

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Saul Levitt

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace, NYC.

DATE Feb. 7, 1939

SUBJECT River and Creek Shore Stories

THE WATERSLUMS

An occasional Board of Health inspector will drop around, take a gander at the place and go off.

In some places the Edison Electric will not wire and neither will the Bell Telephone Company, and the Consolidated will not run a gasline.

And this is not in the Tennessee Valley or the Everglades but in the City of New York.

It is on the shores of the City, in the shacks and the houseboats which form little communities, at Eastchester Bay in the Bronx and the Raunt on Jamaica Bay.

If you take a Long Island train to Rockaway on a summer day, you *{Begin page no. 2}*pass by a rude Venice with houses on stilts and dories tied to skimpy two-plank piers and people being neighborly across water alleys.

Or if you go up on the Third Avenue 'L' over the Harlem River you can see down below among the patches of green and the coal elevators and railroad sidings, some shacks; and on the local Lexington line the creeks which dribble westward from the East River into the Bronx like West Farms Creek and Westchester Creek harbor little groups of people in moored barges and in shacks.

Along West Farms Creek a man has cleared off the rubbish and made himself a garden behind a fence of old boards. Near 177th Street on West Farms Creek lives an old lady. She lives on a barge and she has pounded sod around the cabin on the deck and the grass grows there.

WEST FARMS CREEK

The oldest resident of the Creek is browned to the color of a slow-baked potato and he lives on the Creek under the bridge at [Whitlock?] in what appears to be the deckhouse of a boat washed ashore, with a chimney pointing out of the roof.

When T. R's handpicked Rough Riders charged up San Juan Hill the shores of the Creek were wooded and the water ran blue and sparkling to the East River. Then the City began to sprout

around the Creek, the hills and vales and wildflowers disappeared and the red and gray brick rose up and cut the horizon to sharp edges.

The blue, the green, the fish, the white sailboats disappeared, and now it's gray and brown water, sooty shores, flat barges, derricks on the Creek, and the fishing boats which go up to Execution Light three times a week lie on the old Creek like a pink ribbon on a sow's ear.

Every once in a while a body washes ashore, every once in a while somebody comes down below the bridge with a candid camera to take a candid picture, and up above the youngsters crossing the bridge, going home from the new high school utter shrill cries and don't look down.

The old man never says a word except about the weather. He takes care of the white fishing boats moored to the piers.

In answer to a question asked him once as to why he lived here he smiled and looked around him at the derricks on the shore and the barges and the gray Creek and he said, I just don't know why exactly except that I've been here forty-five years, so I guess I'll go on living here. I've been around boats for a long time and I don't know anything else. My wife and sons are dead. I can't understand kids today with their automobiles and movies. Mister, will you tell me why kids are so tough today and disrespectful, do you know what the world's coming to? I don't know if I like living down here or not but I've lived here for forty-five years and I'm sixty-three now. I guess I can get along without electricity and a bathtub until I die if you want a drink of water dip the ladle in the pail over there.

There are other residents on the Creek and like the old man they are camouflaged and their dwelling places are camouflaged and the way you find them is by looking down there a long time among the barges along the shore until your eyes get sharpened and the jittery rhythms of the street stop beating in your brain.

In this way you discover a war veteran who used to be a carpenter and now lives in a shack near Starlight Park. The shack is painted white and looks like the boxhouses you see at railroad crossings.

The war veteran's eyes can't hold to any one thing, his hair is iron-gray and his mouth is loose and funny as if it was on a hinge and he doesn't know how to hold it.

He says the world is going to end in a flood. If I could get a radio, he says, it would sure be nice. I'd listen to everything all day long but I'd keep it low. After a while I'd fall asleep. Then I'd put it on again, see? I'm allright and don't mention hospitals. I can't stand red-tape, see? I'm a'scared of something but I don't know what it is, see?

OR DONCHER SEE.

In the barge-home of the youngest resident of the Creek it's like being in a movie. Through the window the Creek flows cleaner than it does farther east, and it's like looking on a screen, a box-view of almost-green water with the leaves floating down to the East River.

The youngest fellow's voice is so high it threatens to crack through the roof, if this is a place to live I'm a Chinaman, I'm a college grad, I'm a mechanic, painter, utility man, I used to work for the Edison. If there's an odd job around I grab it. If a war'll bring prosperity I'm for a war. Listen, d'y'know what I'm going to do when I get a job? I'm going to move into an apartment, no, into a hotel. I want service. For the love of Jesus.

The colors of the Creek are yellow, brown and gray. There's nothin' nowhere [nohow?]. Nobody knows any tall stories or broad stories.

The City and the news came here via the milk train and when it rains on the Creek there is a pattering on the junked cars, bedsprings and old newspapers scattered along the shore.

The City kids come around with mongrel dogs and play games along the shores of West Farms Creek.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

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

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 Venture coming in. After tyeing up boat he came forward toward shack and recognized interviewer but was ill at ease. He finally opened door of shack. The Captain of the fishing boat who was address 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 weekfish 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 [?] captain. This [?] captain, he liked his drinks you know, and he went off one night and must have gotten a big one on because when he comes back - Y'see there's a space between 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 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 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 viser, 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 "today" he 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 ain't 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. Right there on the boat that's right. I had a sailboat when I was a young feller maybe eighteen. 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 for 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 away 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.

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 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 house. 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.

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