take you home until it's time for your aunt. And they will look for your aunt."

I says, "All right."

So, this woman was a little bit taller--she was taller than me. And she says, "What's your name?"

I says, "Mabel."

"mabel, do you know where you're at?"

I says, "No."

She says, "You're in Jersey City."

I says, "I don't know Jersey City."

She said, "How did you come here?"

I said, "My aunt brought me here. She told me to sit here until she came back."

"Alright," she says. "Come on, because it's getting late, and I just left my boyfriend in the bar." She dranked a lot.

J: Was she white or black?

M: Black.

So, she says, "Come on. I'll take her home to mother."

So, they lived--now, she live on Fifth Street. That was 7th or 8th and somewhere goin' into Grove Street--somewhere around in there. I didn't find those things.

She says, "Come on, now."

I'm thinking. I turned and looked. I'm thinking of that boy and the cop--I could see them. So, I says, "All right." I know when to talk and when to shut up.

So, she took me by the hand. She says, "Come on."

I thanked the girl. The girl kissed me "goodbye." She says, "I'll tell the cop, the lady's got you."

I says, "Alright."

She says, "The cop'll think that lady's your aunt, and I don't know what to tell him."

I says, "Alright, you tell him."

She says, "Alright."

So I go on with this woman. We walked. We walked. She cut through streets like we were doing in The Park this morning. And she held me by the hand. She was a trifle bit taller than me. She must have been a woman around five six or something like that 'cause I haven't grown, see.

Okay, so she took me, and we walked and walked and walked and walked and walked, then we walked, and walked, and walked some more. Then we turned into another street and all was private houses. Nice, private houses. So, she says, "Here's my mother," and she opened a gate, and we went up a flight of stairs that was the porch. And she says, "Mamma, I got an offering here for you."

J: We have to stop a second.

(Tape is paused).

M: Opened a gate. We went up a flight of stairs and was on a porch. And she says, "My name is Bessie."

I says, "Miss Bessie?"

She says, "Yes." She looked at me and smiled. She was a little taller than me, but not too much.

So, I looked at her. I says to myself, "Gee, she's good lookin'."

So, she says, "Mamma, I brought you a little lost girl. You have to take care of her 'cause I goin back--" She was going back to visit her boyfriend or something.

Mamma says, "You don't stay home no time."

She says, "That's okay. I'll be back."

So, she went on back down the stairs, and Mamma took me by the hand and led me in. She says, "You're a big girl."

I says, "Yes, ma'am."

In the room sat a grey-haired man and another girl lighter than all of us. So, Mother says, "Miss White." She says, "My name is Ellen White."

I said, "Miss White."

She said, "Who learnt you how to talk?"

I said, "My aunt. I go to school."

So, she said, "That's very nice." She said, "You

hungry?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am." I'd ate the sandwich the girl gave me.

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So, she scrambled some eggs and had some biscuits, and I think she had bacon or something. She told me to sit down at the table. I sat down at the table, and she sat just like you sit, watching me, and I bowed my head to say my grace. So, she turned to the man, she says, "Pappa," that's what she call him. She says, "Pappa, this girl has had some bringing up."

So, he says, "Yeah." I didn't like him at all. I didn't look at him, I just said nothin'.

She turned to the girl--the light girl sittin' at the end of the table--she says, "Ellen, here's a girl that's gonna be with us for awhile until I can find her people."

To me, I said to myself, "You'll never find them." I dropped my head and ate my eggs.

Ellen said, "Mamma, she can sleep with me."

I said to myself, "That's good. I like her. Good

looking, great balls of fire." I have her picture. She was tall. Light brown skin. Her hair was longer than mine because she had it all wrapped up and turned around like that.

So, she got up and she says, "When you get through eating, I'll take you to the bathroom and you can come with me to my bed."

I say, "Yes, ma'am."

So--she's named after her mother--so she says, "Mommy, I'm going in the room."

Now, the situation at their house was different. It's just like an ordinary house today. There was rooms upstairs and rooms downstairs. You come out on the porch from the kitchen. There was a stove--everything--table, diningroom, everything.

So, after I got done eating, Miss White took me to the bathroom--gave me a towel and things to wash. I still didn't cry. See, I was one very stubborn woman. So, she washed my face and she washed my hands and she gave me--went in there and got a little nightie from Ellen, brought it out, put it on, put shoes on, and I know she searched my clothes to find out who I was--where I come from. She couldn't do that, see, 'cause I'd left everything behind me.

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I didn't leave it in the park, I left it on the train--the papers and things I had.

So, she says, "We'll look for your people tomorrow." But I knew with the description I had given, they would never find them. I told them that I lived with my uncle, and that he was a minister, and that they came here and went shopping and told me to sit in the park 'til they come back. I had to remember that story beca J: How old was she? Ellen?

M: She must have been about nineteen or twenty.

J: Oh, she was much older than you.

M: Yes. Much older than me. And when she held me in her arms--held me tight--oh, I was so comfortable, girl, I slept up a breeze.

So, next morning we got up, and mother told her, "Now, we got to start inquirin' about this kid. We can't keep her."

(Suddenly, much louder). Dad said, "No, 'cause we'd have to send J: How old was she? Ellen?

M: She must have been about nineteen or twenty.

J: Oh, she was much older than you.

M: Yes. Much older than me. And when she held me in her arms--held me tight--oh, I was so comfortable, girl, I slept up a breeze.

So, next morning we got up, and mother told her, "Now, we got to start inquirin' about this kid. We can't keep her."

(Suddenly, much louder). Dad said, "No, 'cause we'd have to send her to school." He was the first one ever ran his hand up my dress, feelin' my pussy, and I told Ellen.

J: When did that happen?

M: That happened about six months or seven months later.

J: Okay, go back to the second day. Then we'll bring you up to date.

M: Second day. Okay, so, next door to us was--next door to this house was Italian people. Everything around there most was white and Italians, and Mamma called in the Italian people and told them they were going to send out a searching party lookin' for this woman. They couldn't find the woman 'cause I didn't give them the description of where I lived at, see.

So, she says, "You don't remember the place?"

I says, "No." But I knew where I come from. I knew every part about me. 'cause I knew my uncle would kill me if I ever told them that he was tryin' to mess with me. He'd kill her. He was nasty. If he'd kill that white man,

you know he'd kill another.* So that's why I wouldn't tell her. Whenever they spoke to me, I had a word for them.

So, two days passed--three days--nothin'. They went to the churches; nobody said anything about missin' a girl. They ain't thought about New York now. They ain't figured out nothin' about New York. They figure I come from Jersey. So, I just let them think that.

So, then Ellen said, "Mamma, we'll put her in school. Maybe by the end of the year somebody'll--" So, they signed me up in school. And, what they told the teacher there, I don't know, but that was [Kolb]--Monmouth and [Kolb]--Monmouth Street and [Kolb] Street--Thirty-Two. I think the number of the school was Thirty-Two. And I got along with all the kids and everybody. I didn't try to beat up nobody 'cause I was too scared.

J: Was it black and white students too?

M: Yes, in Jersey City it was black and white. They didn't have to worry anything about me hittin' somebody 'cause we all was the same. I mean, I went to Sunday school and I played with the kids, and the Italian boys and girls,

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* This murder hasn't been mentioned in any transcripts up to now, but the videotaped interview with Mabel indicates that her aunt wanted money from her grandmother to get this man out of some sort of scrape. If there's further

reference in another transcript, I'll cross-reference this page. (SA)
they were very nice. Naturally, the Italian boys, they wanted to get a little bit, you know. They would run me ragged--the "new girl"--I'd fight them, and that was the end of that.

So, that all went for a whole year.

J: Did you ever get lonely, Mabel, or cry or feel sorry for your--

M: I was too stubborn to do anything. See, I didn't even tell Ellen. Ellen was the first woman that kissed me. I didn't tell her.

J: About where you'd come from?

M: Where I'd come from or nothing. Nobody knew where I come from but Mabel.

J: How did you feel--like the other kids had family, they lived with mother and father. How did you feel? Did you feel like an orphan?

M: Miss White said that maybe my aunt and uncle wanted to get rid of me and that was a good way to do it. After a year, see. And they read the papers--it didn't say nothin' about no missin' person. Many years later I discovered that he said he'd looked for me. He didn't look nothing. See, all they wanted was the money and what was

brought to them. So, that comes in on another part of the story altogether.

So, then Pappa, he started--they showed me how to do work and different things, you know.

J: What kind of work?

M: Housework. Showed me how to cook and like that, see. Nobody showed me those things. And Ellen was there. Ellen was goin' with another fellow named Benny, and he was a light fellow--was good looking. And he would take me to little parks and playgrounds and things like that.

So, there's a pause in there where Benny wanted to marry Ellen. Ellen didn't want him. His mother wanted her son to marry Ellen 'cause she saw Ellen was a good girl. Ellen was gay--now that I know it. She was. So, every night I slept in her arms. And, anything happened during the day, I would tell her.

So, she had a girlfriend that lived at the end of the street, and they were in a private house. Everything was private houses. And she--I found out later--she told this girl she loved me. She wished I belonged to her.

This man told--they was talkin' one night, and his mother and him sat down to talk to Ellen's mother. Ellen was out up to her other girlfriend's house, and I wasn't

there. And, the mother told her, "If Benny can't marry Ellen, nobody else will. I'll see to that." They'd been friends goin' to school--see, the mothers. So, she says, "I'll see that she don't marry nobody else."

She said, "Why would you do that to me and my family?"

She said, "Because I want Ellen in my family. She's your first child."

So that means they must have been gay together--them two women. See, I didn't understand at the time. Now, when there are things going on, I understand them. See, she accidentally had this Benny by another man, and I think it was a white man, and she wanted him to marry her girlfriend's daughter. That's the way I figured it out.

So, she says, "She won't live to marry anyone else if you don't make her."

But Ellen didn't love the man! She didn't care nothing about that damn guy.

So, anyhow, it figured out and carried on. She would come every day or so, and they would eat and talk and cry and eat and talk. So, I told Ellen. So, Ellen goes to her mother and she says, "Why do I have to marry Benny?" I don't know what the answer was her mother gave her, but she wound up marrying Benny.

J: Talk about the first time she kissed you. You said she was the first woman that kissed you.

M: She kissed me about three years later.

J: And you were how old?

M: I can't exactly remember.

J: Twelve or thirteen?

M: No, no. I was older than that. I must have been about thirteen or fourteen years old because I felt funny when she kissed me.

J: Why?

M: Oh, I didn't know. I felt funny.

J: Good funny or bad funny?

M: I don't know bad or good. I know it was a funny feeling. And I held onto her so tight.

She says, "I believe you're older than you say you are."

We were in the bed, so I laughed. She says, "You'll never tell me," she says, "But I'll find it out."

So, from there on, she took me under her wings. Okay. Where I went--she had to know where I went. The mother asked her why she was so interested in me. And, she said, "I just don't want her to get in trouble with any of the boys."

Granma says, "She ain't going to get into no trouble."

I called her Granma, but her name was Ellen White.

J: How long did you live with them?

M: I stayed with them four or five years.

J: Were you going to school the whole time?

M: I was going to school right from their house.

J: And, did you work too? Did you work for them?

M: No, I didn't work with nobody. I'd come home and do my chores--you know what I mean--and helped with the house and all like that.

And, everytime I looked, Pappa was trying to put his hand under my dress. I'd beat it and tell Ellen the next night when she was holdin' me in her arms. That's how she knew. Then she would take me next day--'cause he knew that I told her, and she would get mad at him and wouldn't speak to her father--and she would take me up to her girlfriend's house to stay a couple of days 'til Pappa cooled down.

And Mamma--Mamma turned around--that's why I don't care too much for some people--Mamma says, "These old fresh children comin' around--" They always--in those days, the blame--it don't care how young a child was or how old it was--if the child told them the man was doin' somethin', they'd put it on the child.

J: They still do.

M: I guess you're right. Why is that?

J: Why do you think?

M: Well, I don't know.

J: I think to protect--

M: Protect what. What the hell they gonna--

J: Protect the family because--

M: Protect the family?

J: Right, they don't want to believe that someone can do that.

M: And Pappa, he'd get mad and hit at me, and I'd run, run, run, run down the street to the other girl's house and stay there 'til Ellen come from work.

J: Did you love Mrs. White?

M: I loved them all. I didn't pay him any attention because I had Ellen to protect me, see, and that went on for quite awhile.

Well, I went to school, and Mrs. White, she look at me and say, "I can't understand how your aunt left you. Now, are you sure what you told me was so?"

"Yes, ma'am."

J: And you never told anybody about Winston-Salem, or your grandmother, or the house with flowers--

M: Nothing, nothing. It was not until fourteen years later that they found it out. They didn't find it out then. I told them, see.

And Mamma says, "I knew something was wrong," she says, "But I'll give it to you. You're a good girl." She says, "I couldn't have stood up under it like that knowin' what happened. I'd have went to the cop."

I didn't want to go to the cop because the first thing they'd tell the cop is that I was fresh and ran away or something like that. They wouldn't believe that a man could do something to a young child, you understand. In those days, the parents and the grownup people had it all planned out that it didn't happen. It happened like he said, not like she said, see. That's what's wrong with the world today.

So, I stayed with them for five years. I don't know how old I was. I was quite an old child when I left them 'cause I--

J: Seventeen, eighteen?

M: Eighteen years old. I went to--

(Tape cuts off at this point. End Side 1).

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J: You got a job. What kind of job?

I got a job. That's after I graduated from 8B.

J: You graduated from Eighth--

M: Eight B, that's all, see, because eight-B was the highest they went. And I finished the Eight-B, and then I left.

J: Do you know what year? Do you have any idea--?

M: No, I can't figure--

J: Okay, we'll figure it out.

M: I can't figure that out. It was after five years or something 'cause, when I left school, I left them.

How I come to leave them: Ellen got married, and I didn't like him. She had a baby and she told the husband--one night they were talkin'--and she says, "You take my baby and Mabel if anything happens to me. You take my baby and Mabel." Now, she died mysteriously. I always believe that woman done something so she could take the baby. See, Ellen wasn't sick or nothin'. She wasn't sick. She just went to sleep and didn't wake up anymore.

J: How did you feel?

M: Oh, girl, I seen so much done to people that you'd be surprised.

J: But she was someone you loved.

M (whispers): Yeah.

And so, the day after the funeral, he takes me and the baby and carries us up to a woman's house to live--for me to take care of the baby. This woman had a whole lot of children from the State, and she knew this fellow, so she says, "All right. You two stay there, and Mabel will take care of the babies too--all of the babies. Help us out."

