

Day Work

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In those days they called it "day work." You work maybe today or two days, sometimes three for one person. At one time I was working for three to four persons a week. That was cleaning their whole house. I worked for Dr. and Mrs. McDonald maybe on a Monday. Maybe on Tuesdays I would go to Dr. Matthews's. I would go to the Van Horns' and do a day's work. The Van Horns' was a house with three lawyers.

I patterned my life after things that I learned. So many people would just work and pay no attention to what's going on. I didn't just cook and clean. I worked with my eyes and ears open. I watched and listened to them and the way they lived. For me it was like going to school. I have no complaint about most because they were very beautiful people, willing to help and teach you along. I would ask them about this thing or that thing I would see them do.

Little helpful hints they had, they would pass it on to me. As they shopped they would say, "Maggie, do you ever do this or that? We do it this way." Those women would also tell you how to know that you were getting a good deal and what sort of stores to go to. At the lawyers' house they would discuss the business right over the breakfast table. That's where they did the most talk together. After they would leave—she was a beautiful woman too—she would sit down and have coffee with me

and talk. "Well, Maggie if you ever get into a lawsuit or problem of any kind, handle it this way." Their main thing was you should never try to handle a case by yourself. Always see a lawyer.

I learned the cuts of meat at the Brisseys' house. I worked for her when I was seventeen years old. She had this cookbook, which I had never seen before. It showed the pictures of the different cuts of meat—rump roast center cut and chops and calf's liver and so on. So when I was shopping for myself, I would go to the store and ask for that cut of meat. They were always surprised because, as a rule, our people would go in and say, I want a dollar's worth of pork chops, or a dollar's worth of this or that. They could get the best cut for the same money, but they didn't know any better.

I learned the advantage of buying good clothing. You might pay a few cents more, but it paid off in the end because it lasted and always looked good. I noticed people that bought from the cheaper stores, and my children's clothes outwore them two to one. I remember the shoes that I bought for my children. My children's feet never looked bad. I wanted that because I knew what happened to mine as a child, and I didn't want it to happen to my children. You only needed one pair a season. I know some of my neighbors would buy shoes two or three to every one pair my children had, and their feet never looked as good.



(left) Maggie and her husband (below)
The author's birthplace Penguin, U.S.A.



I learned a great deal from some of the people I worked for. But—well, there were problems.

In the tenth grade Louise won the posture contest of about one hundred girls. She was the only one black. They had all white judges. They didn't use any blacks because there wasn't any blacks in the school system at the time. I told you how tiny and cute she was. She wore cuban-heel shoes, and I dressed her up for the part.

(Louise got another award like that way back when she was a little girl—in a spelling contest like the one they have today over the country. They spelled down to twenty girls in the finals. She was the only black, nineteen whites. She spelled those nineteen whites down and won.)

That night after the posture contest, I was catering¹ a party for this lady. It had been in

1. catering: providing food, supplies, and service for.

the paper who won the contest, and some of her guests had seen it. I went in to take something to the table, and one of the guests said to this other woman, "Did you see a little nigger girl won the posture contest?" Those women turned all colors. I heard the woman I was working for whispering, "Shh, that's her mother; that was Maggie's daughter."

I didn't say anything. I just acted like I didn't hear. But when I went back to the table everybody was quiet. They were looking at me. It really put a damper on² the party. And I was sorry for that because this lady I was working for, Mrs. Forsberg, and I called ourselves very good friends. Before that incident it was, "Maggie, bring this or that." After that she didn't have me come in to the table much more.

I worked for another family, the Friedmans. They were very nice, but they worked you awfully hard. I would eat at noon like for ten minutes.

One day I was working, and I happened to see her getting my lunch ready after her son had had his. He left part of his soup, and she poured some more soup in there and called me in to lunch. I didn't eat the soup. Her daughter came in—she worked at the store, and they took different lunch periods. She saw I didn't eat the soup, and she wanted to know why. I told her that her mother just poured in some of Myron's soup and I don't eat after other people. Of course, that upset the whole family. They were very angry with their mother. Many, many years after that they were still trying to apologize to me.

One time my husband's two sisters and mother came to visit us, and I wanted to take off for the couple of weeks they were going to be visiting. So I sent a friend of mine to work in my place.

This lady I worked for said to this friend,



Maggie's passport photo, 1970 Penguin, U.S.A.

"I hope you're going to be like Maggie. She doesn't take anything. She doesn't take my sheets and doesn't take this."

This friend, knowing what I had, said, "Maggie wouldn't have anything you have in this house. She has a new piano, and she just furnished a house with new furniture."

When I went back, this woman was spouting tears. She said, "I think I insulted your friend."

I asked her how.

"I told her that you didn't take anything, and she said you wouldn't have anything that I have here."

"I wouldn't. I'm sorry that you thought that of her."

"You got a piano?"

"Yes."

She went on, you have this, you have that? After that she got so tight I quit working for her.

The same kind of thing happened when I

2. put a damper on: ruined the mood of.

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worked for another woman, Mrs. Tucker, the beautician. Her husband had to be in a wheelchair all the time. He would be taken every morning to his shoe store, and she would do hair. She and I just got along beautiful. We'd have coffee every morning, and then I'd do up the house. She'd send me to the bank to take her evening's money and never missed a penny. Finally the banker's wife, someone I had worked for, came to get her hair done.

I was there cleaning and she said, just making conversation, "Oh Maggie, did you get your taxes paid? My husband told me you were in the bank the other day."

I said, "Yes," kind of quiet. Because working like that I wasn't expected to own property.

The next morning I went and Mrs. Tucker was all sullen. Finally she said, "Maggie, this coffee can is very low. I thought you just opened it yesterday."

"I did."

"It looks like maybe a half cup of coffee was taken out of the can."

"The can comes like that when it sits on the shelf so long and has been handled about. They're not full. The weight is there but the can is not full."

She knew that. But this was because she was wondering how I could afford property. She seemed to think that I had taken coffee. I had to tell her that we didn't drink

coffee at home—my husband never drinks coffee, and I only drink it when I am out with someone else.

The next payday I told her, "Mrs. Tucker, I won't be back."

She got awfully nervous then. "What's wrong?"

"It seems that you're accusing me of taking coffee. The fact that you would think that I would take coffee, you might think that I would take something else. So you look good to see if you miss anything before I go. If you do, I want to pay you for it."

By this time I really didn't need to work. We had saved money from the beginning of our marriage, built two homes, and had this little store. And your dad worked through-out the depression, and I had worked right along from right after Louise came.

She said, "Oh no, nothing like that!"

She tried to talk me into staying but she couldn't. When I left, she said, "Don't tell Mrs. Jackson, or any of those people that I know, what I said about the coffee."

"Oh yes, I'll tell them. Mrs. Jackson got me to work for you."

Mrs. Jackson felt so bad when I told her. She really got on Mrs. Tucker, "Maggie works for us, takes care of our silver, takes care of the dishes, never breaks dishes . . .!" Oh, they felt terrible. I never met Mrs. Tucker again, but I understand that she felt awfully bad about it.