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Downstairs, Upstairs in D.C.; How White Folk Looked to Those Who Served Them

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis

THEY CAME from Midnight, Mississippi, and Dawn, Virginia; from Knott, Texas, and Whynot, North Carolina. They are the African American women who migrated from the rural South to work as domestic servants in Washington in the early decades of this century.

As the daughter of a woman who spent five years as a dayworker, the granddaughter of a woman who toiled as a live-in servant, and the great-grand daughter of slaves, I have traveled back to the woof of my African American heritage through the stories of these women.

With candor and compassion, 81 women spoke with me about their lives as domestic workers in the homes of wealthy white families. They described how they encountered, but never accepted, the master-servant relationship, and their struggle to climb from the status of live-in servants to daily paid workers who returned to their own homes at night.

Domestic work was never easy, and the white households of Washington often proved to be environments of frustration and abuse. Many of the women described working conditions in the 1920s and 1930s that provided them wages of as little as 25 cents a month from employers who demanded subservience at all times. One woman told of her accommodations in the garage of the white family for whom she worked:

"When I'd go down at night from the kitchen, I'd go right in this little room. Car sitting up there. That's where I slept," the woman recalls.

My perspectives on African American womanhood in this century were permanently altered by these women's resilience, courage and fortitude. Through their determination and struggle to make something more of themselves, these women saw themselves as going from grace to strength.

Ultimately, their migration from the South and continuing struggle to increase their autonomy not only improved their own lot but transformed work life for succeeding generations of African-American women. Here are some of their stories:

Waydella Willis loves white people. She especially loves the way white men worship their women. "Like goddesses," she said. During a lengthy interview with me, the elderly woman repeatedly sighed, "I'm always happy. No matter what. I'm just happy."

She was happy when she worked for the mean white lady on Wisconsin Avenue who never let her take any time off. She was happy when that caused her only boyfriend to leave her. She was happy that she never married, never had children and never had a personal life. She was happy when the family for whom she had worked for nearly 31 years simply let her go one day -- without notice, severance pay or pension. She is "just always happy."

Now she lives alone in a tiny row house on East Capitol Street. On the day I went to interview her, she wore a peach print dress, with no jewelry, and white sandals.

Miss Willis is short, light-skinned and quite stout. Her short hair is blonde, curled and well oiled. Although she is "happy," the telltale wrinkles around her mouth are not from laughter. And the constant twitch in the lower corner of her right eye is suspect. She frequently pauses in mid-sentence to stare vacantly out the window, especially while describing "her people" -- the family for whom she worked for 30 years. She loves to tell how she cared for their nine children, who are all grown now with children of their own. She is happy that "her people" all send her a dollar in a card every Christmas and continue to this day to bring their old clothes to her nephew's children.

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She discussed in great detail the inevitability of hard work for African American women and compared the work of a live-in to that of a dayworker. Her voice was high-pitched, and she spoke with ingratiatingly sweet affectation. The result was an unnervingly shrill, Butterfly McQueen-type whine.

At 80 years old, she still does daywork. But her two sisters and other family members accuse her of letting white folks and everybody else walk all over her. Miss Willis said she disagrees. Then her fingers started making busy movements in her lap again. She pursed her small, dry mouth and her shiny eyes glowered as she insisted that she could not remember one time in her life that she had been mistreated or abused by anybody. Not even the time she had missed her sister's wedding because "her people" would not give her the day off, even though she had given them four months' notice of her intention to take that day off. But to make up for her having to miss the wedding, hadn't they taken her on a trip with them (and let her babysit) the very next summer?

She had never liked how her sister talked back to white folks. It was not right to treat white people that way. After all, there was good in everybody. It wasn't that she practiced "turn the other cheek," she just "liked to be happy and not make anybody upset."

Waydella Willis never spoke up. She never fought back. "Her people" took whatever they wanted from her. She did whatever "her people" wanted, whenever they wanted. As long as they left her "happy" she did not mind. When I left her she was still staring blandly through the window. Her right eye was still twitching, and her empty fingers had begun to busy themselves in her lap again. From all appearances, I left her as happy as I found her.

A young white woman who shared a desk with me at the Library of Congress told me about Cartella Berks. When she learned that I was researching black domestic workers, she insisted that I meet the woman who had served her family for more than 50 years. "Cartella," she said, "is just like a member of our family."

I called Miss Berks but instead of using the white woman's introduction, I said that I had been referred to her by my great-aunt, whose name she said was vaguely familiar. I told her about my project researching working women, but she replied gruffly that she had never done anything but daywork and could not possibly tell me anything of importance. Then I mentioned that I knew she went to John Wesley Church with my aunt, and she consented to have me come by. Never did I mention the white woman who gave me her number.

Miss Berks was very generous with details about her former life down South and what she had done in her 80 years. Memories of her trip to Washington were particularly vivid and lively. Then she began to show me pictures, including those of the white people who she said were her employers. She said that she kept their pictures around "like people go to scary movies, to remind me of them people I hate." When she saw my shocked expression, she laughed, "That's the truth, honey!"

She also brought out her old uniform, which she still kept in her closet, though she had not worn it in 40 years. To her the pictures and the uniform are like war relics or scars from a painful surgery. They are macabre mementos of the things that pained her most. She said that her hatred for her employers helped her keep her life in perspective.