This is the thing. In this tale--we were there--I was there--I can't tell you how long--but, two weeks maybe after the baby and I were installed in this woman's home, she calls me next morning. She says, "The baby will not live."

I asked her, "Why?"

She says, "Because the mother has come after it." That's what she told me.

J: Who? Ellen?

M: Yeah, Ellen.

She described what she looks like. She said, "You know, I don't know what she looks like"--Miss [Robinson] was her name.

I says, "No, she can't."

She says, "Yes. She didn't want the baby to live in

the beginning, and the baby's only 'round about a couple of months old." She said, "So, you are free to stay here, but the baby won't be here with us."

When Benny came that night, she told him. She says, "I've seen your wife. The baby will not live 'til morning." I'm sittin' right there.

So, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. So, she had six or seven children--boys and girls. The oldest one was about fourteen years old. He was a white boy--white and colored. The City put them there for her to take care of them. So, she says, "Mabel can stay for as long as she wants to, and she'll be one of my family." She says, "But the baby won't.. So, you might as well prepare tomorrow to burry the baby." We sat up all night. You know, that baby went to sleep and never woke up.

That's right. I've come in so many different things, you don't know how I've lived under them, but I've lived under them. I see how treacherous people are. I should take a shotgun and go around shootin' all the women and men.

J: Who? All the--

M: When I think about how people do each other--how cruel they are to each other.

So, she says, next morning, "Benny stayed all night.

The baby never woke up."

Miss White, she got mad 'cause I had left the house and everything. I don't know--I dismiss. You see, there're a lot of things I could tell you, but I dismissed them from my brains, you know.

So, then, she moved up on [Siegler] Street--Fifty-Two--I think it was--no, it wasn't. Fifty-Two was the other street she bought a home down. This was up in--up like Harlem and the Bronx--like the Bronx, but I forget the name of that street. But anyhow--I think I got letters and things home from that. Anyhow, she--I didn't see her anymore. I began to go around with girls and things like that. And they would take me to different shows.

J: Let's talk about that, Mabel. When you say you began to go around with the girls--how did you meet these girls?

M: Well, I met a lot of girls when I got a job--

J: Talk about the job. What kind of job?

M: The first job that I went to. I think it was Mrs. Parker.

Now, they was hooked up with--what is that company's name?--all over the world now. I can't think of it right this minute. But, anyway, she had two children. One child

I liked because the child's named Ellen. A little blonde. The other was a brunette.

J: Okay, white. This was white--

M: Yeah, they were white.

J: So, were you doing cleaning for them?

M: Cleaning for them and taking care of the children and like that. And she liked me very well.

So, no, before I did that, where was I at and what was I doin'? I answered an ad or something, and this woman was a middle-aged woman with grey hair. She was old like I was now, see. Or maybe she wasn't quite as old.

[Bamberger] I think their names were. There was only a son and a mother. And she taught me how to cook real good. First time--

J: You were like eighteen, nineteen years old at the time?

M: Uhugh. So many things happened to me in one year--or two years--

J: This was around nineteen twenty. These are in the beginning of the nineteen twenties.

M: It had to be. It had to be.

So, I stayed with them about two years, then I come in on this other job--the other job with the two children.

[Bamberger] and them--he was a lawyer, and she never--

In the meantime, I falls for a colored woman who worked down below with these children. Her name was [Drummond]. She's a tall, good-lookin' black woman with beautiful, mixed grey hair, and she was so nice. Oh, she was so nice. She would bring things to me and take me places and like that.

J: Was she in the life too?

M: I don't know. Never would find out.

But, in the meantime, I got patched with some gay men.

J: How did you meet them?

M: Oh, you know how you always just--somebody--maybe on the street or something--"Hello, hello, hello" and like that, see. And, by getting mixed with them, I got mixed with women. By getting mixed with women, I got more gay men, and Miss White had moved up into--I think it was [Siegler] Street--I'll have to think that thing out. And these fellows used to come up and see me, and they set on the porch and talk, you know, the fun part. They wouldn't talk about their life, see. They would switch around and talk in an offhand way to keep me from knowin' that they were gay. Now, I know they're gay, but then I knew they were queer 'cause I'd had so many girlfriends that were

queer.

J: Already! See, you've got to fill in. How many girlfriends--when you say you had lots of girlfriends that were queer--

M: Well, there was--wait a minute now. I went to church. I think I went to church a couple of times and I met--there was days off and I would meet girls in church, and we would laugh and talk, you know. They were just about all I need.

So then, at that time, I was goin' with a girl named--what's her name now? Don't tell me I forgot my little dear's name! Her name was Viola--Viola [Bellfield]. She was a staunch--oh, boy, we used to go to bed and have a ball.

J: Was she older than you?

M: We both were 'round about the same age, see. But they was all New York people--not Jersey people, see. I'm out of Jersey. These was all New York womens, see. And then I began to go to theater.

J: What did she look like, honey?

M: She reminds me something of--what that girl that gave--[Sisuva]? What's that girl's name? She wasn't quite as tall. [Loquita].

J: Sobrina.

M: Sobrina. She was something of her complexion and all, but she wasn't quite as tall as she was. And then she introduced me to other people. And then, I just had a ball. I used to go over her house and stay all night. Her people liked me. And oh, I could put the charm on. I could charm--

J: Was she butch?

M: All of them was in the life, but I found--

J: Did she dress in a certain way?

M: No, she just dress ordinarily. She didn't put nothin'--no shirts--nothin' on like that. And me, I just put skirts and blouses on, that's all. And most of the time I was there--half the time I was wearin' socks, see.

And then they introduced me to so many other women, which comes in--Ethel Waters and all of them--because we got in with show people in New York.

J: We gotta do a whole tape on that.

Go back. So, you're sitting on the porch, and all these gay, queer guys are there ... Mabel, go back to that. And they don't know you're queer.

M: Oh, no. They don't know nothin' about me. No, no, no, no. These fellas doesn't know it or anything

'cause, when they get ready to talk, they would talk in a different way, thinkin' to throw me off the track, and I wouldn't say anything at all 'cause I didn't want them to know who I was. And, I used to go to their house and have dinner; their mother used to always make biscuits and things for me, and--what's that fella's name?

J: Piggy.

M: Piggy and his friend--they were just like that--Piggy and his friend and a couple of more would sit out on the porch and they would get ready to talk. They talk in Pig language so I wouldn't know what they were saying. I knew what they were saying. And I wouldn't talk in no language at all 'cause I didn't want them to know--

J: Know your business.

M: Catch onto my business.

So, Miss White liked them. I went to see her. She lived in [Siegler] Street. I went to see her. And I just kept workin', and--

J: Then talk about what you did in New York. Where would they take you--your girlfriends--when they come to New York?

M: generally, they would take me--Piggy and them would take me to some other friend's house, see. They don't

know I'm queer. So, I can't figure how--I know how they found it out. I was goin' with some girls and they wanted to give me a birthday party. They wanted to bring me in so that Piggy and them--'cause there was quite a few of those gay men--and they wanted to bring me in. So, these girls formed the party and included the men in it. And every one of them was gay. And told them--I think--did they tell 'em it was for--how did they form that party? That's the point because, I can see them now, when I walked in and when they walked in, it was a party 'cause they had drinks and everything there. I think--

J: Was this in New Jersey or in New York?

M: No, this was in New York.

J: Where?

M: Now, let's see, that was at Piggy's house. Piggy--Piggy lived-- See, I had met Piggy long time before in Jersey, see. Young girl. His mother was very nice and all like that. And I know they were queer, so I would hang around them just to hear what they would say. So it seems like they don't know it's me, and these girls have told them that it was a giving-out party for a butch--and that was me. They didn't tell the name or anything.

J: Did you already see yourself as butch?

M: No, I just liked women, period. I didn't just think about 'em, I liked them. See, I got that from Ellen because Ellen was so nice to me, and everything that connected her was nice to me, so that's why I didn't bother with any married people.

I got hooked up with one married woman--great God above--her husband told her, if he caught me, he'd cut my throat. But he didn't catch me.

J: Back to this party. So, they're going to have this coming-out party for this butch--

M: I don't know how many butches. Quite a few of them. And, when [Benny]* and them walked in the room, their mouths fell open. And she* says to the other girl, "It can't be."

She says, "That's her." So they had been talkin' all along.

And them boys, they come up there--we called them faggots then--they come up and they hug and they kiss, "Why did you keep us in the dark? ... And I'm sittin' on my porch and I couldn't talk to my "Sweetie""--as they called their men friends.

I said, "I didn't want to."

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* It's possible Mabel may have said "Penny" instead of

Benny. Was Benny, Ellen's husband, gay? Did he and Mabel really stay in touch after Ellen died? For how long?
Well, it was some party--all night long.

J: Was it black and white people at the party?

M: There was white men there, not white women 'cause mostly all of my friends then was colored. I knew a few white, and there were very few.

J: Who was your girlfriend there? Did you have a girlfriend at the party? Or were you by yourself?

M: I was alone. I was alone. I always managed to work out and be alone. For what reason, I don't know. And, everybody liked me--

J: Do you remember what you wore to the party?

M: Well, I tell you, I had nothing to wear, but I wore a grey suit--skirt and blouse and jacket. I always dressed like that. Or else I dress with white--white skirt, white jacket and a colored blouse.

But I never got right in with women--going to bed with them like that. I don't know, I just simply (stammering, inaudible).

J: What do you mean, that you never "got into bed"--

M: I never got right in--for instance, you spend the night with a person and then you go to bed with them,

you know. But I never done it.

J: But why did--

M: In what way, I always managed to get away from it. I wanted somebody of my own. Everybody I knew had somebody, and I didn't feel it was right for me to come in and take something from somebody. Even if I wanted it, I wouldn't do it.

And I had so many friends. When I got an apartment in New York on a hundred and twenty-second Street in the basement--it had three rooms--I had a lovely time. My friends--girls--that I'd known so long--lived next door to me--they got me the apartment. And, I don't know, I was by myself all the time.

J: But you had sex?

M: Not often. I never bothered with it. I ran away from it because I was afraid people would do me bad or they wouldn't be good to me like Ellen was.

J: So, you didn't make love to women? Or you made love to women, and you didn't let them make love to you? Or you just didn't make love at all?

M: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

J: Which one, honey?

M: All of them into one.

J: So, you did have some sex.

M: Yes, I had some. 'cause, why would that husband want to slit your throat if--remember?--you told me--

M: Well, I was with his wife. He found out. I don't know how he found out--

J: But did you make love to her?

M: That I was after he. And the wouldn't blame her, they blamed me. And she was after me! That's how she dragged me into her home. And with that, I called it outs. I never wanted to be caught with a married woman 'cause I knew it was danger, in some way, if the husband catch you.

Now, if I hadn't heard him say that-- "I'll catch her, I'll cut her throat." I was under the bed. I had been in the bed with the woman.

J: Making love?

M: Uhmhum. What else do you think we were doing in the bed? Sittin' down playin' cards?

J: But you just said to me you didn't make love?

M: Not to everybody. Just some people, see, and then I'd draw the line from then on.

J: How old were you at that time?

M: Oh, I was goin' in my twenties--about twenty-

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five.

J: Can you--

M: No, it was before I was twenty-five because twenty-three--twenty-three, I was in Bedford.

J: Now, we've got to tell that story, honey.

M: Now that's where all the rest of the things come in.

J: Should we leave that for another day? You getting tired?

(Tape clicks off and on again immediately).

J: Tell the Bedford story.

M: Okay. I was workin' for--this woman had three boys.

J: Don't cover your mouth.

M: This woman had three boys. I can't, right now, tell you their names.

J: That's alright.

M: It was one, two, three. She went away. She and her husband was gettin' a divorce--or she was gettin' a divorce from him. And she went with this other man. This other man, he was--now, this is a story all in one.

J: Let's talk about you. Don't worry about him.

M: No, but it's all in one. I worked for this

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woman, and she had the three boys, and she was gettin' a divorce from her husband. She was to marry--I can't get it straight. Where is Japan Point?

J: Orient Point? ... I don't know, honey.

M: There is a Japan Point. Has to be because this man, he controlled--he had--it was a great amount of milk.

J: That's alright, honey. It doesn't make a difference.

M: In order to bring things back, I've got to bring him in.

J: But it's alright if you can't remember exactly.

M: I have to remember to make the story come in. And she, she went away--It was a summer month.--and left me--the boys went away--she left me with the house. Now, this man--oh, Lord, what is his name? Everytime I see something, it reminds me of his name. He's a very fine white man. And he--stop it there--he married her. He married her. She divorced her husband. She had been a wealthy woman, and her husband--something to do--did he use up all the money or what did he do? He did something he had no business. That's how she come to divorce him, and she

was goin' with this man. She reminds me of somebody that comes here very much.

But anyhow, she lived in Morningside Avenue. That's where all this happened. Viola--Viola, Viola, Viola, Viola, Viola--[Bellfield], I think that was her name--colored girl--she and I went to a cabaret. And, you know how these girls are, they like to pick up a man so's they buy them a soda and stuff. So, this man asked her would she--now, mind you, there's a story attached to him too about his family--he asked us would we go to a cabaret. I said, "Yes."

So, he says, "Where will I pick you up at?"

Now, she had come in from Jersey City and was going to stay with me. I said, "Oh, yeah. We'll be at where I work at." See, I was stayin' there, gettin' ready to go back to Jersey in the next couple of days.

So, I wrote him out the address and everything. He used to bring his boyfriend.

J: Was he gay?

M: No! He was no gay man. He was no gay man. Wait'll I tell you. Wasn't nothin' gay about him. I never thought about it at the time. It didn't worry me 'cause I knew I wasn't in love with him, and she wasn't in love, and he said he would take us to the cabaret.

At the cabaret was playin', I think, Fletcher [Henderson] or a couple of--what's the child's name now? What's the girl's name we read so much about?

J: Billie Holiday?

M: No, it wasn't Billie, it was that other one, Ethel Waters. All of them were around the same age.

So, I said, "Oh, yes."

He says, "I'll take you there, and my boyfriend and I will give you a soda, and we'll sit there."

So, she was at--Viola was at my house. We dressed and waited for them. They came about nine o'clock--this man did. He knocks at the door; I opens the door and let him in--him and his friend--now, he's waiting 'till we get our jackets or something and we go on out. While we're standin' there talkin', the door opens. Now, I know I had shut the door. Wasn't nobody else out there. And two white men walked in--great big white men.

