

## Negro Women in Industry

By HELEN B. SAYRE

THE Negro woman's sudden entrance into industry is a new adventure and a dramatic innovation. In the urgent quest for workers to "carry on" during the World War, she saw her longed-for opportunity, saw—as she visioned it—the end of the rainbow, and she came seeking it by thousands from her sunny, quiet southern home and plantation and placid housework and was at once swallowed up in the industrial centers in northern cities. Plucked so abruptly from the narrow spheres of such service as field hands, domestics and children's nurses, it is amazing to observe the transition and transformation of this same gentle, leisurely southern woman into the high-tension industrial worker in a large factory. Labor turnover, time clocks, piece work, output, maximum and minimum production, these words were unknown in her vocabulary a few years back. But today there are thousands of these girls and women, working tirelessly and patiently and steadily in our large industrial plants,—and *making good*.

At the close of the War and during the general depression in business which followed, many Negro girls were released and replaced with white help. It was a tragedy to the Negro girl, as she had not had time to lay aside anything for the rainy day, to gain needed experience and skill, and to overcome the impatience of the average employer and an antagonistic foreman. She was hired in a period of crisis, to fill the gap at the bottom of the scale,—the most undesirable and unskilled jobs in the factory were assigned to her. The idea seemed very general that she could not be trusted to do the skilled work in any event—usually she was not given an opportunity if white help could be secured. Wet and sloppy work, heavy and tedious, with little chance for advancement, and if she did succeed, it was by sheer grit and determination, as many have told me. She had to be able to outdo her white competitor; sometimes she failed through lack of experience, and this would cause employers to say she was not capable, when in most cases it was simply due to poor selective instinct on his part or lack of intelligence or adaptability in her particular case.

Left to the mercy of ignorant, prejudiced, intolerant foremen, what could be expected? However, the whole story is not so dark. Though her progress was retarded by the turn in events, still we know that she did retain some very worthwhile places and she has progressed in them wherever possible to semi-skilled and skilled jobs. It is worthy of note, that wherever an employer was humane and appreciative and gave his Negro help a chance to advance and a square deal in wages and working conditions, he had steady,

cheerful workers—which refutes a charge so prone to be made about their being undependable. Employers have found her amiable in disposition, intelligent and more adaptable than the unskilled foreign worker for whom white social agencies are engaged in season and out to aid them to adjust themselves, develop technique and become capable, highly skilled workers. For the Negro girl there are no such agencies outside of a small work being done by the Y.W.C.A. in the City of Chicago. In my experience with both white and Negro girls, I have found no difference between them in capacity for work.

Negro women are working today in the stock-yards, nut factories, hat factories, lamp shade and mantel light industries, leather products, tobacco factories, paper box factories, mattress industry, as beaders and embroiderers, and workers in the insulated wire factories; as power machine operators of all kinds, including cap, apron, bathrobe and dress-makers. Some of the best core-makers in the great McCormick harvester plant are Negro women. But it is unquestionably in the sewing field that the Negro girl finds her greatest opportunity. She has a natural aptitude for this work and has become a factor with which the trades union will have to consider. During the Garment Makers' strike in Chicago this spring, Negro women operators were employed in the strikers' places in large numbers. Many had had but little experience, and I heard of one firm that had employed three different sets of ninety operators in less than three months. Efforts were made to induce these girls to join the Union. I have been informed by a young Negro woman who belonged to the Union and who had organized the shop in which she worked, that the Union has always had an open door for Negro women.

The Garment Makers are mostly recruited from the Jews and the Poles and as such they are designated on the books, but the Negro members are always classed as Americans. This is rather interesting, I think—however, it is hard to get Negro girls into the Union. One reason is that they cannot join unless experienced. They argue that this is their chance to gain experience; joining the Union can come later. The value of collective bargaining is a matter of education, and industrial education is what is greatly needed to help the Negro girl stabilize her position in the labor world.

The story of the Negro women employed at the Nachman Springfield Cushion Company of Chicago, Illinois, may be of some value in understanding the whole situation. It will also show the splendid growth of a business whose enviable record for superior quality and excellence in manufactured products is the output of these same

women power machine operators, who make the durable covers for the softly resilient springs.

