

Where We Come From Who We Are



Service Workers Oral History Project
Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC
Local 82

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Project Director: Laura Chenven

Interviewers and Project Participants:

Fred Arrington	Glenda Lewis
Doris Gudger	Myrna Mobley
Linda Holmes	Pernell Vinson
Louise Johnson	Angela Woodland
Elizabeth Kennedy	

Interview of Teresa Rivera Lopez and Translation: Maria Naranjo

Humanities Scholars:	Alice Hoffman
	Paula Johnson-Williams
	Marat Moore
	Stacy Passman
	Mary Kay Quinlan

Editor:	Laura Chenven
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Editorial assistance from:	Alice Hoffman
	Marat Moore
	Stacy Passman
	Jane Williams

Layout and Design:	Stacy Passman
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HUMANITIES COUNCIL
of Washington, DC

Alta Cook

Interviewed by Doris Gudger: October 1995

Alta Cook worked at many jobs before joining Local 82. Her work was always hard, but she performed it with energy and spirit. Her service to others, her commitment to justice for working people, and her ability to count her blessings comes across strongly in her interview. If only her ideas on a living wage were implemented, many members of Local 82 would live better lives.



MARAT MOORE

Alta Cook

I was born at Washington Adventist Hospital on November 11th, 1918. I am a native to this area. I was just a youngster and going to school and living in a foster home because my father was 25 years older than my mother and my father had some kind of heart attack. He worked on the job. Those days were before the union days, and they had no benefits like they do now. I don't know whether he worked at Potomac Electric or the Gas Company. He was sick on the job. They laid him off because they didn't have the facilities that they have now for the workers. My mother worked in hotels, and she worked all kinds of jobs....

Before the union

I had a miscarriage in '57 and that's when I started [selling papers] 'cause Charlie [Mrs. Cook's husband] was selling newspapers out on the street corners. The corner that he had I didn't want him to lose. He was going to [school]. He took radio and television repair courses—those two things.... I wasn't able to do anything better, so I just went out and sold newspapers when Charlie was off the corners so that he wouldn't lose his corner. In those days, the Daily News would sell for a nickel.... And maybe The Post was selling for a dime. I say maybe. But it wasn't much more than the two papers. Of course, Charlie would sell some of the other papers like the Wall Street Journal. They were a little more expensive and so forth. But the most you that you could get from selling the newspapers was a nickel, at the tops a dime for each one that you sold. The Daily News was only a nickel, so you turned in four cents to them, and you kept the penny. That meant that you had to sell a hundred papers to in order to make a dollar. I can sympathize with anybody [because of that]. Some of these Congressman and Senators get up ...(and

call people) dead beats. I would just [love] any of them to quit their job as Congressman or Senator, take no salary whatever, and go out try to make a living selling newspapers on the street corner and see how fast they could make a living.

We would leave our house say around 4:30 or 5:00 o'clock in the morning and go down to the newspaper building, pick up our papers. They had a special restaurant where I just loved watching Mr. Whatchamajigger. I remember when his place was up there on Connecticut Avenue. He was popular, particularly with all of the newspaper people. I wish that I could remember his name. Anyway ...one time, Charlie was studying and I was filling in for Charlie. I went into the restaurant, and there was somebody sitting at one of the tables. They asked me for one of the papers. I did not know any of the rules that he had made. Duke [was his name]. [He] was one guy. I mean he thinks about all his employees first. Because by the time they get off from work, the newspapers were all gone. So, he asked us to come in there and go right straight back to the kitchen and leave all the papers that anybody working there wanted. Then if I had any left over, then I could sell them to the customers. Duke himself came right up to me and said, "No, Mrs. Cook you go right straight back there. I want those papers to be for my workers." He said these guys can go out and buy it off the street if they wanted to. I mean he said it right there before them. He didn't mince his words. He said, "I'm doing this for my workers because they haven't got the time to go out and buy a paper. So I'm providing it for them by letting the paper be bought in here." So when he once explained it to me, I just closed my eyes and sailed right on through his restaurant and got in and out as fast as I knew how. But I just loved Duke because he was so good. He just came right out front with what he wanted to say. He just didn't mince his words a bit.