I says, "What do you want?"

He says, "We're raidin' the house."

I says, "For what?"

He says, "Prostitution."

I hadn't been with a man no time. I couldn't figure.

"Come on," he says. "come on. Get your coat. Get your

coat and hat."

They took us downtown. And, when they got us downtown, they fingerprinted us and everything, and I noticed a peculiar thing about this fellow. He didn't show up. Neither one of the other two fellows. Just us two girls.

J: They set you up.

M: Sure it was set up. He'd set his own mother up. He st-- After I got in Bedford, I could find everything about him. He set his own wife up.

J: But you two were lesbians.

M: Yes, we were les-- They don't know nothing about we were lesbians. I guess they'd have throwed the key at us. See. You don't go around tellin' people that you're this, that and the other. No.

So, we stayed overnight. And, next mornin', we was takin' in front of a judge. Next mornin', now. Ain't had time to get no clothes or nothin'. So, I tried to--I says, "I didn't know (inaudible)."

"Why'd you pick 'em up for?"

A little woman. Just like little Judgie. The spit image of her! Hair, eyes, everything! I looked at her today on the corner. I said, if that don't look like Jean [Norris], there's nobody--she must be her mother.

She sat up there and she say, "Well, only thing I can say is 'Bedford'."

No lawyer, nothin'. She railroaded me. I was the oldest from this other kid. So they railroaded me. The other kid could prove she was from Jersey City and she'd come to spend the night. That would make it think that I had that girl there for prostitution. And the man--and this fellow told the cops that's what he came for.

Okay, now, next thing, up to Bedford I was sent. The first thing happened when I hit Bedford was this [Irishman].

(The tape develops a strange echoing sound at this point so that Mabel's voice is reverberating back and forth).

Big, tall, handsome [Irishman]. He said, "Now, you tell me your story," he said, "Because you don't look like anything like that. And I'll tell you one."

He sat down--him and his wife--and told me why this judge sent me here. She had to send up so many people a month, and she get payed for so many people."

(Tape ends at this point).

INTERVIEW WITH MABEL HAMPTON (M)*

Interviewer: Joan Nestle (J)
Interviewer: Deb Edel (D)

J: This is Tape Number Four with Mabel Hampton, July, 1986.

Okay, now Mabel?

M: Yes.

J: I wasn't here to hear the end of your other tape so--

M: Well, you'd better start it.

J: I will, but first tell me, where did it end?

M: Where we ended was when the--Miss--Miss--can't think of the woman's name--she put me in the car and brought

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* This tape evidently followed the tape whose transcript page numbers are preceded by the letter E.

me to New York.

J: Okay, now, what year is this that you're back in New York?

M: Nineteen twenty-three.

J: Okay, and, do you remember how old you were? You would be around twenty. Twenty-two.

M: Yeah, yeah. I was twenty-two when this was goin' on.

J: Okay, so we'll pick up--so you've been in Bedford Hills now--

M: A year-- I was was in Bedford Hills a year and eight or nine months altogether. I come out of there in nineteen twenty-three.

J: Before we go on, Mabel, can you talk a little bit about what the experience did to you? know that it's not something you talk about a lot, and I'm one of the few people you've talked about it with.

M: What do you mean, "experience"?

J: Bedford Hills. What did it mean to you? Were you ashamed of being there? Why did you--?

M: Why didn't I let people know I was there?

J: Yes.

M: I didn't want them to know that I had been

picked up for bein' a--a--a prostitue or bein'--

J: But you knew it wasn't true.

M: Well, I know it wasn't true, but they don't know it wasn't true.

J: Do you still feel--?

M: 'cause so many people began to think that Bedford Hill was a terrible place--

(Dog barks because, evidently, someone is at the door. Tape is shut off to deal with this. When recording resumes, Mabel and Joan are discussing some object).

J: Deb gave this to me for my lipstick.

M: No wonder I couldn't open that thing!

J: It's for a fem, honey, see? So I can see what I look like.

M: Oh, deary, they say I'm touchy. Let's go. Connect the thing.

J (laughs): It is connected. It's on. Here we go.

Now, Mabel, I was just asking you--now, you had said that you didn't want people to know that you were at Bedford Hills--all these years.

M: That was the only thing. I didn't care anything about them knowing I was a lesbian. I didn't want

them to Know I was in Bedford Hills 'cause they say, "Oooh, she says she's never went around with men and then she's all hooked up with some man and prostitution and in Bedford Hills." See? And that wasn't so. So, I just kept quiet and told nobody.

J: How do you feel about it now?

M: The same way. See? I'm not particular about--well, now it doesn't matter because of the age. See? I don't care what they think 'cause lot of people has killed people or--not only Bedford Hills--they've been all over--served plenty of times.

J: And there're a lot of women--good women--who are also in jail.

M: There's a lot of--plenty of good women. I met a couple of them, and they wasn't lesbians--they wasn't gay either.

J: But there are a lot of good lesbians in jail too.

M: Yeah, but they're in jail. They're in jail for something they didn't do.

J: Okay, let's go on now. You come back, it's nineteen twenty-three, and what do you do?

M: Well, I went to one of the girls' houses.

See? This--what was she now? She brought me back from Bedford Hills.

J: It's okay, honey, if you can't remember.

M: Yeah! Those are memories 'cause she brought me back. She's an investigator. When she walked in--did you get the last of that?

J: Uhmhmm.

M: And, she seen me and all like that. "Oh, well," she says, "I'll have you out of here," and carried me down to--almost said his name, but I forgot it--"and see whether I can get you out of here tomorrow morning."

So, sho' 'nough, he says, "Certainly, I'd have let her out before, but she was having a nice time, and--"

J: Where did she take you? To Manhattan or New Jersey?

M: Well, she carried me to Manhattan.

J: Where in Manhattan?

M: Was it Manhattan? Yeah. Because, you see, Maud lived--that's the woman that's in the picture that sits in the chair.

J: Beautiful woman, all dressed up?

M: That's her.

J: Oh, she was beautiful.

M: She was a goodlookin' woman.

And, so, her husband was a moving man.

J: She was in the life?

M: Yeah. Her and I went together many times. Her and I went together many times 'cause I was the first woman. She didn't know, and I didn't know either.

So anyhow--so, we carried on. We had a good time. And--

J: So, this is nineteen twenty-three and--

M: This is nineteen twenty-three.

J: And you're going back to Maud.

M: So, I went back to the white girl's house--to her apartment--and there I met a couple of more, and [they] said, "What are you going to do."

I says, "I need some place to stay."

They said, "How bout an apartment?"

I says, "Oh, boy. Sure. You got one?"

Say, "Yeah, I think I know somebody who's got one."

So, they puts me in a car and carries me to a hundred and twenty-second Street.

J: Where was their apartment?

M: Their apartment was up in the Forties--a Hundred and Forty-Second--somewhere there.

And this woman was a very nice woman. She had a husband and a sister. But they didn't pay you no attention. So I got three rooms from this woman: bedroom, a livingroom, and kitchen. I could do all my cookin'. She furnished me with dishes and things to cook by.

So, "Now," I says, "I have to go over to Maud's and get my clothes and things," 'cause she had all that. So, we got in the car and went to Maud's, and Maud had her husband to bring all the dresser and things like that. See. Maud furnished up the room 'cause her husband was a moving man, and he brought all this stuff home with him.

Next day, I was settled, and we had a ball. We all--they had food, they had liquor to drink. I didn't drink.

J: So, all the girls--all the women came?

M: Yeah, all. There was about five or six white women, and the rest was colored. Some I knew and some I didn't know.

J: And they were all lesbians?

M: And everybody was gay. As you call it, they was gay.

J: What did you call it?

M: I didn't call it anything but to say they liked women.

life?"

M: Did I stay in the life?

J: Did you say, "They were in the life?" Was that a phrase you used?

M: No, that's something that happened here later. So, then, I settled down. And then I wanted to get a job, and I started lookin' for a job. And I worked in a factory and different places, you know.

J: Well, tell me about it. What kind of factory, Mabel?

M: Dress factory. We made--the first time I was in a dress factory, I was sewin' on a machine. I was sewin' on a machine, and that's the year that they started walkin' out for the strike.* So, I didn't like that too much.

So, one of the girls said, "Can you dance a little?"

I said, "Uhugh."

So they carried me to The Lafayette. That's before nineteen and twenty-three was out. So, I danced a couple of months and--

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* I don't imagine strikes were very welcome in this post-war era of Palmer raids, deportations (of Emma G., et cetera), and general anti-Communist backlash. Was Mabel scared, politically opposed, or just doggedly needing to work?

J: "They like women." Did you say, "In the life?"

M: Did I stay in the life?

J: Did you say, "They were in the life?" Was that a phrase you used?

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like being at The Lafayette.

M: Well, it wasn't--I didn't like it too much because that type of life I hadn't been used to. There was Florence Mills and all those women. From Florence Mills to Ada Somebody and the two Ethels and this, that, and the other.

J: Was Gladys Bently there?

M: Yeah. That's how I happen to have come in with Gladys, see. So Gladys and her girlfriend was named--I think her name was Ethel. I think--no, her name wasn't Ethel 'cause the other two was-named Ethel. This was a girl from Philadelphia because she used to come in on the weekends, and they'd come to my house and stay, you know--

J: Why didn't you like it, Mabel?

M: Hmmm?

J: Why didn't you like it? I think other times you've said that you did like it? Why didn't you like the Lafayette? Being in--you were in the chorus?

M: Yes.

J: But you didn't like it. Why?

M: No, I didn't like it because, at that time--men are funny--if you had color, they were after you. They

didn't bother much with brown-skined black women. They was always after white women and light women and all like that, see. And I'm sensitive. Bein' around people, I sensed all of that. So, they'd go to bed--they'd grab you to go to bed with them. But otherwise, they wouldn't bother, and, if you didn't drink, they wasn't goin' to bother you, see. So, I didn't have too much trouble with them, but one--we was preparin' for a dance chorus to go to--now, where were we goin'?--right this minute I--was it Chicago or where?--'cause I got mad and got out the window in the hotel, see, 'cause he wanted to go to bed, and I didn't want to, see. And then, they wouldn't have nothin' to do with you. And, if you didn't watch yourself, they'd beat the hell outa you. See.

J: But there were other lesbians there with you, or were you--

M: Oh, most everybody. All of them women was gay. All those women was gay.

J: So, were they having trouble with the men too?

M: No, some of them wanted to get higher up, so they'd go to bed with the men. I didn't want to get higher up. I didn't want to be bothered. See, 'cause I didn't want no [dicks] and things like that worryin' me and gettin'

babies, so I wouldn't bother with them.

And, only thing I did--then the girls got me in the chorus that--let me see, we was at--where was we at now?--I tell you in a second--The Garden of Joy.

J: Yes, that's a story.

M: See, The Garden of Joy. They got me in the chorus there. And I could dance pretty good, and got along--

J: Where was The Garden of Joy?

M: It was in The Forties, up on the hill.

J: A Hundred and Forties, you mean.

M: No, that was in The Forties. I think that was in about A Hundred Forty-Six, a Hundred Forty-Seventh Street--it was a hill. It was up on a hill.

J: Where the Abysinian Baptist Church is?

M: Yes. Not far from that. Up on a hill. It was floatin' on a hill. And there--I stayed there a couple of months.

J: And that's where, you told on another tape, how you were kidnapped and all that.

M: Yeah. That's right.

J: You don't have to have that.

Where did dancing in Coney Island come in?

M: Where did dancing in Coney Island come in?

J: Was that before or after--

M: That was a little before 'cause I had met Gladys--not Gladys Bently, but Gladys Mitchell, and her mother liked me very well. So, I met met Gladys, and she took me to her mother's home, and they fed me--

J: Right. We have this on another tape. I remember--when you fell in love with that woman! Remember that?

M: Yeah, that's it. That comes right in between that.

J: Between where? Between Bedford? When you came back from Bedford Hills?

M: When I came back from Bedford. All that was in there before Christmas.

J: In between--'cause you were back in New Jersey then for that. Right.

M: Yeah.

J: Let's go--Could you talk a little about Gladys Bently? What you remember?

M: Well, I just remember that we all was friendly together, and she--

J: What did she look like, Mabel?

M: She was a brown-skinned woman, and she dressed boyish all the time, and she'd fight up a breeze.

J: She was big, wasn't she?

M: No, she wasn't. She got big in later years. See, she wasn't big. She was kind of heavy-set and kind of heavy-voiced. And, by the time she got through beatin' the women, the men wouldn't bother her. See, 'cause she knocked the hell out of the women. Oh, she bruisified them if they looked at somebody else and she wanted them, see.

So, then, The Garden of Joy--she appeared there. I appeared there with her. And, let me see. Where was I living at? I was living on A Hundred and Twenty-Seventh Street between Lennox and Eighth.

J: What were you wearing at this time? How did you dress?

M: I always dressed with a suit.

J: Did you consider it boyish?

M: I didn't care nothin' about bein' how I was dressin', 'long as I was dressin' and I was dressin' good because I had three or four suits and shoes. I had Oxford shoes--

J: But, I mean, did you see yourself--? When you dressed, did you dress--

M: Like I seen myself [as] a boy?

J: Like a stud.

M: Yeah, yeah. Well, you had to be a stud, you know. And you'd wear a little tie or collar pin or something like that.

INTERVIEW WITH MABEL HAMPTON (M)

Interviewer: Joan Nestle (J)

J: This is December Twenty-eighth--

M: Today is the twenty--

J: Seventh or eight, I don't know. But anyway, this is Joan Nestle and Mabel Hampton, and we're doing a tape about Mabel's life in New York City as a lesbian.

Mabel the first question is, in what year did you come to New York City?

M: Well, I'll turn away from that. That I come to New York City or Jersey City?

J: No, New York City. We're just interested in New York City.

M: New York City. Okay. Let's see, nineteen--

when I came to New York City--you see, I was going backwards and forwards.

J: Okay, that's alright, don't--

M: Well, I'll say, nineteen--

J: When you first hit the city. When you first hit the city.

M: Hit the city. World War I. What was that?

J: Around nineteen--now, that would make you eighteen.

M: Yeah.

J: But you came here as a little girl.

M: Yeah, but I came to Jersey City.

J: Yeah, but for a few days you were in Greenwich Village. Remember when you were living with your uncle.

M: Yeah.

J: So, give me that date.

M: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I was eight years old.