In the beginning this company employed less than fifty persons. It was a simple matter for the heads of the firm to know each individual worker. Today there are between six and seven hundred on the pay-roll. The employment of such large numbers has tended to destroy any personal relation between employer and employees, and there is practically no contact with the workers. The making of these cushion covers was also a simple process in the beginning; they were used mostly for chair seats and a perfectly "green" girl who had never seen a power machine before could learn in a very few days to sew them. Today this firm manufactures cushions for all kinds of upholstered furniture, day-beds, mattresses, and automobile seats. Each unit-spring is enclosed in a separate pocket and these covers are made in two operations.

When I tell you we have girls who can sew from five to seven thousand pockets in a day, you will realize that they have become "peppy" and mastered the speeding-up in industry. They are put on piece work in about three weeks and we have many girls making from twenty to thirty dollars per week. An average girl can make eighteen dollars per week. This is good pay for a year round job.

There came a time when this large group of girls, with no previous factory experience and no one to encourage and reprove them or give them any personal attention whatever, were doing about as they pleased. They were very irregular in attendance,—a very serious matter to the firm, in trying to give prompt service and keep up production.

The cushion is an unfinished product and is delivered in large quantities to factories to be upholstered. The girls would say, "If we stay out we are the only losers, being on piece work." So the week would go something like this: Monday—bad; Tuesday—a little better; Wednesday—very good, being pay day; Thursday—very poor; Friday—somewhat better; Saturday—a half-day and the worst day of the week. The company was about three months behind in delivery of orders due to the fact that girls were given a chance to learn to operate the machines with pay, and many stayed just long enough to learn. Continually employing new help, of course, was responsible for poor quality of work as well as a large labor turnover and financial loss. The girls were disposed to be late for work and quit anywhere from a half-hour to fifteen minutes before closing time. There was considerable lack of respect for authority when it came to the forelady and inspector, as there was more or less a division of authority; so the firm had almost decided to release all the colored help, which meant a terrible blow to future opportunities. It was at this juncture that the Chicago Urban League was

appealed to and they advised putting a Negro woman as Personnel Director in charge to save the situation if possible for these hundreds of girls. The work of this Director has been very interesting and to some considerable degree satisfactory to the firm. It must be acknowledged to the credit of the firm that they have done everything possible for the Director to carry out her plans.

Her first task was to establish confidence and good-will in the hearts of the workers for herself. This was done by bringing about some very needed improvements for the physical welfare of the workers, such as individual towels, rest-room, installing a wholesome lunch service, ice-water coolers on each floor during the summer months, having the space between the rows of machines widened seventeen inches so that the girls could swing the large work more easily in sewing, installation of ventilators. There was a need to develop a spirit of respect for those in authority and this has been brought about gradually by the careful handling of individual cases needing adjustment. It was necessary to educate those in authority as to their duty and responsibility as well as to require respect from the girls toward them.

The girls soon realized that if they had just cause for complaint, they were upheld; if they were in the wrong, their Director gave them a warning the first time that a second offense would mean dismissal, and it did mean just that. Misfits were gradually released; careless and poor operators were discharged; certain factory rules were established, such as for punctuality, attendance, general conduct. This was done after heart to heart talks with the girls and they were made to realize the necessity for these adjustments.

We have without doubt today, we believe, the best disciplined group of factory employees to be found. We have an average of 97% on time; 95%-98% on the job! Our production has increased steadily from about 250,000 pockets to an average of 400,000 per day and on special occasions when we have needed an increased production they have easily speeded up to 500,000. This is the output of about 170 operators. If, of course, we add to this the workers on both operations we could approximately sew about 1,000,000 pockets in one day with 300 operators. This would give us about 17,000 cushions per day. Eighteen months ago we were three months behind in filling orders; today we guarantee a twenty-four hour delivery. Posting an hourly production scale on the bulletin board stimulates interest and it is great sport to watch the figures mount. We issue from time to time a printed bulletin or news sheet containing instructions and matters of general interest and information for the workers. We encourage the girls to larger earning effort by giving each girl a new dollar bill

for every five dollars increase in her pay check; we also issue stars to the girls to wear on their caps, showing their rating,—one star for fifteen dollars; two stars for twenty dollars.