Lots of times, we used to sell them right on the corner of Connecticut Avenue and M Street. That's right across the street from where Ike and Mamie [President Eisenhower and his wife] used to go to church. So whenever they would come out of church, they would make a U turn then go back down to the White House. It would never fail if Mamie was in that car, she would always wave. I never bothered to try and sell them a paper. But one time President Kennedy, it was just before he was elected President, he stopped by the corner to get a paper.

I had a habit because we knew some of the young people who went to the club which was on N Street. It was Saint Matthew's young people's club. They would come from Saint Matthew's Church and buy their newspapers from me and Charlie. We were like personal friends, you know. So I was selling newspapers to some of my personal friends. I said to them thank you and God bless you like that. A gentleman who had just previously bought a paper from me he said, "Well you didn't say that to me." So I said, "Sir, I didn't know you wanted me to say it." And I said thank you, and God bless you, and that was it. He was as happy as a lark. So I always said it.

The day that President Kennedy, he wasn't the President then but he was soon to be, bought his paper and I said thank you and God bless you, he turned around, and he was speechless. He didn't know what to say. So he was thinking maybe that I was asking for a tip. But I wasn't and he just walked on back there to the paper place. It was so funny. He just didn't know what to say when I said thank you and God bless you. That was my personal contact with President Kennedy.

It was the same way with Billy Graham. He was with somebody, and I was selling papers there. You'd think a person like Billy Graham, even though he wasn't buying the paper, he would stop and say something kind to a person. He was so preoccupied that day that he didn't. It kind of wrinkled my thing because he didn't. I had to forgive and forget because...he was just preoccupied, you know.... That particular corner was a corner where you could meet just about anybody because of the location.

Another time when... [the Eisenhowers had grandchildren], ...I went to the dime store and [got] those little plastic things just about big as that thing that the tape goes in.... I got some cotton, some nice clean white material, and I stuffed a little baby mattress and put it in there. I made two little triangular pillows, and I edged them in pink. [I also made] a little blanket. I had gotten these little tiny dolls. They use to call them Thumbalina Dolls. They were soft plastic, and the baby's feet and arms you could bend them. I would crochet clothes for them. I made one for each corner and put them in there. Rather than take them and put them in the mail, because they may have been damaged, ...I was close enough to the White House...to walk up there. When I did, the officer at the gate, instead of him taking them, he said I had to go over to the building

where they took care of the White House mail. I put them into one of the small paper bags. I got a little thank you note.

When the Kennedys were in the office and I knew she had just lost a baby, I wasn't about to give her any baby dolls at that time. I knew that her colors were yellow and white. My mother used to make nice little potholders. So I got Mama to make some for their own private use. I did the same thing with her gift as I did with the Eisenhower's gift.

When the children of Queen Elizabeth were little, I made dolls for the girl. I knew the boy wouldn't want a doll to play with. So I had some pipe cleaners, and I made him a little poodle dog. I still got the letter from Queen Elizabeth thanking me.

*Working at
Different Jobs*

I didn't join the union until after I was grown and married. I had been, up to that time, doing all different kinds of work: selling door to door, selling newspapers on the street corner, and lots of other things. I worked in a bakery, Reindeer Frozen Custard Store, and all that before I joined the union around 1960 something. I don't exactly know the year... Mr. Robert Bailey...was one of the officers. Arline Neal was another officer, and Mrs. Franklin also worked with the union at that time. I think both Mr. Bailey and Mrs. Franklin are deceased now...

*A Hardworking
Woman*

The building that I worked in was 815 15th Street, N.W., very close to the White House. It was owned by the Bricklayers, and they had offices in that building [the Bowen Building]. One of their top officers had a penthouse up on the top floor. I used to clean the bathrooms on one side of the building, and another girl cleaned the bathrooms on the other side of the building. We had four hours' time to do the work. But I was a slow poke. I didn't make it in four hours, but they didn't fire me because of that. They were good to me. I would pitch in when some of the other girls did the offices. I did both ladies' and men's bathrooms on one side of the building from the top of the building. It has nine stories and the basement. I also did the halls. I got so that instead of using the elevators, because they slowed me down, I would go by way of the steps, and that kind of hastened it up a little bit... I got so, once I got use to it, I could do it in four hours' time. If I did a thorough good job on Fridays, I could go in there and maybe do it in two hours time on Saturday...