J: That would be around nineteen ten 'cause you were born in nineteen oh two.

M: That's right.

J: So, in nineteen ten, you went to what part of the city?

M: I came to fifty-two West Eighth Street. My aunt brought me.

J: Now, let's skip--'cause we know everything that happened and you ran away and, now, what year did you start living in New York City as a lesbian woman?

M: Oh, that was around nineteen--I was about seventeen years old.

J: So, that would be around nineteen nineteen, nineteen twenty. Okay.

M: Nineteen twenty.

J: In what part of New York City did you live?

M: I never thought about that. That was in nineteen twenty. I lived in one twenty West Twenty-Second Street. I had two rooms there.

J: Did you pick that neighborhood for any special reason?

M: No, no. A girlfriend of mine was livin' in that house. Oh, yes. They lived next door and they got me--

J: Were they lesbians?

M: Yup, they were lesbians. And they got me three rooms there in that house. And I stayed there 'till I met Lillian, and we--

J: So that was 'till nineteen thirty--you stayed there around eighteen years? How long--

M: I was--different times I'd come back. And, meantime, I went away with people, and I worked, and I went away, then I always kept a room or something, then I'd come back. Then I went in the show.

J: Alright, let me go back. Were there lots of lesbians living around that neighborhood?

M: Around that neighborhood I knew--oh, what was here name. If I can think of her name, then I can think of all the rest of them. I'll get it later. But, anyhow--

J: What was the apartment like?

M: Well, it was three rooms on the ground floor, and there was a bedroom, a livingroom, and a big kitchen.

J: You remember how much you paid for rent?

M: I don't think I paid them more than ten dollars a week. Ten dollars a week I think I paid for that apartment. It was funny. She was a funny place. Then I would go to work 'cause I went to work for Mr. [Dandrick], and, you know, I had--

J; Did you have parties in your house?

M: Have what?

J: Did you have lesbian parties in your house.

M: Not in my house. Next door, this girl, she had four rooms in the basement, and she gave parties all the time. And sometimes we would have pay parties too.

J: Oh, tell about that. What's a pay party?

M: We'd have pay parties, and we'd buy up all the food--chicken, and different vegetables, and salads and things, and potato salad--and I'd chip in with them you know 'cause I'd bring my girlfriends in, you know. And--what was her name? If I can think of her name, I can think of all the rest of those names.

J: So, you paid for the things you brought to the party. Or did the money go form the party to pay rent or something?

M: No, no. We didn't have no parties with the rent. We went to a lot of those places.

J: Well, talk about that too.

M: We went to a lot of the pay--where you go in and you pay a couple of dollars. You by your drinks and meet other women and dance and had fun. But, with our house, we just give it for our close friends. Pigs' feet.

J: How many women would be there about?

M: Sometimes there would be twelve or fourteen--maybe less and maybe more.

J: And, what would you have to eat?

M; Oh, potato salad, pig feet, chittlins. And, let's see, what else did we have? And sometime it was corn. in the winter time it was black-eyed peas, and all that stuff we had.

J: What were the women wearing at the party?

M: Most of them wore suits. They wore suits. Very seldom did any of them have slacks or anything like that because they had to come through the street. Of course, if they were in a car, they wore the slacks, but then five or six of them would be in the car and come with their slacks on. And, most of them had short hair. And, most of them was good-lookin' women too, there was--

J: Were there a lot of couples or were there a lot of single women?

M: Well, there was single and couples because the girls just come and bring--the bulldykers used to come and bring their women with them, you know. And you wasn't supposed to jive over there. You wasn't supposed to look over there at all. So, --

J: There was dancing?

M: Oh, yeah, they danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston--they did a little bit of everything.

J: Do you remember what records--was it by records? How was the music?

M; The music was records. They were all records.

J: Who? Do you remember who?

M: I think I got some records home now. I've got some records I want to bring you. Some old, old records that we used to dance to. You see, with the fire, I tried to save as much as I could.

J: Did you meet women at these parties, Mabel?

M: Hmmm?

J: Did you ever meet anybody that you took home across the hall?

M: No. No, no, I didn't do that. I don't know, I didn't do that. There was Mildred Green; there was quite a few of them.

J: Were these all black women, or would these be white women too?

M: No, very rare unless we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. They were all colored. But me, I'd venture out with any of them. I just had a ball. I had a couple of girls--white girls--from downtown in The Village and tell them about it and they would come up. They were white girls, and we got along fine.

J: Do you remember the first time, approximately, that you went to The Village as a lesbian?

M: Went to The Village?

J: As a lesbian woman--that you went to The Village 'cause you knew that's where other lesbians hung out.

M: No, the first time--I was going down there all the time. I didn't know "first time" at it. After I started out and got in the show with the show-girls, we'd go down there in the summer--those-- Then, at that time, I was acting at the Cherry Lane Theater. So, therefore, I went there--

J: And what time did we figure this was--this was nineteen twenty, right?

M: Yeah, it was around in that time. It was nineteen twenty.

J: But you knew that The Village was a place where lesbians went?

M: Well, I wasn't sure, but I knew you could go down there and meet up with quite a few of them, see.

J: Did you ever go to any bars down in The Village in the twenties?

M: Very seldom. Very seldom. I didn't have to

go to the bars because I would go to the women's houses. Like, Jackie, maybe, would have a big party, and all the girls from the show--all the girls from this place/that--she had all the women there.

J: Do you remember how the women called themselves. Like, nowadays, we call ourselves "lesbians" or-- What were some words that they used? Like, you said "bulldagger"--

M: Yeah, "bulldykers" and--What else?--"ladylovers"--and "butch"--and--

J: What was the woman called who wasn't a butch?

M: Well, I'll tell you, the butch was mostly like the man, you know.

J: Right, and what were the other ladies called?

M: And the other ladies--"This is my friend, my wife," blah, blah, blah. And we would--

J: Did you use the word "stud"?

M: Sometimes, yeah. Mostly we heard "stud" when we went to a big party like on Riverside Drive--not Riverside Drive--what's the other thing?--we came through there the other day. What is it? It's a hundred and tenth Street--no, Central Park West. Now, there was a woman there that knew me very well, and I used to go up to her house.

At her house, we had the marriage between two women.

J: Oh, talk about-- What year was that, Mabel?

M: God! That must have been around nineteen-- Oh, the marriage was after I met Lillian.

J: So that's around nineteen thirty-nine?

M: No. No, no, no, no, no. It was before back as that. That was around nineteen thirty <u>eight</u>--something like that--'cause I met her in nineteen thirty-two. And, one night--What is the woman's name?!--I'm trying to think. Now, if I can think of her, I can tell a lot of things. Oh, brother!

J: That's okay.

M: Anyhow--no, it ain't okay, I got to remember. Anyhow, she called us next door. We was livin' next door, and she says, "Mabel," she says, "You know, Florence--"--I forget what Florence's last name--"She's getting married."

So Lillian says, "No, she can't."

"Yes, she's going down--her and her friend and her and her mamma is going down to get the marriage certificate and The Reverend Monroe will marry them." So that's how I knew he was gay. He was a faggot.

J: What church was he with?

M: He's a hundred and fourteenth Street and Saint

Nicholas Avenue. Oh, he was a fine guy.

So, anyhow, I said, "Alright." So, naturally, we dressed fine, you know, and there must have been about thirty/thirty-five people there. And big--

J: In their house?

M: In their house. It was an apartment. And, I think thats one oh ten or something like that.

Hit on some stories. That's the woman who I--I was becoming political, and she wanted me to become an Assembly woman or something. I wouldn't do it. Lillian says, "no. Don't get yourself in trouble with those--", what do you call them now?--people that messed up just before the Second World War. She says, "Don't bother with them because they are--you'll get yourself in trouble." Now, in the meantime, I was--

J: Let's go back to the wedding ceremony.

M: Oh, the wedding ceremony, okay.

J: What were you wearing back then? Do you remember what you and Lillian--?

M: Wait a minute now. No, the girls was there and they had on tux--white neckties and everything--and slippers, and I had on a suit. I remember, I had on a white suit.

My hair was long. I had the girl fix my hair. She

rolled it all up, and I put water in it and waved it, and it come down all around my face like that.

And, Lillian always look like a fashion [plate], see.

So, we went to this wedding. The guests started arriving, and I seen more people that I knew--

J: Was it all women?

M (a bit trucculently): All women. Yeah, it was all women. There wasn't no men there outside the minister--that's all. And, of course, the girl who was marrying [Elga}, her mother gave her away.

J: How would they dress the bride?

M: They had pants on.

J: Both of them?

M (with more trucculence): No, not both of them. The girl had a veil--a wedding dress and her veil--and I think she had white shoes on. And the bride's maids--they had different dresses on with flower; they had flowers on the arm. And music was playing.

J: And how was the bride groom--the woman who was the groom.

M: Oh, she had a real beautiful bridal gown. She had a gown on.

J: Oh, she had the gown.

M: The bride had the gown on--

J: And what did the other woman have on?

M: And the other woman had on pants. She had on white pants. She was dressed in white too, and so was the bride.

The passed downtown at City Hall!

J: How did they do that?

M: I don't know. That girl looked so much like a fellow you couldn't tell her apart--just like some of them do today. She was the spitting image and didn't have to change her voice. She had a heavy voice anyhow. They went down there, and I forget who, at the time, when she went down there, had a blood test and everything. Everything was okay. Brought the thing back--went and got it, brought it back, give it to the minister.

J: Do you remember anything that Reverend Monroe said at the ceremony? Did he say anything--?

M: Yes, just like the regular, "Do you take this woman to be your lawfully married--, [and[do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

J: He said the word "man"? He didn't say "two women"?

M: No, I don't think he did. I don't think he

did. There was so many people, and I was so far back. And I could hear her sayin', "Yes."

J: How old were they, the two people getting married?

M: Well, one was twenty-five, and the other was thirty. And then, after that, Reverend Monroe said, "Now, kiss the bride," and he knew they were women. He knew because he was gay hisself. And that's all he went in for--was to marry men and women.

J: What was his first name? Do you know, Mabel?

M: I can't remember now. I'd have to get it from somebody. I think [Sis] would know his first name. But, anyhow, he was Monroe.

J: Did a lot of lesbians that you knew then get married?

M: I didn't know too many--not that got married. I heard about them, but not too many. I heard about another woman who got mixed up with another girl, and she was married. We were all coming from a big party, and she went home. Her husband come in, and he must have slapped her around. She killed him right there. She was from Lillian's hometown. Her and Lillian went to school together. He didn't give her a day. He was a mean guy.

J: Mabel, do you think living in New York City made it easier for you to be a lesbian than if you lived someplace else--like in a small town?

M: Yes, in a small town, you wouldn't have a chance to get around and meet people. Now, in New York, you met them all over the place: from the theater to the hospital, from the hospital to anything. I even went one night to the political meeting, and I met to women there. I knew they were gay. I knew it. And we start to talkin' and like that. And then from that I got mixed up in spiritualism and found out that the head woman was a lesbian.

J: So New York was really a good place to be a lesbian in--.

M: Yes, this a very good place to be a lesbian. You learn so much, and you see so much, and you meet so many people.

J: Did you feel safe here as a lesbian? Like in other towns, you know, lesbians get beat up?

M: No, I never went to other towns. That was the point. I never went nowhere but Brooklyn, New York, Jersey; Brooklyn, New York, Jersey--well, maybe, and White Plains out there a little bit. That's all. In The War, you

couldn't get me out of New York.

J: Did you hang around a lot in Harlem--in the gay community in Harlem?

M: Well, yes. Of course, I was in with the show people--quite a few--and we'd go to night clubs and different places, you know. I'd sit there and drink my soda, and they'd talk and they'd drink up a breeze, and we'd get out of there and we'd go to one of them's house and meet some more.

J: What year is it?

M: All of that happened before I moved to the Bronx. I moved to the Bronx in nineteen forty-three. So all of that had to happen in between The Twenties and The Forties.

J: Do you remember the names of any places you went to in Harlem?

M: Yeah, there's--I forgot them now--just like the back of my hand I remembered them. You'd go down the steps and go in. They'd be playin' the music. I went to four of five of them--maybe more. And then I went down the village to a white place down there and were treated very nice.

J: Tell us--I remember--when they used to have

those big drag dance. Those drag balls?

M: Well, the drag balls are different. Everybody went to those. The women wore pants and the men wore dresses.

J: When was this?

M: That happened in twenty-five or twenty-six--something like that--because that happened around the time [or Miller] Florence [Millrose[died, you know? And then--

J: What part of New York were they in? You took me to one in the 1960s, I remember, with Lillian. I was with Carol. But, in The Twenties, where were they?

M: That was Seventh Avenue--someplace on Seventh Avenue. But, there were so many of them, they were open all around the place, you see. Get in there and have a nice time.

J: You also told me that there used to be boat rides.

M: Boat rides?

J: That there was some women who ran boat rides?

M: Oh, yes. What is her name now? I used to know it better than I know my own. And they'd give these boat rides up the Hudson, you know, I mean way up there--way up there all night long--and that's where you'll see the gay

people at. And she--

J: What year? Can you remember that?

M: That's since we've been here in the Bronx. That was around nineteen-- What is her name? I'd have to call on somebody else for those, but Rose would know the boat rides. Oh, of course, one woman lived off of Boston [Post] Road on a hundred and sixty--think she's sixty-fifth--sixty-fifth or sixty-sixth Street, and she was known for her boat. Everybody would go when she gave a boat ride. And, I knew those faggots--

J: Was this in the nineteen fifties or forties or--

M: No, no, these come down into The Sixties and Seventies, and we would go up the Hudson. All night long, those boat rides--and sometimes in the day, but mostly at night.

J: Mabel, were there any other parts of the city that you loved more than any others--that you loved to go with a girlfriend--or any parts--beautiful parts that you remember?

M: No, I don't remember because I was travelling so much--going away with the white people that I worked for--I didn't have--Lillian went. She was on a couple of

them, but I didn't bother so much.

J: There wasn't anyplace that you just liked to walk or parts of the city that you--

M: No. Here in New York?

J: Uhm-hmmm.

M: Let me look over the place.

J: Did you like Central Park or did you like the river.

M: No, I did not. No, no. I didn't like Central Park; didn't like the river. Most I go is people's homes--and Crotona Park*. I loved Crotona Park; I'd go out there and sit, and we used to go out there and--on holidays, we carried food and all out there and----

J: Oh, picnics.

