at that particular period. Naturally many of these small timers did terrible acts. But there were some who, if given the opportunity, could step out on the stage of the Palace Theatre and stop the show. The “breaks” were often deciding factors in vaudeville.

“The Corner” was more than a mare loitering place. It was the Chicago gethering place of the vaudevillian; it was an open air club, a forum, an exchange, an information bureau,- call it what you will, it never had a definite name. But the daily assemblies

had a distinct professional information which was calculated to be of mutual benefit. Questions were constantly asked, and answered. Queries such as - “Who's booking the Orpheum in Hammond now?” “How many houses does Webster book?” “What's the fare to Evansville?” “Where can a fellow have some cheap lobby photos reproduced?” 5 “Whatever became of The Six Damascos?” “What's the baggage hauling rates out to the Empress, at 63rd. and Halsted?” “Is there a good hotel in Grand Rapids that makes professional rates?” “Can you get back to town from Rockford after the show Sunday night?”

Steel worker http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh000100/

DATE April 3, 1939
NAME OF INFORMANT Nelson Walton

I don't know how true this story is, I have been hearing it for years. Every time I try to pin the guy who tells the story down about what year the accident took place, where, and who the poor son of a bitch was I am evaded. But the boys say it is true. The story goes that a guy fell off, or was pushed off, one of the bridges into a ladle. You know what happens then. He goes pouff into nothing. Then the company buried the guy with the steel until the family got over the accident, or until they moved away. After that the company dug up the metal and used it in the process of making steel.

The last fatal accident we had was on the mold yard crane runway. There mere three cranes on the runways: two slag cranes and a mold crane. Some molds were needed in a hurry and the foreman sent the mold crane operator down to get the craneman down from one of the slag cranes to relieve the man on the mold crane because he was faster. The guy thought he'd ride on the center crane instead of walking. Before the crane stopped he jumped off. It was pretty dark in the place and as he jumped he was crushed to death between the crane and the columns that support the roof of the building. Next day the company issued orders that no craneman can get on or off moving cranes.

The ladles in the pits are big. They weigh 175 tons. They are hooked up into the cranes by hookers in the pits. We had an old fellow, pretty well along in years and not as husky as he used to be. The hook got away from him and swung back from the ladle and hit him in the chest. That didn't kill him right away. But a few days later he died. The company doctors went over to examine him. They said the man had died from heart trouble.

For years steel has been made with soft ore, raw lime, scrap steel and a small amount of scrap iron. That made up about forty per cent of the total charge. The hot metal added made up about sixty per cent of the charge. A week or so ago the bosses got a brain storm and decided that ore was more expensive than 'cinder", which was nothing but old slag they had thrown away and which they were dragging out of the lake with their cintering plant. Now this 'cinder' is porous. And it was a fine business when the weather was dry. The bosses overlooked that the cinders were porous and hold a lot of moisture in damp weather. They had started that type of charge in dry weather and it worked fine. Yesterday was the second day of two damp days and the cinder they charged yesterday absorbed a great deal of moisture so that when hot metal was poured on the top of the partial melt in the furnace it trickled down to the cinders. A tremendous force of steam was created and two furnaces were blown up. And I was working on the crane when that happened. What a noise!