

Excerpt from oral history interview with domestic worker discussing the Bronx Slave Market. (December 6, 1938)

Having heard rumors that a "Slave Market" was in existence in the Bronx -- according to hearsay, this market was operated by white "Madams" where Negro women slaved for a few cents per day -- early one November morning, I decided to confirm such reports by making a personal tour of the neighborhood where the condition was supposed to exist.

While walking down 167th St. and as I reached Girard Ave., I found the object of my search. Here I was confronted by sights and tales of woe which I shall always remember.

There, seated on crates and boxes, were a dejected gathering of Negro women of various ages and descriptions -- youths of seventeen, and elderly women of maybe seventy. These women were scantily attired -- some still wearing summer clothing -- and as the November wind swept and whistled through them, they ducked their heads and tried to huddle within themselves as they pushed close to the wall....

A woman with a gold tooth smiled and invited me to share her box. Her face bore cuts over both eyes and the corner of her mouth. She appeared to be as broad as she was tall, but, despite all this, her flat face bore a kindly expression. When she discovered that I was in her category, she became sympathetic and as one woman to another, she began to relate her futile struggle of life from past to present into my receptive ears. She commenced by stating that her name was "Minnie." Minnie was born in the tidewater section of Virginia near Norfolk, a seaport town, in 1908. (She looked forty-five)....

Minnie tried agency after agency but the results were the same. They wanted their money in front. She couldn't get day's or part-time work because the agents had special cliques to whom these choice jobs went. It was rank folly for any outsider to think of getting one of these jobs. After many days of trying, rent due, money gone, a sympathetic girl in one of the Agencies, told Minnie that, "when she was out of money, she stood on one of the corners in the Bronx, where women came and hired you."

"Next mo'nin' Ah gut up prayin' that de lan lady woudn' heah me and walked de fifty-some blocks to dis place, an' I saw Othah gals standin' heah-so Ah stood wid dem. Soon a fine cah driv up -- dere was a lady hol'in' some O'dem eye-glasses yo' hol' in yo' han' an' peepin' at us -- dem di'mons on huh finguh's mos' blin' you an' de mo'nin' too!" She pointed our way an' de big black buck chauffeur got out an' 'proached us sayin', 'Come heah.' Ah sed, 'Who -- me?'

"He sez, 'yes -- ya wanna wuk, don'cha?'

"I walked to the cah an' he says, 'get in'. Ah staht to got in the back but de madam was dere -- he in de front -- wheah could ah set? "Git in the front. Doan tank ya'll set in de madam's lap, dees ya?' De gals laughed.

"'Vill you get in, goil?' sed de madam, 'hi got no time for dot foolishness.' The gals luffed.

"Hi pay twanty-five sants an hour -- is dot alright mit you?"

"Ah said: 'Yas'm.' After all, I was 'bout to be put out do's.

"De Drivuh driv down Walton Avenue a ways an' stop 'fo' a fine 'partment house. De madam tuck me up to huh 'partment an' ah 'clare, dese seben rooms she pint out to me ain' fittin' fo' hawgs to live in. Dey was sume doity!

"She say: 'Listen, golly. Hi vant you to do a gutt [chobe?] h'im having company tomorrow. Hi vill tip you fine. Your time begins now. You vill be pait by dot clock. See - - nine-forty five?"

"Dat dam' clock sed de same time dat she said, so Ah tho't mah clock was wrong. (All the gals carry clocks.) Ah sta't wukkin' an' wo'n mo'n fifteen minutes begin, when dot ol' heiffer was givin' orders, "do dis an' do dat." She 'zasperate me so dat ah co'd choke huh tongue out'n huh but ah beared huh. 'Bout six o'clock, ah tol' huh, 'Miss Gol' blatt, ah's thru."

"She sehs, 'bout time,' Den she sta'ts reachin' in con'-ahs fo' dust -- feelin' huh husban's shoit colla's to see ef 'nough sta'ch in dem -- lookin at de flo' mos' touchin' nit wit' huh big nose, nea' sighted se'f. Den she smile and seh, 'Vas de lunch gut?' (dat ole slop-fish, two days ole!)

"Ah said: 'reck'n so!"

"Den she gi' me mah money -- dollar, eighty-seben cent.

"Ah sehs: 'Miss Gol' blatt, ain' you' miscalc'late? Ah wukked eight hours -- tu'k fifteen minutes fo' lunch?"

"Listen' dear goil, Hi neffer cheat hany body. You voiked seven hours -- fifteen minutes, vich giffs you vun dollar -- heifty-two sants, hand hi took hout fife sants for bringink you here, vich makes hi should giff you van eighty seven, bud hi giff you, per agreement, a nize fat tip of tan sants -- van eighty sefen. Goodby!"

"ah was mad den, but when ah got out an' foun' dat it wus eight o'clock and dat ole heifer done cheat me out of two hours, ah cou'd a kilt huh. Well, ah at leas' had sumf'n fo' my lan'lady.

Here, Minnie paused awhile and squinted her tired eyes, say-"Ah hates the people ah Wukks for. Dey's mean, 'ceitful, an' ain' hones'; but whut ah'm gonna do? Ah got to live -- got to hab a place

SOURCE: Minnie Marshall, interviewed by Vivian Morris, December 6, 1938, transcript, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.