M: Picnics, yeah. We had a beautiful time out there. I met [Mel] downtown, see. She lived in River Street. And there are two women I can tell you--

J: What year was this?

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* Not being a native New Yorker, I asked someone to look this up for me on the map to get the right spelling. For the record, Crotona Park is in the Bronx, between Treemont and East Treemont, about eight or ten blocks south of Bronx Park with the zoo and garden. (SA)

M: There was [Mel]--oh, that was in The Sixties--
[or Nel?]
around in The Sixties. [Mel] would get through cuttin' hair and she'd come uptown. She's always had a car. She drive from the time she was knee-high to a duck. And she was crazy over women--ooooh, my God.

J: She taught you everything you knew, right?

M: If there was ever a woman that loved a woman, it was [Mel], and now I'm gettin' ready to kick her butt. She's gotten so religious, you can't do a thing--

J: I know, we're gonna get her before--

M: Yeah, we'll get her.

J: Do you ever remember anything about sports. Did you know women who liked to play softball or were there any teams.

M: No, all the women, they didn't care too much about them--softballs--they liked the soft women. Didn't care about any old softball. cut it out!

J: I've got to ask you these questions?

J: What about there jewelry? Was there any special jewelry that women liked to wear, or how they wore things?

M: I don't know. Most everybody had a watch, and that's about all.

J: What about rings? Any special significance to

rings?

M: No, there're more rings now than they ever wore in their life.

J: What was your favorite outfit? How would you like to dress up?

M: My favorite outfit, when I was young, was a suit--and a shirt--a tie. That all. Nobody know what you was when you had a suit on and flat, low-heeled shoes. Even when I wasn't workin', I wear socks.

J: What would happen--I'm thinking in The Twenties, or Thirties, or Forties--when lesbian couples got sick or one of the couple died? How did you handle that? Can you remember?

M: We all got there. There was--oh, I still can't think of the woman's name.

J: Later, you make a list of all the names that you can remember.

M: No, I have to think of that because she and I had--she's the one who told Lillian--oh, it just was on the end of my tongue--"I don't know what you gonna do with Mabel 'cause Mabel loves all of the women." Oh, what was her name? Well, anyhow--

J: We'll get to it. What would happen if

somebody died?

M: I'll tell you the truth. I wasn't around too many people that get sick and die. I was a lucky, fortunate woman. The first--

J: Did you hear of any--?

M: Well, you'd hear of it, and that's about all. The first funeral I went to, I was more than twenty-five years old--and a girlfriend and another friend of mine, they went to the funeral and carried me. I was uncomfortable, but I got along with it okay.

J: How did women help each other through those times?

M: Well, they worked together. They worked. They lived together, and they worked.

J: And when somebody got sick, would all the friends come?

M: The friends would come and help them--you know--bring food, bring money, and help them out 'cause all of us had a little piece of money. Nobody was broke then. And--

J: Did you ever feel lonely as a lesbian, Mabel? Or did lesbians stick together?

M: Well, no, I never felt lonely because I was

too busy working. See, you'll have to find somebody who really--'cause, you see, this month--for two months or three months or two years--I'll be workin' for this person, I'd come home a Lillian'd be home and before that I had other friends.

J: But you had lots--you had friends all through--

M: I had plenty of friends, but I didn't hold onto one person too long because I was too--I don't know--this place and the other place. And then, if I got lonely, I would go to a theater.

J: You loved theater.

M: Oh, I loved the theater.

J: Isn't that another thing that made New York special? Because you couldn't find that in another city.

M: Well, I went to the theater. I went down to the [German theater] [or a proper name, The German theater?] --down there in the theater--in the operas.

J: Can you name some of the plays that you saw that you liked the best through the years? I know you saw The Captive.

M: Oh, yeah, I seen that so many times. And then there was other plays that--I can't remember them--but, do

you remember, you gave me a book, and it has everything in it. I went back and found that book last night. It's about that thick. It's about that wide and about that long.

J: I don't remember.

M: Yeah, you had it. I don't know whether you left it with your mother or what, but you gave it to me, and I've always cherished that book 'cause every show--everything on earth--is in that book.

J: Oh, the encyclopedia? Is it an encyclopedia?

M: No, it wasn't no encyclopedia. Time when Helen Hayes was a young girl, that there.

(End Side 1, begin Side 2).

M: Now there's a question I can't answer. I just didn't like them. I didn't feel like a man, but I couldn't. I just liked the women. Never mind the men. They were alright, but I didn't care for them. See.

J: So when you dressed however you dressed, and when you wore what you wanted--

M: I was always dressin' in a suit.

J: But you knew you were a woman--

M: Oh, yes. I knew I was a woman. I dressed in a suit with low-heeled shoes--and, in those days, people--if

they seen you too much with low-heeled shoes on, they think you were queer.

J: They were right.

M: And they were right. But that didn't stop me from wearin' 'em. 'cause some people would ask me, "You wear low-heeled shoes all the time?"

"Yes," I says, "Because my feets' bad." I had a lie for them.

J: All the years that you were living with Lillian, and you called each other "mom" and "pop", and you joked about those things--?

M: When I first met her, she was "Duchess". I called her Duchess because she was little and cute, you know. And then, after she made me mad, I'd call her The Little Bear, and I was the Big Bear. And all our friends knew us when, we hit the Bronx, as The Little And Big Bear. All of the little cards and everything would say Mr. and Mrs. Bear. (Laughs).

(Pause on tape).

J: You hit the Bronx?

M: We hit the Bronx. This was nineteen forty-three goin' on forty-four. We hit the Bronx. And we moved to six thirty-nine. And there I met two girls upstairs--

Frances and Billie--and Frances had three children, Billie had none. Billie was the Big Cheese. She was the man, see? And they had parties all up there. And they still would go to parties.

And then the next one I met was [Florene]. She lives 'round the corner from me now. There's quite a few of them that's still alive.

J: When you moved someplace, did you know there were lesbians there, or it just turned out to be--?

M: Oh, no, no, I didn't know them, but the way you find that out is--. Now, the way we moved in--when we moved in, I remember--Frances came down and spoke to us, and I said to myself, "Hmmmm." I looked at Billie. Billie had on pants and everything.

So they says, "Where'd you live at?"

I says, "A hundred and eleventh Street."

So, she says, "You go to parties much?"

I says, "Yeah."

So, of course, all we had to do was [say a little drink] to Lillian, and she was right there. So, that's how we got together from one to the other. But I mean, when you find one, you're bound to find everybody else.

J: What year is this now we're talking?

M: Oh, nineteen forty-three and four--like that--and we've been there ever since.

J: How did the World War [effect] you? The Second World War.

M: The Second World War--I was in a hundred and eleventh Street. I was an air-raid warden. I got my thing-a-ma-jigs. And then Miss Bryce--that's the woman's name--
(a name)
Miss Bryce, (inaudible) Bryce. She was a very good-lookin' little light woman.

J: Is she a lesbian we're talkin' about?

M: No. She was married. But she knew all about it, see. And we wanted me to run for an office, see?

J: Did you not do that, Mabel, because you were a lesbian? Was that one of the reasons you didn't do it?

M: Run for the office?

J: -- 'cause you were a lesbian?

M: No, Lillian told me not to. No, "Because," she says, "You'll get in trouble. These people will beat you up 'cause you're hot-headed, and you'll say things you're not supposed to say. So leave it alone." Okay with me. I left it alone.

And then, you see, we moved from hundred and eleventh Street to Lenox Avenue. I met some fine girls up there on

number nine A Lenox Avenue--that's a hundred and twenty-second Street.

J: What kinds of jobs did these women have? What kind of work did they do?

M: The jobs I was doing then: day's work, then I went into a factory for awhile, and then--

J: And these other women, what were their jobs? The friends that you were meeting.

M: Oh, they had different jobs" cook, and the others' was chamber maid, and one was in the hospital and it was all around, you know?

J: Did anyone drive a taxi or do anything like that?

M: No, I remember that I met one woman who would drive a cab because the taxi was hers. I met her, but, didn't keep tabs on her.

J: When you said "Billie"--when you were describing your neighbors, Billie and Frances--?

M: They had been together years 'cause Billie had helped Frances to raise those children. And--

J: When you said Billie was the man, did Billie think she was a man, or was she just--?

M: I don't know. I didn't ask. She looked that

way. And, of course, she looked that way, and she act that way.

J: How do you mean? How did she act?

M; Well, ...

J: She was loving, wasn't she, to the children?

M: Yes, the children adored her, but Frances--she beat the hell out of Frances 'cause Frances was fresh. Frances would, you know, look at somebody else, see, when she get a couple of drinks in her. Frances live up the street from me in a private house. She bought a private house up there.

J: Now, you mean?

M: Yes, now. (Laughs). I started to s-- If I get one of these things, I'll send them to Frances. I met her not long ago on the Grand Concourse.

(Pause on tape).

M: She bought one for me.

J: Mabel, was there a lot of physical violence that you were aware of? A lot of people beating each other up?

M: Well, I didn't go around those people. I heard of it--could hear about them, you know, a fight. They go into a club and get half half drunk and you look at

somebody--bip!--they knockin' you left and right. But, then that's how the men found out what they were. And the men would say, "Here come that old bulldyker," and all like that. So, I didn't pal around with those people, and I didn't go to the place with them. That's why I was runnin' to the theater, and I took up dancin' lessons, and I took up singin' lessons so I didn't have to be bothered with them. I meat (inaudible).

J: Would you be ashamed then if anybody called you a bulldagger?

M: No, 'cause I knew that was the first name that started out. See?

J: Were you ever ashamed?

M: And anytime somebody called you something, rest assured, when they call you that, they know something about it--not about you, about that--or else they wouldn't call you.

J: Were you ever ashamed of being a lesbian, Mabel?

M: No, I never was ashamed and never got around people who was ashamed. The all mingled in with each other. We had lovely times.

J: We'll stop now.

Mabel Hampton

(End of tape).

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I Lift My Eyes to the Hill: The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman

Joan Nestle

I hope that many of you had the privilege of meeting Mabel Hampton yourself. On Thursday nights, as many of you know, Ms. Hampton held court at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, opening the mail and finding out everyone's story. A devout collector of books on African American history and lesbian culture, Ms. Hampton in 1976 had donated her lesbian paperback collection to the archives. Surrounded by these books and many others, she shared in welcoming the visitors, some who had come just to meet her.

Another more public place you could always count on finding Ms. Hampton in her later years was New York's Gay Pride March. From the early 1980s on, Ms. Hampton could be seen strutting down Fifth Avenue, *our* avenue for the day, marching under the Lesbian Herstory Archives banner, wearing her jauntily tilted black beret, her dark glasses, and a bright red T-shirt proclaiming her membership in SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment). Later in the decade, when she could no longer walk the whole way, Ms. Hampton would be the center of a mob of younger lesbian women all fighting for the right to push her wheelchair down the avenue. Mabel Hampton, domestic worker, hospital matron, entertainer, had walked down many roads in her life—not always to cheering fans. Her persistent journey to full selfhood in a racist and capitalistic America is a story we have not yet learned to tell in our lesbian and gay history work.

Over the past ten years, I have been dazzled at our heady discussions of deconstructionism, our increasingly sophisticated academic conferences on gender representation, the publication of sweeping communal and historical stud-

Text can be found in Joan Nestle, A Fragile Union (Cleis Press, 1998.

ies, and our brave biographies of revered figures in American history in which the authors speak clearly about their subjects' sexual identity. But my grief at the loss of Mabel Hampton turned my attention elsewhere.

When I was offered this honor, the Kessler Lecture, I knew I had to speak of her because her life in this country was the story we are in danger of forgetting in our rush of language and queer theory. I also knew that I would have to confront a racist history in my own relationship to Ms. Hampton. Our two lives, Ms. Hampton's and mine, first intersected at a sadly traditional and suspect crossroads in the history of the relationships between black and white women in this country. These relationships are set in the mentality of a country that in the words of Professor Linda Meyers "could continue for over three hundred years to kidnap an estimated 50 million youths and young adults from Africa, transport them across the Atlantic with about half dying unable to withstand the inhumanity of the passage." (Bell, 11).

In some warm month of 1952, my small white Jewish mother took her breakfasts in a Bayside, Queens, luncheonette. Sitting next to her was a small black Christian woman. For several weeks they breakfasted together before they each went off to work, my mother to the office where she worked as a bookkeeper, Ms. Hampton to the homes she cleaned and the children she cared for.

One morning, as Ms. Hampton told me the story, she followed my mother out to her bus and as Regina sat down in her seat, she threw the keys to our apartment out the bus window to Ms. Hampton, asking her to consider working for her.

This working relationship did not last long, because of my mother's own financial instability. I remember Ms. Hampton caring for me when I was ill. I remember her tan raincoat with a lesbian paperback in its pocket, its jacket bent back so no one could see the two women in the shadows on its cover. I remember, when I was twelve years old, asking my mother as we did a laundry together one weekend whose men's underwear we were washing, since no man lived in our apartment. "They are Mabel's," she said.

In future years, Regina, Mabel, and her wife, Lillian, became closer friends, bound together by a struggle to survive and by my mother's lesbian daughter—me. Ms. Hampton told me during one of our afternoons together that when Regina suspected I was a lesbian she called her late that night and threatened to kill herself if I turned out that way. "I told her, she might as well go ahead and do it because it wasn't her business what her daughter did and besides, I'm one and it suits me fine."

Because Ms. Hampton and I later formed a relationship based on our commitment to a lesbian community, I had a chance much later in life, when Ms. Hampton herself needed care, to reverse the image this society thrives on, black women caring for white people. The incredulous responses we both received in my Upper West Side apartment building, when I was Ms. Hampton's caretaker, showed how deeply the traditional racial script still resonates.

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To honor her, to touch her again, to be honest in the face of race, to refuse the blankness of physical death, to share the story of her own narrative of liberation—for all these reasons—it is she I must write about.

Ms. Hampton pointed the way her story should be told. Her legacy of documents so carefully assembled for Deborah Edel, who had met Ms. Hampton in the early seventies and who had all of Ms. Hampton's trust, tell in no uncertain terms that her life revolved around two major themes—her material struggle to survive and her cultural struggle for beauty. Bread and roses, the worker's old anthem—this is what the nagging voice wanted me to remember, the texture of the individual life of a working woman.