In 1973 a friend of mine, Mrs. Mill, who is now dead, I had known her from the time I was in my teens before I got married,

needed some help. So she offered me and my husband a place in her house. She gave us the middle bedroom upstairs and the back bedroom upstairs. We turned it into an upstairs living room, and we shared the big bath. I blocked off the bedroom, which was connected to the master bedroom, so that Charlie and I wouldn't use it and it would be private for Mrs. Mills when she slept upstairs. But she got so she couldn't navigate the steps, and so she slept downstairs in the back room off the kitchen.... That's the way things were. I stayed with Mrs. Mills. You might say that I only worked from around 1961 or '62 at the earliest for the union up until about 1973.

I still kept my membership going and paid my dues until they said it wasn't any longer necessary for me to pay dues. I met lots of good friends in the union. The union was extra good to me. One time they had a special party... I still have the nice little stove they gave me. It's brand new, never used it. I've got it out in the closet outside of my door here. I do want to eventually use it. I didn't have it out because I have a friend, she lives here on Harlequin Terrace, she had used her little stove and was in need of a new one. Well, I was not about to give her mine and so I hid it, which I feel was kind of nasty but anyway it's still there. I've saved it. One of these days I will use it because I cherish that stove. It was so nice of the union to give it to me. I wanted to make sure that one of these days I could say well, yes I used it. But as of right now, it's has not been used. It's still spanking brand new.

Many of the people who had offices in the Bowen Building were very good to me. One time [in] one of the offices that I was cleaning there it was this check. I knew for a fact that Charlie and I got dividend checks in the mail. That's what this was.... I was cleaning in this office and this stuff was in the trash can. I said, "Well, that's not right. That's not supposed to be in there." So I put a little note on Mr. Newton's desk. I said, "Here, this must have gotten put into the trash by mistake." When he saw me the next time, he said, "Mrs. Cook, that lady was ready to sue me because she thought that I had stolen that check from her." I said, "Well, I'm glad that I discovered it."

Mr. Chief Justice Marshall had an office there [in the Bowen Building]. I only met him down on the elevator once or twice. He said hello or something like that. Mr. Edgar Hoover had an office there too. Now nobody, I don't think, knew that he did have that office there....

[I was active] with the union, ...I worked on the Minimum Wage Committee, and we tried to get the wages up. We finally did get them up. I think it was about four dollars an hour or something like that. We were still working on it when I quit working in about 1973 to help Mrs. Mills. I couldn't work at the union job after I helped her because she needed constant help. I made wonderful friends there [at the union]: Arline Neal, Mary Martin, and some of the others that were always so good to me. So I have nothing bad to say about the union....

The Work Week

Your main week was Monday through Friday. But instead of working five days a week you worked up to about six days because you worked on Saturday too. See those lawyers some of them in particular worked around the clock.... Saturday would be considered a half a day. It wouldn't be considered a full day.

I don't know what the rules and regulations were but I tried to obey them much as I could. I just went in Monday through Friday, and some of the girls did not work on Saturday. They only worked five days. But for those like myself who cleaned the bathrooms and the halls, you had to go in and do those bathrooms because some of those tenants would go in there. See, like I say, some of those lawyers, and people that had those offices, they were there...twenty-four hours a day. So you [went] in there and cleaned those bathrooms on Saturdays to make sure they were okay.

One time I was a hot-tempered lady.... The lawyers they knew that I had cleaned those bathrooms good. Somebody went in there, I don't know whether it was because I had neglected to put toilet paper in there, or what it was, but the poop was all over the wall. I just exploded. I said, "I don't mind cleaning up accidents after somebody, if they have an accident. But if you need toilet paper leave a note or something so that I can put extra paper in the bathrooms." To deliberately do something that would make more work to see whether the person was cleaning up or not, that just boiled me over. I shouted up and down the halls. Our boss at the time was Miss Dolen. She came upstairs, and she said, "What's the matter up here?" I said, "Somebody went in there and just messed up that bathroom." I knew that I had cleaned it good. I said, "I don't know if it was because it didn't have any toilet paper or just what it was but it just made me mad." I knew good and well that I had cleaned the place good.... I would get down on my knees underneath the sinks and do underneath the sinks so that it wouldn't be dirty.... I

tried to clean the toilets the same way and everything. She said, "Well if anything is wrong, you just come on downstairs to me and don't be shouting up here because sometimes these lawyers need it quiet...."

