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I Was a Part Of The Bronx Slave Market

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I was a slave.

I was part of the "paper bag brigade," waiting patiently in front of Woolworth's on 170th St., between Jerome and Walton Aves., for someone to "buy" me for an hour or two, or, if I were lucky, for a day.

That is The Bronx Slave Market, where Negro women wait, in rain or shine, in bitter cold or under broiling sun, to be hired by local housewives looking for bargains in human labor.

It has its counterparts in Brighton Beach, Brownsville and other areas of the city.

Born in the last depression, the Slave Markets are products of poverty and desperation. They grow as employment falls. Today they are growing.

They arose after the 1929 crash when thousands of Negro women, who before then had a "corner" on household jobs because they were discriminated against in other employment, found themselves among the army of unemployed. Either the employer was forced to do her own household chores or she fired the Negro worker to make way for a white worker who had been let out of less menial employment.

The Negro domestic had no place to turn. She took to the streets in search of employment—and the Slave Markets were born.

Their growth was checked slightly in 1941 when Mayor LaGuardia ordered an investigation of charges that Negro women were being exploited by housewives. He opened free hiring halls in strategic spots in The Bronx and other areas where the Slave Markets had mushroomed.

They were not entirely erased, however, until World War II diverted labor, skilled and unskilled, to the factories. Today, Slave Markets are starting up again in far-flung sections of the city. As yet, they are pallid replicas of the depression model; but as unemployment increases, as more and more Negro women are thrown out of work and there is less and less money earmarked for full-time household workers, the

markets threaten to spread as they did in the middle '30s, when it was estimated there were 20 to 30 in The Bronx alone.

The housewife in search of cheap labor can easily identify the women of the Slave Market. She can identify them by the dejected droop of their shoulders, or by their work-worn hands, or by the look of bitter-resentment on their faces, or because they stand quietly leaning against store fronts or lamp posts waiting for anything—or for nothing at all.

These unprotected workers are most easily identified, however, by the paper bag in which they invariably carry their workclothes. It is a sort of badge of their profession. It proclaims their membership in "the paper bag brigade"—these women who can be bought by the hour or by the day at depressed wages.

The way the Slave Market operates is primitive and direct and

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Two members of the "paper bag brigade" waiting to be hired at Brighton Beach and Coney Island Aves. in Brooklyn. The Slave Markets have spread from The Bronx to many other parts of the city. This scene is typical. In the Bronx, one of the main waiting places is Woolworth's on 170th St.

Staff Photo by De Blass

New Orleans and Jazz, 1950 By John Hammond

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BARON VON MUNCHHAUSEN

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