After her death on October 26, 1989, when Deborah and I were gathering her papers, we found a box carefully marked, "In case I pass away see that Joan and Deb get this at once, Mabel." On top of the pile of birth certificates and cemetery plot contracts was a piece of lined paper with the following typed entries:

1915–1919: 8B Public School 32, Jersey City
1919–1923: Housework, Dr. Kraus, Jersey City
1923–1927: Housework, Mrs. Parker, Jersey City
1927–1931: Housework, Mrs. Katim, Brooklyn
1932–1933: Housework, Dr. Garland, New York City
1934–1940: Daily housework, different homes
1941–1944: Matron, Hammarlund Manufacturing Co., NYC
1945–1953: Housework, Mrs. Jean Nate
1948–1955: Attendant, New York Hospital
1954–1955: General, daily work
Lived 1935: 271 West 122nd Street, NYC
Lived 1939–1945: West 111th Street, NYC
Lived 1945–current (1955) 663 East 169th Street, Bronx, NYC

Compiled in the mid-fifties when Ms. Hampton was applying for a position at Jacobi Hospital, the list demanded attention—a list so bare and yet so eloquent of a life of work and home.

Since 1973, the start of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I knew Ms. Hampton's story must be told, but I was not a trained historian or sociologist. I attended every session I could on doing lesbian history work, and together we tried to formulate the right questions that we thought would elicit the kind of history we wanted: What did you call yourself in the twenties? How did you and your friends dress in the forties? What bars did you go to? In the late seventies, when I started doing oral history tapes with Ms. Hampton, I soon learned how limited our methods were. Here is a typical early exchange:

J.: Do you remember anything about sports? Did you know women who liked to play softball? Were there any teams?
M.: No, all the women, they didn't care too much about them—softballs,

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they liked the soft women. Didn't care about any old softball. Cut it out!

I soon realized that Ms. Hampton had her own narrative style tightly connected to how she had made sense of her life, but it wasn't until I had gone through every piece of paper she had bequeathed us that I had a deeper understanding of what her lesbian life had meant.

Lesbian and gay scholars argue over whether we can call a woman a lesbian who lived in a time when that word was not used. We have been very careful about analyzing how our social sexual representation was created by medical terminology and cultural terrors. But here was a different story. Ms. Hampton's lesbian history is embedded in the history of race and class in this country; she makes us extend our historical perspective until she is at its center. The focus then is not lesbian history, but lesbians in history.

Preparing this essay gave me a new understanding of the saying Ms. Hampton loved to repeat. When she was asked, "Ms. Hampton, when did you come out?" she always replied, "What do you mean? I was never in!" The audience always cheered this assertion of lesbian identity, but now I think Ms. Hampton was speaking of something more inclusive.

Driven to fend for herself as an orphan, as a black working woman, as a lesbian, Ms. Hampton always struggled to fully occupy her life, refusing to be cut off from the communal, national, and world events around her. She was never in, in any aspect of her life, if "in" means withholding the fullest response possible from what life is demanding of you at the moment.

Ms. Hampton found and created communities along her way for comfort and support, communities that engendered her fierce loyalty. Her street in the Bronx, 169th Street, was *her* street, and she walked it as "Miss Mabel," known to all and knowing all, whether it was the woman representing her congressional district or the numbers runner down the block. How she occupied this street, this moment in urban twentieth-century American history, is very similar to how she occupied her life—self-contained but always visible, carrying her own sense of how life should be lived but generous to those who were struggling to make a decent life out of indecent conditions.

I cannot give you the whole of Ms. Hampton's journey, but I would like to take you through Ms. Hampton's decades up to the 1950s by blending the documents she left, such as letters, newspaper clippings, and programs, with excerpts from her oral history and my interpretations and readings of other sources.

These personal daily documents represent the heart of the Lesbian Herstory Archives; they are the fragile records of a tough woman who never took her eyes off the hilltop, never let racism destroy her love for her own culture, never let the tyranny of class keep her from finding the beauty she needed to live, never accepted her traditional woman's destiny, and never let hatred and fear of lesbians keep her from her gay community.

None of it was easy. In each decade, right from the beginning, Ms. Hampton had to run for her life.

We need to start the story in April 1963, when Ms. Hampton was desperate to document her own beginnings so she would be considered for employment by the city:

To the county clerk in the Hall of Records, Winston-Salem, North Carolina:

> Gentlemen: I would appreciate very much your helping me to secure my birth papers or any record you may have on file, as to my birth and proof of age as this information is vital for the purpose of my securing a civil service position in New York. Listed below are the information I have to help you locate any records you may have.
>
> I was born approximately May 2, 1902 in Winston-Salem. My mother's name was Lulu Hampton or Simmons. I attended Teacher's College which is its name now at the age of six. My grandmother's name was Simmons. I lived there with her after the death of my mother when I was two months old. It is very important to me as it means a livelihood for me to secure any information.

On an affidavit of birth dated May 26, 1943, we find the additional information: Ms. Hampton was of the Negro race, her father's full name was Joseph Hampton (a fact she did not discover until she was almost twenty), and he had been born in Reidsville, North Carolina. Her mother's birthplace was listed as Lynchburg, Virgina.

This appeal for a record of her beginnings points us to where Ms. Hampton's history began: not in the streets of Greenwich Village, where she sang for pennies thrown from windows in 1910 when she was eight years old, or even in Winston-Salem, where she lived on her grandmother's small farm from her birth until 1909, but further into a past of a people, further into the shame of a country.

Ms. Hampton's deepest history lies in the middle passage of the Triangular Slave Trade and before that in the complex and full world of sixteenth-century Africa. When Europe turned its ambitious face to the curving coastline of the ancient continent and created an economic system based on the servitude of Africans, Ms. Hampton's story began. The middle passage, the horrendous crossing of the waters from Africa to this side of the world, literally and figuratively became the time of generational loss. Millions died in those waters, carrying their histories with them. This tragic "riddle in the waters," as the Afro-Cuban poet Nicholas Guillen calls it, was continued on the land of the Southern plantation system. Frederick Douglass writes, "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it." These words were written in 1845 and Ms. Hampton was born in 1902, but now as I reflect on Ms. Hampton's dedication to preserving her own documents, I read them as a moment in the history of an African American lesbian.

The two themes of work and communal survival that run so strongly throughout Ms. Hampton's life are prefigured by the history of black working women in the sharecropping system, a history told in great and moving detail

by Jacqueline Jones in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present.* Though Jones never mentions lesbian women, Ms. Hampton and her wife of forty-five years, Lillian Foster, who was born in Norfolk, Virginia, carried on in their lesbian lives traditions that had their roots in the post-slavery support systems Southern black women created at the turn of the century. The comradeship of these all-women benevolent and mutual aid societies was rediscovered by Ms. Hampton and Ms. Foster in their New York chapters of the Eastern Star.

Even the work of both women, domestic service for Ms. Hampton and pressing for Ms. Foster, had its roots in this earlier period. Jones tells us that "in the largest southern cities from 50% to 70% of all black women were gainfully employed at least part of the year around the turn of the century." In Durham, North Carolina, closer to Ms. Hampton's birthplace, "during the period of 1880–1910 fully one quarter of all black women 65 years and older in the urban south were gainfully employed, a figure five times higher than for white women" (113). Very likely, both Ms. Hampton's grandmother and mother were part of this work force.

> I'm Mabel Hampton. I was born on May 2, 1902, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and I left there when I was eight years old. Grandma said I was so small that [my] head was as big as a silver dollar. She said that she did all she could to make me grow. One day she was making the bed and gettin' things together after she fed the chickens. She never let me lay in the bed; I lay in the rocking chair, and this day she put the clothes in the chair; when she carried 'em outside, she forgot I was in 'em and shook the clothes out and shook me out in the garden out on the ground. And Grandma was so upset that she hurt me.
>
> My grandmother took care of me. My mother died two months after I was born. She was poisoned, which left me with just my grandma, mother's younger sister and myself. We had a house and lived on a street—we had chickens, had hogs, garden vegetables, grapes and things. We had a back yard, I can see it right now, that back yard. It had red roses, white roses, roses that went upside the house. We never had to go to the store for anything. On Saturdays we go out hunting blackberries, strawberries and peaches. My girlfriends lived on each side of the street, Anna Lou Thomas, Hattie Harris, Lucille Crump. Oh-OOh-O Anna Lou Thomas, she was good lookin', she was a good lookin' girl.
>
> One day Grandma says, "Mabel I'm goin' to take you away." She left Sister there and we went to Lynchburg, Virginia, because Grandma's mother had died. I remember when I got there, the man picked me up off the floor and I looked down on this woman who had drifts of gray hair. She was kind of a brown-skinned woman and she was good lookin'. Beautiful gray hair she had. I looked at her and then he put me down on a stool and I set there. They sang and prayed and carried on. I went to sleep.

However pleasant Ms. Hampton's memories were of North Carolina, she had no intention of returning there later in her life.

> Lillian tried her best to get me to go to Winston-Salem. I says, "No, I don't want to." She says, "You wouldn't even go to my home?" I says, "No, because with my nasty temper they'd lynch me in five minutes. Because they would see me walkin'

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> down the street holdin' hands with some woman, they want to put me in jail. Now I can hold hands with some woman all over New York, all over the Bronx and everywhere else and no one says nothing to me."

When she was seven years old, in 1909, Ms. Hampton was forced to migrate to New York. In her own telling, there is a momentous sense that she has lost whatever safety she had in that garden of roses.

> One morning I was in the bedroom getting ready for school [a deep sigh]. I heard Grandma go out in the yard and come back and then I heard a big bump on the floor. So I ran to the door and I looked and Grandma was laying stretched out on the floor. I hollered and hollered and they all came running and picked her up and put her on the bed. She had had a stroke. Grandma lived one week after she had that stroke. My mamma's younger aunt, I'll never forget it, was combing my hair and I looked over at Grandma layin' in bed. It was in the morning. The sun was up and everything. She looked at me and I looked at her. And when my aunt got finished combing my hair, Grandma had gone away.
>
> They called my mother's sister in New York and she came so fast I think she was there the next day. I remember the day we left Winston-Salem. It was in the summertime. We went by train and I had a sandwich of liver between two pieces of bread. And I knew and felt then that things was going to be different. After eating that sandwich I cried all the way to New York. My aunt tried to pacify me but it didn't do no good, seems as if my heart was broken.

Taken to a small apartment at 52 West 8th Street, Ms. Hampton met her uncle, a minister, who raped her within the year.

In telling her story, Ms. Hampton has given two reasons for her running away at age eight from this home: one involves a fight with a white girl at school and the other, a terrible beating by her uncle after she had misspelled a word. Whatever the exact reason, it was clear that Ms. Hampton had already decided she needed another air to breathe.

> My aunt went out one day and he raped me. I said to myself, "I've got to leave here." He wouldn't let me sleep in the bed. They had a place where they put coal at, and he put a blanket down and made me lay there. So this day, I got tired of that. I went out with nothing on but a dress, a jumper dress, and I walked and walked.

Here begins an amazing tale of an eight-year-old girl's odyssey to find a place and a way to live. After walking the streets for hours, the young Ms. Hampton came to "a thing in the ground, in the sidewalk, people was going down there." A woman came by and thought she recognized the lost child. "Aren't you Miss Brown's little girl?" Before Ms. Hampton could answer, the woman placed a nickel in her hand and told her to go back home to Harlem. As Ms. Hampton says, "that nickel was a turning point in my life." Instead of going uptown, Ms. Hampton boarded a Jersey bound train and rode to the last stop. She came above ground and walked until she found a playground. "I seen all these children playin', white and black, all of them havin' a good time." She

joined the children and played until it began to get dark. Two of the children took an interest in her, and she made up a story: "My aunt told me to stay here until she comes." The girl called to her brother, "You go get the cops, I'll try to find her aunt." She brought a woman back with her, a Miss Bessie White, who began to ask the child questions. Ms. Hampton: "I looked down the street and from the distance I see the boy comin' with the cop, so I decided to go with the woman. Bessie said, come, I'll take you home."

Ms. Hampton remained with the White family until she was seventeen. One member of the family, Ellen, particularly stayed in her memory:

> I seen a young woman sitting left of where I come in at. I say to myself, this is a good-looking woman. I was always admiring some woman. Oh, and she was. She had beautiful hair and she looked just like an angel. She got up out of the chair, she was kind of tall, and she says, "You come with me." So she took me upstairs, bathed me, and said, "We'll find you some clothes." She always talked very softly. And she says, "You'll sleep with me." I was glad of that.
>
> So I went and stayed with them. The other sister went on about lookin' for my aunt. I knew she never find her. See I knew everything about me, but I kept quiet. I kept quiet for twenty years.

Mabel Hampton, from the very beginning of her narrative, speaks with the determination of a woman who must take care of herself. She will decide what silences to keep and what stories to tell, creating for herself a power over life's circumstances that her material resources seldom gave her.

For Mabel Hampton, the 1920s was a decade of both freedom and literal imprisonment. In 1919, at seventeen, she was doing housework for a Dr. Kraus of Jersey City. Her beloved Ellen, the first adult woman to hold Ms. Hampton in her arms, had died in childbirth. With Ellen gone, Ms. Hampton's ties to the White family loosened; she found work dancing in an all-women's company that performed in Coney Island and had her first requited lesbian love affair. She discovered the club life of New York. This is the decade that Ms. Hampton paid a visit to the salon of A'Lelia Walker, the flapper daughter of Madame Walker, and was amazed at the multiple sexual couplings she observed. She performed in the Lafayette Theater and danced at the Garden of Joy, both in Harlem. In this decade, she made the acquaintance of Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley, and Alberta Hunter. She was one of the 150,000 mourners who sang "My Buddy" as the casket bearing Florence Mills, beloved singer, slowly moved through the Harlem streets in 1927. This was Ms. Hampton's experience of the period that lives as the Harlem Renaissance in history books.

But before all this exploration took place, Ms. Hampton was arrested for prostitution by two white policemen and sentenced to three years in Bedford Hills Reformatory for Women by a Judge Norris. As Ms. Hampton recounted it,

> While we're standing there talking, the door opens. Now I know I had shut it. And two white men walk in—great big white men. "We're raiding the house," one of them says. "For what?" "Prostitution," he says. I hadn't been with a man

> no time. I couldn't figure it out. I didn't have time to get clothes or nothing. The judge she sat up there and says, "Well, only thing I can say is Bedford." No lawyer, no nothing. She railroaded me.

When Ms. Hampton talked about her prison experience, she dwelled on the kindnesses she found there:

> It was summertime and we went back out there and sat down. She [another prisoner] says, "I like you." "I like you too." She said no more until time to go to bed. We went to bed and she took me in her bed and held me in her arms and I went to sleep. She put her arms around me like Ellen used to do, you know and I went to sleep.