Some of [the people who worked in the Bowen building] were very important people. When they wanted to have some privacy and didn't want folks to know where they were or what was going on, they would rent these offices and keep it quiet. But I do know [J. Edgar Hoover worked there] because I saw him several times when I was going up and down the halls or on the elevators in the buildings. It wasn't more than once or twice I think. About the only communication I would have would be hello and good bye, you know something like that, very brief....

Confidentiality

I know that there are probably others. I never had a job that put me into the exact office where he rented, because that wasn't my job. I only cleaned the toilets. Another girl who cleaned his office, would know it, you know what I mean? But she couldn't say anything because that's the kind of place it was.... [It] was the Bricklayers' headquarters up on the top floor.... But they rented out the rest of the building. It was strictly speaking that nothing that you saw or heard ever went any further.... Your job was strictly confidential. You didn't go spreading breezes around. Especially when you were working in buildings where there were lawyers.

When I filled in for the girl, Alice Richardson, I think was her name...she had the bathrooms on the side—where I was it was strictly just toilets and sinks, you know, the ladies' rooms and the men's room. On her side of the building they had little places where people could go in and sit down and stuff like that. But the ones on my side of the buildings, they didn't, and Alice could go in there and do all of that work and get out of there in [quick] time. It was when I would substitute for other girls and see how much more they did than I did, and they did it well. They did their job. It made me ashamed of myself. I was a slow poke. See that's what the union done for me. You know how wonderful the members were. They could go in there and just leave those places ...spotless.

The Pace of Work

Now one of the members who taught me a lot, she's dead now, but Lena Simms, she could go in there, and she could clean that place. It would just be so clean, you could eat off the floors after she got done, you know.... But...I was a slow poke and I don't think I've ever really gotten out of being the slow poke. But I did manage

*Fighting for
Wages*

to speed up a little, so that I didn't get fired....

[The union] had things that they were trying to do in order to get better wages. I participated whenever I was able. During that time when I was there...., I think that they had increased [the minimum wage].... I don't know what it is now, but they were trying to get it up. At different times I have called up headquarters...[of] the International Union offices, and I said if they want to give the people that make the lowest wages a living wage, the wage should never be less than \$10.00 an hour. The fact that your taxes, your dues, and everything comes out before you get that paycheck, doesn't leave all that much. It should be higher than \$10.00 an hour. I was trying to tell them that they should boost it up to that.

Now in order to balance the budget, back after World War I, the big depressions, and so forth, the country decided that they would freeze all the wages—everybody from the top all way down. They did that for about ten or twenty years...to have the money to build up the economy so that things started getting better after the depression....

The executives all over the country should freeze their salary automatically when they see that the economy is not right. They shouldn't have to jump down on the little guy. If the salaries was higher for the little guy...—say the minimum wage was \$15.00 an hour— now that would [still] not be enough when you figure you automatically take out for Social Security Insurance and stuff before you ever get that check. You're still not getting the whole \$15 to take home.... For those people who have children and so forth, there should be...a provision if they wanted to [qualify] for child care, the employer could put it in as part of the salary, instead of the person having to pay for that.... They [could] bring the children [to work]. If it was necessary and the child got sick or something, the [parent] would be right there. They could check the child out and see that everything was taken care of.... It would take quite a lot of doing. But if they're really honest and truly wanted to help the little guy, that's my suggestion—make it easier so that it wouldn't have to be this hassle of getting to a babysitter....

Well, I don't think I have much more [to say] because I haven't been able to get down to [union] meetings and stuff, you know, but when I am able, I go. The union has done more for me than I've done for it. It's just the plain truth.