

# Race relations

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY KRISTIN POST

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In this oral history, Rebecca Clark says, “Back then, the only jobs in Chapel Hill for any black person was work as a domestic lady — cook, clean, wash, iron. And the onliest job the men had was janitors and work for the university. And the women worked for the university. That was the onliest jobs available.”

These limited job options had a certain impact on the relationship between white employers and African Americans. Just before this excerpt begins, Mrs. Clark is discussing what her days were like when she worked for the laundry at the University of North Carolina. She worked all day and had a half hour off for lunch, when she went home for a quick bite. She received one of her highest paychecks ever at this time, earning \$27 a week for six days’ work.

## Preliminary questions

1. What buying power would Mrs. Clark’s paycheck have today? What is the minimum wage today, and how does this compare to Mrs. Clark’s income?
2. Do African Americans and other minorities still have limited job options? Explain why things have or have not changed since Mrs. Clark’s time.

## The recording

This media is available in the web edition only.

## Transcript

I would run home and eat and go back eating. I had a relative that lived right up here at the corner of Merritt Mill Road and Crest Drive. He was saying, “Rebecca, the way you working, I

want you during your lifetime in a day, to lay down and stretch your body for ten minutes, because you need it.”

But we were then doing what we was taught to do, was work for a dollar. And I almost had no choice. Because when you were even doing, before the laundry, doing domestic work, if your child got sick and you couldn't come in, they'd tell you, “If you can't come, I'll have to get somebody else.” They didn't have no sympathy for you. And they didn't have no meals for you. ( ), you left it there for supper. Your meal wasn't included in that. And most times, your lunch wasn't included in that.

So coming up, the relationship between white and black, I guess everybody respected everybody, but there wasn't a lot of hostility because we knew we had to work and they knew they had to have some help. Back then, there wasn't that many black folks in Chapel Hill. During that time, in 1931, '32, '33, about five thousand people in Chapel Hill. There wasn't that much more than that were students.

## Follow-up questions

1. What is the significance of a relative telling Clark, “Rebecca, the way you working, I want you during your lifetime in a day lay down ten minutes and stretch your body out.” How do you feel about a lifestyle where having ten minutes' rest is not an option?
2. What do you think about the way she describes the relationship between whites and blacks? In what way is it unbalanced?
3. What is the significance to her statement “there weren't very many black folks in Chapel Hill?”

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### On the web

#### Race in her lifetime

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/race-docsouth/>

In this lesson, students will use oral histories to trace the life of Rebecca Clark, an African American who was born in rural Orange County just before the Depression and witnessed the changes in civil rights over the years.

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### About the author

#### KRISTIN POST

Kristin traveled around the world by herself from 2000-2001. She traveled west from California through New Zealand, Australia, Southeast Asia, China, India, Nepal, and East Africa. She brought along a mini disc recorder, and captured her experiences in sound as well as on film and on paper. Whenever she listens to this audio, she is transported into the moment with an immediacy her

pictures and journal cannot imitate. She hopes that teachers, students and the general public will enjoy traveling the world through the sounds she captured in that year of her life.