But where Ms. Hampton found friendship, the board of managers of the prison found scandal and disgrace. Opened in 1902 in a progressive era of prison reform, Bedford Hills under its first woman administrator, Katherine Davis, accepted the special friendships of its women inmates. But in 1920, word that interracial lesbian sex was occurring throughout the prison caused Davis to lose her job. The new administrators of the prison demanded segregated facilities, the only way, according to one of the men, interracial sex could be prevented.

I want to pause here to comment on both the generosity of Mabel Hampton in sharing her prison experience with me and the impact her words had while I read about this prison in Estelle Freedman's book *Their Sister's Keepers.*

By the time I was doing the oral history with Ms. Hampton she had left this experience far behind. She told me that she seldom told anyone about it; she would just say she had gone away. But toward the end of her life, Ms. Hampton wanted the whole story to be told. She realized that her desire to be open about her life was not popular with her peers. "So many of my friends got religion now," she would say. "You can't get anything out of them." But because of Ms. Hampton's courage to document the difficult parts of her life, my reading of background history was transformed.

When I read the following sentence in Freedman's book, "By 1919, we are told, about 75% of the prisoners were prostitutes, 70% had venereal disease, a majority were of low mental ability and ten percent were psychopaths," I was forced to see the women encoded in this list. Mabel Hampton was among these counted women. We have a special insight, a special charge, in doing gay and lesbian history work. We, of all peoples, have had our humanity hidden in such lists of undesirables all our public days. I started this work on Mabel Hampton because her life brought to the study of history the dignity of the human face behind the sweeping summaries.

After thirteen months, Ms. Hampton was released from prison with the condition that she stay away from New York City and its bad influences. But Ms. Hampton could not contain herself. She spoke of a white woman with a gray car whom she had met in Bedford coming to Jersey City to take her to parties in New York. When a neighbor informed on her, she was forced to

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return and complete her sentence at Bedford. Ms. Hampton later described some of the life that the state had declared criminal.

> In 1923, I am about twenty years old. I had rooms at 120 West 122nd Street. A girl friend of mine was living next door, and they got me three rooms there on the ground floor—a bedroom, living room, and big kitchen. I stayed there until I met Lillian in 1932. I went away with the people I worked for but I always kept my rooms to come back to. Then I went into the show.
>
> Next door these girls were all lesbians; they had four rooms in the basement and they gave parties all the time. Sometimes we would have "pay parties." We'd buy all the food—chicken and potato salads. I'd chip in with them because I would bring my girlfriends. We also went to "rent parties," where you go in and pay a couple of dollars. You buy your drinks and meet other women and dance and have fun. But with our house we just had close friends. Sometimes there would be twelve or fourteen women there. We'd have pig feet, chittlins. In the winter time, it was black-eyed peas and all that stuff. Most of the women wore suits. Very seldom did any of them have slacks or anything like that because they had to come through the streets. Of course, if they were in a car, they wore the slacks. Most of them had short hair. And most of them was good-lookin' women too. The bulldykers would come and bring their women with them. And you wasn't supposed to jive with them, you know. They danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston; they did a little bit of everything. They were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. But me, I'd venture out with any of them. I just had a ball. I had a couple of white girl friends down in the village. We got along fine. At that time I was acting in the Cherry Lane Theater. I didn't have to go to the bars because I would go to women's houses. Like Jackie (Moms) Mabley would have a big party and all the girls from the show would go. She had all the women there.

In addition to private parties, Ms. Hampton and her friends were up on the latest public lesbian events. Sometime in February 1927, Ms. Hampton attended the new play that was scandalizing Broadway, *The Captive*. Whatever her material struggle was in any given decade, Ms. Hampton sought out the cultural images she needed. Here, is how she remembered that night at the theater:

> Well, I heard about it, and a girlfriend of mine had taken me to see this play, *The Captive*. And I fell in love—not only with *The Captive*, but the lady who was the head actress in it. Her name was Helen Mencken. So I decided I would go back—I had heard so much talk about it. I went back to see it by myself. I sat on the edge of my seat! I looked at the first part of it, and I will always think that woman was a lesbian. She played it too perfect! She had the thing down! She kissed too perfect, she had everything down pat! So that's why I kept going back to see it because it looked like to me it was part of my life. I was a young woman, but I said, now this is what I would like to be, but of course, I would have to marry and I didn't want to marry [the play focuses on the seduction of a married woman by the offstage lesbian], so I would just go on and do whatever I thought was right to do. So I talked to a couple of my friends in Jersey City. I carried them back, paid their way to see it, and they fell in love with it. There was plenty of women in that audience and plenty of men too! They applauded and applauded. This same girl with the green car, she knew her—Helen Mencken—and she carried

me backstage and introduced me. Boy, I felt so proud! And she says, "Why do you like the show?" I said, "Because it seems a part of my life and what I am and what I hope to be." She says, "That's nice. Stick to it! You'll be all right."

The twenties ended with Mabel Hampton living fully "in the life," trying to piece together another kind of living both from her day work and from her chorus line jobs. Later, when asked why she left show business, she replied, "Because I like to eat."

The Depression that befell the country in 1929 did not play a large role in Ms. Hampton's memories, perhaps because she was already earning such a marginal income. We know that from 1925 until 1937, she did day work for the family of Charles Baubrick. Ms. Hampton carefully saved all the letters from her employees testifying to her character:

"Dec. 12, 1937. To Whom It May Concern: This is to certify that the bearer Mabel Hampton has worked for me for the last 12 years doing housework off and on and she does the same as yet. We have always found her honest and industrious."

Reading these letters, embedded as they were in all the other documents of Ms. Hampton's life, is always sobering. So much of her preserved papers testify to an autonomous home and social life, but these letters sprinkled through each decade remind us that Ms. Hampton's life was under surveillance by the white families that controlled her economic survival.

In 1935 Ms. Hampton was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church at St. Thomas the Apostle on West 118th Street, another step in her quest for spiritual comfort. This journey included a lifelong devotion to the mysteries of the Rosicrucians and a full collection of Marie Corelli, a Victorian novelist with a moralistic bent. She ended the decade registering with the U.S. Department of Labor trying to find a job. She is told, "We will get in touch with you as soon as there is a suitable opening."

The event that changed Ms. Hampton's life forever happened early on in the decade, in 1932. While waiting for a bus, she met a woman even smaller than herself—"dressed like a duchess," as Ms. Hampton would later say—Lillian Foster.

Ms. Foster remembered in 1976, two years before her death, that "Forty-four years ago I met Mabel. We was a wonderful pair. I'll never regret it. But she's a little tough. I met her in 1932, September 22. And we haven't been separated since in our whole life. Death will separate us. Other than that I don't want it to end."

Ms. Hampton, to the consternation of her more discreet friends, dressed in an obvious way much of her life. Her appearance, however, did not seem to bother her wife. Ms. Foster went on to say, "A lady walked in once, Joe's wife, and she say, 'You is a pretty neat girl. You have a beautiful little home, but where is your husband?' And just at that time, Mabel comes in the door with her key and I said, 'There is my husband.' " The visitor added, "Now you know

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if that was your husband, you wouldn't have said it!" to which Ms. Foster firmly replied, "But I said it!"

Lillian Foster, born in 1906 in Norfolk, Virginia, shared much of the same Southern background of Ms. Hampton, except that she came from a large family. She was keenly aware that Ms. Hampton was "all alone," as she often put it. Ms. Foster worked her whole life as a presser in white-owned dry cleaning establishments, a job, like domestic service, that had its roots in the neo-slavery working conditions of the urban South at the turn of the century. These many years of labor in underventilated back rooms accelerated Ms. Foster's rapid decline in her later years. But together with a group of friends, these two women created a household lasting forty-six years.

This household with friends took many shapes. When crisis struck and a fire destroyed their apartment in 1976 (part of the real estate wars that were gutting and leveling the Bronx), Ms. Foster and Ms. Hampton came to live with me and Deborah Edel until they could move back to their apartment house. Later Ms. Hampton described our shared time as an adventure in lesbian families:

> Down here it was just like two couples, Joan and Deborah and Mabel and Lillian; we got along lovely, and we played, we sang, we ate, it was marvelous! I will never forget it. And Lillian, of course, Lillian was my wife. I had Joan laughing because I called Lillian "Little Bear," but when I first met her in 1932, she was to me, she was a duchess—the grand duchess. Later in life I got angry with her one day and I called her the "little bear," and she called me "the big bear," and of course that hung on to me all through life. And now we are known to all our friends as the "big bear" and the "little bear."

Ms. Hampton saved hundreds of cards signed "little bear," but when she appealed to government officials or agencies for help, as she often did as their housing conditions deteriorated, she said Ms. Foster was her sister.

In a letter to Mayor Lindsay in 1969, she wrote,

> Dear Mr Mayor,
>
> I don't know if I am on the right road or not, but I am taking a chance; now what I want to know is can you tell me how I can get an apartment, I have been everywhere and no success. I am living at the above address [639 E. 169th St., Bronx] for 26 years but for about the past 10 years the building has gone down terribly. For two years we have no heat all winter, also no hot water. We called the housing authority but it seems it don't help; everywhere I go the rent is so high that poor people can't pay it and I would like to find a place before the winter comes in with rent that I can afford to pay. It is two of us (women) past 65. I still work but my older sister is on retirement so we do need two bedrooms. If you can do something to help us it will be greatly appreciated. Thanking you in advance,
>
> I remain, Miss Mabel Hampton.

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This letter is for me one of the most important documents we have in the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Ms. Hampton's request for a safe and warm home for her and Ms. Foster now marks the starting point of all my historical inquiry—how did you survive?

In a document of a different sort, the program for a social event sponsored by Jacobi Hospital, where she was employed for the last twenty years of her working life, we discover that a Ms. Mabel Hampton and Ms. Lillian Hampton are sitting at table 25. These two women negotiated the public world with a term that allowed expressions of affection and demanded a recognition of their intimacy.

There is a seamless quality to Ms. Hampton's life that does not fit our usual paradigm for doing lesbian history work. Her life does not seem to be organized around what we have come to see as the usual rites of gay passage, like coming out or going to the bars. Instead she gives us the vision of an integrated life where the major shaping events are the daily acts of work, friends, and social organizations, where the major definers of these territories are class and race, and where she expects all aspects of her life to be respected.

Another indication of how Ms. Hampton expected that her life would be taken as it was is that in every letter preserved by Ms. Hampton there is a greeting or a blessing for Ms. Foster in its closing, whether the correspondent is a friend or former employer. "I do hope to be able to visit you and Lillian some evening for a real chat and a supper by a superb cook! Do take care of yourself and my best to Lillian," Dolores, 1944. "God bless and keep you and Lillian well always, I wish I could see you both some times," Jennie, 1977.

The 1940s were turbulent years, marked by the international war abroad and the national unrest at home. While black American soldiers were fighting the armies of racial supremacists in Europe, their families were fighting the racist dictates of a Jim Crow society at home. Harlem, Detroit, and other American cities would see streets become battlefields.

For African American working women like Ms. Hampton, the forties was the decade of the slave markets, the daily gathering of black women on the street corners of Brooklyn and the Bronx to sell their domestic services to white women who drove by looking for cheap labor. In 1940 Ms. Hampton was part of this labor force, as she had been for over twenty years, working year after year without workmen's compensation, health benefits, or pension payments.

In September 1940 she received a postcard canceling her employment with one family: "Dear Mabel, please do not come on Thursday. I will see you again on Friday at Mrs. Garfinkels. I have engaged a part time worker as I need more frequent help as you know. Come over to see us."

Ms. Hampton did not let her working difficulties dampen her enthusiasm for her cultural heroes, however, and on October 6, 1940, she and Ms. Foster were in the audience at Carnegie Hall when Paul Robeson commanded the stage. The announcement for this concert is the first document we have reflecting Ms. Hampton's lifelong love of the opera and her dedication to African American cultural figures and institutions.

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In 1941, perhaps in recognition of her perilous situation as a day worker, Ms. Hampton secured the job of matron with the Hammarlund Manufacturing Company on West 34th Street, assuring her entrance into the new social security system begun just six years earlier by Franklin Roosevelt.

She still took irregular night and day domestic employment so she and Ms. Foster could, among other things, on May 28, 1946, purchase from the American Mending Machine Company one Singer Electric Sewing Machine with console table for the price of $100.00. She leaves a $44.00 deposit and carefully preserves all records of the transaction.

On February 20, 1942, we have the first evidence of Ms. Hampton's involvement in the country's war efforts: a ditto sheet of instructions from the American Women's Voluntary Services addressed to all air raid wardens. It reads,

> During the German attack on the countries of Europe, the telephone was often used for sabotage thereby causing panic and loss of life by erroneous orders. We in New York are particularly vulnerable in this respect since our great apartment houses have often hundreds even thousands under one roof. . . . The apartment house telephone warden must keep lines clear in time of emergency. Type of person required: this sort of work should be particularly suited for women whose common sense and reliability could be depended upon.

In August Ms. Hampton worked hard for the Harlem branch of the New York Defense Recreation Committee, trying to collect cigarettes and other refreshments for the soldiers and sailors who frequented Harlem's USO. In December 1942 she was appointed deputy sector commander in the air warden service by Mayor La Guardia. This same year she also received her American Theater Wing War Service membership card. Throughout 1943 she served as her community's air raid warden and attended monthly meetings of the Twelfth Division of the American Women's Voluntary Services Organizations on West 116th Street. During all this time, her country maintained a segregated army abroad and a segregated society at home.

In January and February 1944, she received her fourth and fifth war loan citation. This support for causes she believed in, no matter how small her income, continued throughout Ms. Hampton's life. In addition to her religious causes, she sent monthly donations to SCLC and the Martin Luther King Memorial Fund, and by the end of the seventies she was adding gay organizations to her list.

On March 29, 1944, Ms. Hampton attended the National Negro Opera Company's performance of *La Traviata*. This group believed in opera for the masses and included in its program a congratulatory message from the Upper West Side Communist Party. On its board sat Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McCloud Bethune, both part of another moment in lesbian history. In 1952 this same company presented *Ouanga*, an opera based on the life of the first king of Haiti, Dessaline, who, the program says, "successfully conquered Napoleon's armies in 1802 and won the Black Republic's fight for freedom." Ms. Hampton was in the audience.