Needless to say, in light of the description I had received from her employers' daughter, of "good ole Cartella" being "just like a member of the family," hearing her pronounce her hatred for them was a real jolt. She went on to reveal that the father of the household in which she worked was a senior government official. He was, she said, a mean, racist man.

She still worked for the mother but was glad to be away from her on the days she was off. The only reason she went in at all, she said, was to keep the woman from calling her on the phone to talk all the time. She said she would go over there and prop her legs up "just like this" and listen to her poor, lonely employer talk on and on and on until it was time for her to go home. "She don't have a friend in the world, 'cept me."

Miss Berks had started out with the family when their four children were very young. They were still in a big house back then. But once the kids were grown, they moved into a condominium. They loved her so much, after more than 25 years of service, that on discovering the condominium had only one door, the father had declared that he "wouldn't have no nigger coming in his front door." He paid a contractor to have the plumbing rerouted so they could cut a back door in the hallway for Cartella. "And from that day to this, I have never used nothing but that back door," she said bitterly. "Don't tell me about them people."

As far as traveling with them, she said she hated it. She had once gone with them to the daughter's graduation -- presumably to lay out the clothes and prepare. But in reality it was just to "show people that they had enough money to bring a black person with them." Later she went with them to a son's wedding, this time to show the in-laws that they

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were bringing not only Cartella but also a black man -- their driver. "They were putting on the dog," she mimicked with a raised pinky finger, "by bringing their niggers with them."

Cartella took pride in the fact that the family "didn't even know where I lived." She did not consider them nice people, friends, family or even good employers. She worked for them strictly for the money. Period! Yet they insisted that she was "just like family."

She told me how the family used to give their servants the ends of the roast beef to eat. "One day I guess they felt guilty," she snickered, "so they gave me a piece of the middle part of the beef, which was red and cooked the way they liked it. Then they got mad because I didn't eat it. All this time they didn't know that black folks don't like that raw meat. They been thinking they hurting us by giving us the ends of the roast 'cause they well done, when that's the part we likes anyway!"

Cartella Berks is very active with the senior citizens in her community and in her church. She said she believes in "fighting for her rights." She actively participated in civil rights marches during the 1940-70 period. She is most proud of pictures showing her protesting in the 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

As I left her apartment, it occurred to me that had I told her that I had been referred by her employer's daughter, I might have encountered an entirely different side of Cartella Berks. I laughed out loud in the elevator down to the lobby when I imagined the "good ole Cartella" who might have greeted me had I said I had been sent by the white folks.

When she has a young woman, my great-aunt Mary Sprow kept a diary in which she described herself as a "poor maid that has toiled many years for a living" and saw herself "in many ways not better than a slave."

For more than 80 years Mary Sprow worked as a domestic for prominent Washington families.

Some saw her only as a lady's maid; she knew she was a lady in her own right. "I worked hard all my life but work is not my life," she often said.

"I don't care about that job or mirate about them people when I leave it. I know God gave me everything; a family, my friends, a home. I like to have fun, dress nice and enjoy life."

Mary Sprow personifies the determination of African American women who transformed themselves so that their work as domestics was not their single identity but merely a job. Her deepest joy came from a group she helped organize in 1913, called the 12th Street (NW) Bible Club.

One day my great aunt took me into that world by letting me attend a meeting of the Bible club in the New Jersey Avenue home of one of the members. At 88, my great aunt was the youngest member of the group and served as its secretary. After a brief business meeting, we were summoned to the dining room where a large table laden with exquisite sterling silver, English bone china and fine crystal awaited us. I tried to disguise my sense of intimidation as I scanned the pyramid of seven plates, five forks, four spoons and three knives set in front of me. My doctorate surely gave me a formal education beyond any woman in the room, and yet these credentials gave me no training for the task that lay before me.

After the food was blessed, the hostess began serving our meal in courses. The other ladies were adroitly manipulating their pyramid of dishes and processing the proper utensils for each course. But after about my third faux pas, my poor aunt openly apologized to the others for my obvious lack of manners.

She smiled timidly, saying: "This girl just doesn't know about these things. She didn't ever do service work."

They all nodded politely, making it clear that they had been fully aware of my embarrassing conduct.

With my humble admission of guilt, they collectively offered me some pointers on multi-course dining, which they learned from being clever mimics of the wealthy Washington families for whom these elderly women had worked all of their lives.

When we returned to my great aunt's front door, she winked and said softly that her only disappointment with younger women like me was that we never wore hats and gloves. She was certain this was because we had never been servants. Those of us who never had to prove that we were real women -- ladies -- seem to have forgotten the art altogether.

"There had been many gains for colored women," she acknowledged. But then she wondered aloud, "if there hadn't been some losses too."

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For a long time I sat in my car remembering the tea party, the loving old ladies with their meticulously attended benevolences and their perfect etiquette. Their fashionable hats and gloves. Staring blankly at my bare, untended hands on the steering wheel, I considered what my great aunt had said. And I too wondered about my losses.

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, a professor of history at Howard University, is the author of "Living In, Living Out, African American Domesticity in Washington, D.C.," Smithsonian Institution Press, from which this article is adapted.

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