

ERNESTINE WRIGHT

I came to Detroit in 1929, and shortly after I was here, the Depression came. In the early 30's there was no jobs for anyone, especially Black people. Anyplace you saw a home, you would see rooms for rent.

Most of the time it was day work. For me it was living in, staying nights. They would have children, and I would take care of the children at times when they had to go shopping. And sometimes they would leave me sleeping in the same room with the baby's crib, so if the baby needed a changing during the night, well, that was for me to get up and take care of the infant.

We had half a day off on Wednesday and a half a day on Sundays, some Sundays. If they were going out of town or someplace, and you had to stay there and take care of children while they were away, you probably had to work all day Sunday.

I never had a chance to go to my church on Sunday morning because of staying on the premises. Even if I got off, that half a day, they would sleep late because they'd been out carousing and partying all night. So I'd have to wait until they got up and had their breakfast, and wash up the dishes and make the beds, and tidy up the bathroom, and then I would get off.

It rolled on and on till I got tired of staying on the place, and some of them paid \$2.50 a week, and sometimes you wouldn't even get the \$2.50 because they'd kinda fall out with something because they didn't need you. They would let you go and call the employment office after another month or so, and then they'd get someone else to come it for that \$2.50 a week.

Then finally I got to where I wanted to do day work, and I was so light behind, I had nothing going for me like those large women. They would go out, and they would have an enormous shopping bag, and I just wondered about that. I said, "I want day work, and I'll get me a shopping bag." I didn't know why they were carrying the shopping bag. I learned later that they would bring stuff home in them shopping bags. Sometimes they would say, "I'll give you a dollar a day and tote, or seventy-five cents and tote, and a dollar and no tote." That was for the day's work. The lady has several children, and she would say, "Well, I'll take seventy-five cents and tote." Tote meant she would let us have food to take home to the children. Most times they would have children that they had to feed.

I would get a dollar a day, and you couldn't always get a day. You'd go to the employment office and sit there for hours all day, and sometimes you wouldn't get a call to come in and do a day's work.

I went to work for a day, and when I got there they would have the clothes all sorted out, and I'd go downstairs and wash. At that

time they had washing machines with the little gas burner to heat the water in the tub to wash. I have washed on wash boards in the home. After you got through doing the laundry, you put it in a big old dryer.

When I'd go upstairs for lunch, you know what I got for lunch, a little bit of tunafish or salmon poured right out of the can and two or three crackers and a bowl of Jello and two or three cookies and a cup of tea. That was my lunch. When I was at lunch, I would have to go and tidy up the bathroom. You know what tidy up a bathroom means? That means you clean that bathroom and then you scrub the kitchen floor. You didn't know what color the linoleum was on the floor until you washed it. That was a day of doing laundry.

Then when you went to house clean, you would have all the rooms to clean, and white people would have that long hair, and by the time you get through with that floor, you'd have a bunch of hair all on the rag. You didn't use a mop because they had white woodwork. They didn't want it slopped up with the mop. I had to get on my knees and clean the baseboards and mop the kitchen floors. Under the bed there would be rolls of dust big as your thumb. They would go downtown every day to Hudson's and Crowley's. They were the main stores. They'd go down there everyday and go shopping and leave me to do my work. When they came home, they'd say, "Did you do this?" on the window sill, "Did you do that?" They knew very well that it wasn't the color that it was when they left there.

One day a lady set the clock back. I didn't have no watch or nothing except for an old alarm clock that would dance off the whole table if you let it go long enough. So when I got home I found out that she come in, I was down in the basement working, and set the clock back so that made me work one hour longer than I was supposed to for that dollar. For one dollar a day. One dollar. This was in 1929 and 1930.

They didn't want you but once a month. That's why the dust was so heavy under the beds, and that's way the floors were so dirty you didn't know the color of them. They would call when they got ready for another person for once a month, they would call the employment office, "That girl you sent me, she stole such and such a thing." Mr. Phillips, he was one of the heads of the employment office, would say, "Well, I'm going to send you another one. This is a good girl."

They was afraid if you sent a young person that their husband would flirt with them, which they did. They said, "Send me an Aunt Jemima type" because they didn't want their husbands to be flirting with me.

I remember one lady I worked for would have me once a week to come in and clean for her, and she told her neighbor what a nice person I was. I did like to keep things clean. I wasn't jealous of them having pretty things, but I lived in a dull drab neighborhood, and I wanted pretty things too.

This one lady asked me, she said, "My friend wants you to come and give her a day. I said, "Alright." She had asked the lady I was working for how much she paid. She told her one dollar, I'm sure she did. But when I went to work for her, I didn't say, "Well now, you pay a dollar too," because I know'd it was understood that she had recommended me to her. So, when I got through working that day, boy did I have a day's work, and she came out with a pair of old muddy shoes, with mud dried on them, cracking and peeling on the living room floor, right where I had cleaned it, and the mud fell all over it and fifty cents. She meant to pay me with those shoes. So I said, "You get me some more money. You know what I mean." She went back and got another quarter which made seventy-five cents. I told my sister, "I took that and come on out because the lady was pregnant, and I didn't want to get into it with her because she'd have that baby." I was just so disgusted with that woman to come into the room with those muddy shoes.