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Continuing her dedication to finding the roses amidst the bread, on November 12, 1944, Ms. Hampton heard Marian Anderson sing at Carnegie Hall and added the program of this event to her collection of newspaper articles about the career of this valiant woman.

Ms. Hampton's never-ending pursuit of work often caused long absences from home, and Ms. Foster was often left waiting for her partner to return to their Bronx apartment on 169th Street, into which they had moved in 1945, at the war's end, and which would remain their shared home until Ms. Foster's death in 1978.

Dear Mabel:

Received your letter and was very glad to hear from you and to know that you are well and happy. This leaves me feeling better than I have since you left. Everything is ok at home. Only I miss you so much I will be glad when the time is up. There is nobody like you to me. I am writing this on my lunch hour. It is 11 pm. I am quitting tomorrow. I don't see anyone as I haven't been feeling too well. Well the ½ hour is up. Nite nite be good and will see you soon.

Little Bear

In 1948 Ms. Hampton fell ill and was unable to work. She applied for home relief and was awarded a grant of $54.95 a month, which the agency stipulated should be spent the following way: $27.00 for food; $21.00 for rent; $ .55 for cooking fuel; $ .80 for electricity; $ 6.00 for clothing; and for personal incidentals she is allotted $1.00. But from these meager funds she managed to give comfort to friends.

Postcard, August 9, 1948:

Dear Miss Lillian and Mabel:

The flowers you sent were beautiful and I liked them very much. I wear the heart you sent all the time. It was very nice to hear from you both. I am feeling fine now. I hope you are both in the best of health.

Love Doris

In 1949 Ms. Hampton wrote to the home relief agency, telling the case worker to stop all payments because she had the promise of a job.

The decade that began in war between nations and peoples ended in Ms. Hampton's version of history with a carefully preserved article about the international figure Josephine Baker. Cut out of the March 12, 1949, issue of the *Pittsburgh Courier* are the following words:

Well friends, fellow Negroes and countrymen, you can stop all that guesswork and surmising about Josephine Baker. This writer knew Edith Spencer, Lottie Gee, Florence Mills, knew them well. He has also known most of the other colored women artists of the last thirty years. His word to you is that this Josephine Baker eminently belongs. She is not a common music hall entertainer. She has been over here for a long time, maybe 25 years. The little old colored gal from

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> back home is a French lady now. That means something. It means for a colored person that you have been accepted into a new and glamorous and free world where color does not count. It means that in the joy of the new living you just might forget that "old oaken bucket" so full of bitter quaffs for you. It means that once you found solid footing in the new land of freedom, you might tax your mind to blot out all the sorry past, all the old associations, to become alien in spirit as well as in fact. It pleases me folks to be able to report to you that none of this has possessed Josephine. I tested her and she rang true. What she does is for you and me. She said so out of her own mouth. Her eyes glistened as she expostulated and described in vivid, charged phrases the aim and purpose of her work. She was proud when I told her of Lena [Horne] and of Hilda [Simms]. "You girls are blazing trails for the race," I commentated. "Indeed so," she quickly retorted. After she had talked at length of what it means to be a Negro and of her hope that whatever she did might reflect credit on Negroes, particularly the Negroes of her land of birth, I chanced a leading question. "So you're a race woman," I queried. I was not sure she would understand. But she did. "Of course I am," she replied. Yes, all the world's a stage and Josephine comes out upon it for you and for me.

In my own work, I have tried to focus on the complex interaction between oppression and resistance, aware of the dangers of romanticizing losses while at the same time aggrandizing little victories, but I am still awed by how a single human spirit refuses the messages of self-hatred and out of bits and pieces weaves a garment grand enough for the soul's and body's passion. Ms. Hampton prized her memories of Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson, creating for herself a nurturing family of defiant African American women and men. Her lesbian self was part of what was fed by their soaring voices. When the *New York Times* closed its obituary on Ms. Hampton with its words, "there are no known survivors," it showed its ignorance of how an oppressed people makes legacies out of memory.

We are now entering the so-called conforming fifties, when white middle-class heterosexual women, we have been told, were running in droves to be married and keep the perfect home. Reflecting another vision, Ms. Hampton added newspaper clippings on the pioneer sex-change personality Christine Jorgensen. From 1948 until her retirement in 1972, Ms. Hampton worked in the housekeeping division of Jacobi Hospital, where she earned for herself the nickname "Captain" from some of the women she worked with and who kept in touch with Ms. Hampton until their deaths many years later. Here she met Jorgensen and paid her nightly visits in her hospital room. From Ms. Hampton's documents: a *Daily News* article of December 1, 1952, "Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty," contains a letter written by Jorgensen explaining to her parents why there is so much consternation about her case, concluding, "it is more a problem of social taboos and the desire not to speak of the subject because it deals with the great hush hush, namely sex."

Ms. Hampton began the decade earning $1,006.00 for a year's work and ended it earning $1,232.00. Because of lack of money, Ms. Hampton was never able to travel to all the places in the world that fascinated her; but in this decade

she added hundreds of pages of stamps to her overflowing albums, little squares of color from Morocco and Zanzibar, from the Philippines and Mexico.

Throughout her remaining years, Ms. Hampton continued with her eyes on the hilltop and her feet on a very earthly pavement. She always had very little money and always was generous. In the 1970s Ms. Hampton discovered senior citizen centers and "had a ball," as she liked to say, on their subsidized trips to Atlantic City. She lost her partner of forty-five years, Lillian Foster, in 1978.

After almost drifting away in mourning, she found new energy and a loving family in New York's lesbian and gay community. She had friendly visitors from SAGE and devoted friends like Ann Allen Shockley, who never failed to visit when she was in town. She marched in Washington in the first national lesbian and gay civil rights march. She appeared in films like *Silent Pioneers* and *Before Stonewall*. In the early eighties she gave her power of attorney to Deborah Edel, whom she trusted completely and with whom she had shared so much. In 1987 she accompanied Deborah and her lover Teddi to California so she could be honored at the West Coast Old Lesbians Conference.

She eventually had to give up her fourth-floor walk-up Bronx apartment and move in with Lee Hudson and myself, who along with many others cared for her as she lost physical strength. On October 26, 1989, after a second stroke, Ms. Hampton finally let go of a life she loved so dearly.

I would like to end this essay where it began, with the memories many of you have of this indomitable woman who gave this country her working life and her support in time of national emergencies but who received so little social protection.

Ms. Hampton never relented in her struggle to live a fully integrated life, a life marked by the integrity of her self authorship—"If I give you my word," she always said, "I'll be there"—and she was.

On her death, her sisters in Electa Chapter 10 of the Eastern Star Organization honored her with the following words: "We wish to express our gratitude for having known Sister Hampton all these years. She became a member many years ago and went from the bottom to the top of the ladder. She has served us in many capacities. We loved her dearly. May she rest in peace with the angels."

Class and race are not synonymous with problems, with deprivation. They can be sources of great joy and communal strength. Race and class, however, in this society are manipulated markers of privilege and power. Ms. Hampton had a vision of what life should be; it was a grand, simple vision, filled with good friends and good food, a warm home, and her lover by her side. She gave all she could to doing the best she could. The sorrow comes because she and so many others have to work so hard for such basic human territory.

"I wish you knew what it's like to be me" is the challenge posed by a society divided by race and class. We have so much to learn about the victories, the sweetnesses, as well as the losses. By expanding our models for what makes a life lesbian or what is lesbian about history, we will become clearer about contemporary political and social coalitions that must be forged to ensure all

our liberations. We are just beginning to understand how these identities or constructs shape lesbian and gay lives. We will have to change our questions and our language of inquiry to take our knowledge deeper. Class and race, always said together as if they mean the same thing, may each call forth their own story. The insights we gain will anchor our other discussions in the realities of individual lives, reminding us that bread and roses, material survival and cultural identity, are the starting points of so many of our histories.

In that spirit, I will always remember our Friday night dinners at the archives, with a life-size cut-out photograph of Gertrude Stein propped up at one end of the table; Ms. Hampton sitting across from my partner, Lee Hudson; Denver, the family dog, right at Ms. Hampton's elbow; and myself, looking past the candlelight to my two dear friends, Lee and Mabel, all of us carrying different histories, joined by our love and need of each other.

Ms. Hampton addressed the 1984 New York City Gay Pride Rally as follows: "I, Mabel Hampton, have been a lesbian all my life, for eighty-two years, and I am proud of myself and my people. I would like all my people to be free in this country and all over the world, my gay people and my black people."

Note

This speech was delivered as CLAGS's first annual David R. Kessler Lecture in Lesbian and Gay Studies on November 20, 1992. It was transcribed by Sarah Atatimur, the transcription made possible from a grant from the ~~Astraea Foundation.~~ Open Meadows Foundation in 1986.

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Slide 74 Mable Hampton (red) (23)

....down here it was just like two couples, Joan and Deborah and Mabel and Lillian; and we got along lovely, and we played, we sang, ate, it was marvelous. I never will forget it. And Lillian, of course, Lillian was my wife ~~(and she had to go wherever I went. And Lillian said it was all right and she'd stayed there.)~~

~~Joan - Talk Mabel - Talk about how your friends - you said about little Bear and Big Bear, where that came from.~~

Mabel -I had Joan laughing because I called Lillian Little Bear. But when I first met her in 1932 she was, to me, she was a dutchess--the grand dutchess and I can't remember what she called me now. But later in life, a number of years later, I named her: we got angry with her one day and I called her the Little Bear and she called me the Big Bear, and of course that hung on to me all through life ~~and her~~ And now we're known to all our friends as the Big Bear and Litt Bear.

~~Slide 75 Sunset Strip~~

Slide 26 - [redacted] - Mabel Hart (30)

I never considered marrying. I had so much trouble when I was little; little girl going to school and my uncle tried to rape me and then every house, even people I went to work for, the men would try to touch me on my buttons and I didn't like it. So, therefore, they meant nothing to me because they were always doing something I didn't like. And if you do something I don't like I don't bother with you. Good riddens to you.

Joan: You knew--this from a very early age that you would never marry.

Mabel: From a very early age that I would never marry. I didn't see any sense in marrying something that I didn't like.

Joan: And that meant you had to work to take care of yourself.

Mabel: That meant I had to always work and I've always worked. And right up until I pass away I'm still working.

Slide 27 - Lillian

Mabel: And I took care of my women. Lillian--from 1932 to 1978 were together. We didn't part. We quarreled a little bit and ybe that's all; tongue and teeth falls out, but we just went on. know she's happy now that I'm that I am, just myself and she sees ow that when she used to jump me about anything, she sees that I'm ight. And I believe she sees it because I believe in reincarnation nd lots of people don't. Correct.

Joan - Mabel you like to wear men's clothes and ~~things~~ but you never ~~thought of yourself as a man.~~

Mabel - Yes. I like to wear pants. I always dress kind of tailored, skirt and blouse and things like that. But I like the pant and the cap, and the hat; but I never considered myself being a man. Because I never liked the men that much. And anything I don't like I don't take up. And I always took up being a woman because I liked the women and what they stood for.

Joan: What was the word you called yourself? ~~You said laughingly, you were talking about being a stud... before remember, the word stud.~~

Mabel: ~~oh yes.~~ I had quite a lot of my friends that were known as studs and the stud comes as part of the way they dressed I think. You see, because they dressed nicely and short hair and things like that. But I didn't care I kept my hair, I didn't bother with the hair. I just liked the suits, and the pants and shoes. I didn't want to be tied down to anything. I just wanted to be myself.

Oct 31, 1989

Mabel Hampton

Gay Rights Advocate, 87

Mabel Hampton, an advocate in the gay rights movement, died of pneumonia Thursday at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center. She was 87 years old and lived in Manhattan.

Ms. Hampton, a native of Winston Salem, N.C., had been a dancer in earlier years. In 1974, with three other women, she founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Manhattan, a collection of lesbian books and artifacts including her personal library.

She was an annual participant in the city's Gay and Lesbian Pride March and was its grand marshal in 1985.

There are no immediate survivors.

Her Spirit Soars Above Us

Joan Nestle, 1989

abel Hampton is not dead. She breathes and walks and talks
g us. You can see her striding down 169th street in the Bronx, greeting
neighbors who meant so much to her, taking in all the street
ts. This was the commmunity that was home for so many years
abel and her life long partner Lillian Foster. Here on 169th
et, MAbel and Lillian made their life, a life filled with
work and good friends, many of whom are here today. Mabel
ton is part of the survival energy of this community. She
never leave.

abel loved life so much that her passions will be our life
memories
comrades - her love of car rides and bacon and eggs in the
ng, her enthusiastic support of her dear Mets, her love of
her dedication to being
and the long night bus rides to Atlantic City, the joy she
keeper of the Archives used:
in meeting new friends and her devotion to old ones, her
her
ht and concern for her dear Libby and Denver, her proud
amations of her right to love whomever she choose to. All of
o have heard Ms. HAmpton's famous whoppee know that her yes
fe was generous and brave and encompassing enough to become
them of hope in difficult times.

abel Hampton is too stubborn to leave us alone; she knows
rds, her love of folk sayings, her remembered bits of poems
ngs, her charm which could turn to a look that could lay
t, will echo in our memories. Mabel Hampton always said,
gave you my word, I will stick by it," and she did. This
ity is too rare, too precious to be forgotten.

we will not be able to leave Mabel alone either, not those

s who benefitted from her miracle of generosity; if MAbel
you needed help and she cared about you, nothing would stop
from going to your rescue. She gave when she had nothing for
elf; her greatest despair in the past months was that she
d not help out enough; in her last week, her greatest
ory was when she quietly left the house to do her laundry so
Adams, her home care attendant, would not have so much work
o.

very Friday night, Lee, my partner, Mabel and I would sit
to a candle light dinner. Mabel loved the elegance of it. In
almsot darkened room, three women from very different worlds,
ng very different journies, shared bread and stories. During
e times I would look with wonder at MAbel, how brave she
ed and how graceful. Some have said that Mabel was child
and yes she had the ability to be as enthusiastic as a
; her last two friends were two young boys whom she allowed
eat her in checkers, but Mabel was also the most truly
nt person I have ever known. She was elegant of spirit, self
essed and wise. She saw to the heart of the challenge of life
he never flinched from the struggle to change a little into
Mabel Hampton knew who she was, she had created herself
little help from others and yet, she had a fullness of being
showered gifts of caring on her selected family. MAbel
on is not dead; from floating grace to amazing opportunity,
spirit soars above us.