The necessary practice of computing wages on a piece work basis has often been the cause of much dissatisfaction. It is not an easy thing to do with so many different rates and in a week this amounts to quite a task. Some of the girls can figure and some cannot; in some cases they do not try but just take whatever is given them. If they suspected they were short they would often quit, but seldom contended for satisfaction. Mistakes are made sometimes by the bookkeeper, but when you realize that all the process of manufacturing is on a piece work basis, such as cutting, loading, sewing, tying and baling, you can have sympathy. However, I have never had the least cause to complain. The girls were gladly given all that was due them if a mistake was discovered. Of course, if the girl was not short, then the Director would help her find out her mistake. This has established a great deal of confidence in the good faith of the company.

We have frequent meetings of the staff of foreladies and inspectors, and instructions are passed to the girls about the work through them to develop respect for their positions as supervisors. Mass-meetings are held and subjects such as business methods, personal responsibility, cooperation, loyalty, punctuality, attendance, factory ethics, health and morals, conduct in the factory as well as when going to and from work are discussed.

The girls wear a neat uniform and cap of blue and white striped gingham made by the Angelica Uniform Factory in St. Louis. It makes a wonderful improvement in the general appearance and they like it. Many of our patrons come to visit the factory. These men are always surprised and agreeably impressed when they see these hundreds of neatly apparelled girls working so quietly and industriously and making such a high quality product. I wish to say right here, that this work requires skill and a good average of intelligence, as we daily receive orders requiring exclusive and special particulars. There are in the employ of our factory Jews, Italians, Slavokians, Poles, Bohemians and Americans, and when you realize that Negro men, women, boys and girls are employed in every department

with absolutely no race friction, you must admit that it is a striking example of inter-racial industrial adjustment.

A word of appreciation now for the girls in this story. It has been wonderful to see the gratitude of these workers as well as the great response we have had to our plans. The majority of the girls appreciate just what it means for them to make good and they are anxious to cooperate, now that they do understand and the whole process of costs and values has been explained. They realize that they are pioneers and to them is entrusted the future possibilities for greater opportunities for Negro girls in industry if they make good. They feel satisfied that the Director will take care of their complaints and give them a square deal. All this has raised the morale of Negro help at Nachman Springfilled Cushion Company and today these workers are assured of steady work and advancement when merited in this company.

It may be interesting to you to hear of the experience of a young white college girl student of sociology and economics who worked in our factory as a power machine operator last summer for seven weeks. Unknown to all but the Director, she was under the guardianship of the Y.W.C.A. Students of Industry Group. In the report of her experiences she made this statement: "I expected to find a low moral status existing among these factory girls. On the contrary, it was just the reverse and I never felt the least bit out of place. I found them cheerful and helpful to each other, and I felt no different than I would in any other strange social group. There is absolutely no profanity or vulgarity in their conversation, as I expected to find." The Y.W.C.A. has again requested a placement for a student this summer! This speaks for itself.

Until the Negro woman in industry has had a longer factory experience, until she has acquired the modern industry complex, where they are employed in large numbers, they must be guided. In a few years they will have established themselves without question as to their ability and capacity for routine factory work. Then they may be counted upon to make their contribution and become an integral part of the great industrial systems of America. Give her time, give her guidance—most of all, give her opportunity.

## *A Successful Library Experiment*

By THOMAS F. BLUE

THE Colored Department of the Louisville Free Public Library consists of two branch libraries housed in Carnegie buildings, seventeen stations and fifty-nine classroom collections in twenty-six school buildings in Louisville and Jefferson County. It has a staff of nine workers and an annual circulation of over 60,000 volumes.

The first branch, known as the Western Colored Branch, was opened in temporary quarters, September 23, 1905. Although this was a new experiment, it immediately became popular and was regarded by the library authorities as a success from the beginning.