

# You Worked Long Hours

Born in 1910, Essie Favrot worked several decades for southern white families as a domestic worker. In an interview, she described some of the situations in which she worked:

I finished out the eighth grade in the country. But by then my very oldest sister had come to stay with my aunt, and she decided it was time I came, too.

The onliest thing then was for a black girl to do was to get domestic work. So, I worked. First it was just about a two-hour job per day, five days a week for this lady that just had come up to me and asked me to work. I'd go down there to her house, clean up the house, do a little washing, and that was it. Fifty cent a day was what I made. They were poor people. They were probably just about as poor as I was, but the lady worked for a department store!

Then, I think, my brother's mother-in-law told me that this lady needed somebody to keep her kids. So I went there and worked. I was living on the place, and that's when I met my husband. This was in '39, and I remember the salary had gone up to a dollar a day. I was making seven dollars [a week] because I was living on the place. And I worked every day from seven to seven. You worked long hours, but you were making a dollar a day.

I slept up in the bedroom with the little boy. There was a servant house in the backyard, but it was occupied by the cook, which was a male. It was considered his house, but I used the bathroom there.

They were rich people. I guess they owned stock. And when my mother-in-law decided to sell half her land, I don't know why but it came for me to borrow the money. My husband had been working for his people much longer than I had. Anyway I asked them for fifty dollars to pay for the property, and they readily gave it to me. But they said they wouldn't help me to build a house. They had got stung with another maid borrowing from them. We paid the money back right quick, and they were surprised.

After that, I worked thirteen years for the Elliots. Now they weren't rich people. They both worked, and they had six children. I took over the running of the house. I did everything for them—the groceries, the cleaning up, the kids. I did all for the kids—took them to the park, to school, bought their clothes, saw that they wore the right clothes to were parties, all that. My neighbors used to laugh because those Elliots were such poor people. Everyone knew they were. I mean not poor white trash—no. Just working people like myself. I was fond of those kids. I still am. I worked for them until my son was born. We still keep in touch. One of the girls just died. She had cancer; that was very sad. And their mother, I worry about her. She's had a hard time. Working for them—since they had all those kids, it was more like family for me there. I feel still sort of protective and maternal towards them. Not like I do my own family, no, but like I would any children I'd cared for that much, watched grow up. I'd help them still anyway I could. I would . . . not go back to work, but I'd help them any other way I could.

After that, I worked days till my son got old enough to go to school. Then I worked for the Helms. I worked there for a while. And they had four kids. Two were up in age, school-age children. And they had two little kids. And I just figured, since I was taking care of her kids and cooking for them, I'd have supper done when they got there and the kids fed and clean. They both worked. And they were so congenial at first. So, when my son started school not far from where they lived, I figured they wouldn't mind him coming down there after school and then going home with me.

But the first day after I did it, Mr. Helms say, "What happened, Essie? Did your son miss his bus?" I say, "No, he didn't miss his bus. It's nobody at home in the evening, so I just took your two children, and when we were on our way back from the park, we picked him up."

"I don't think it's going to be such a good idea, him coming down here. That lady next door.... Mind you now, it's not us," he said. "But that lady next door don't want him playing down here."

So his wife she thought she could come home early so I could go home early, too. And the next evening she said, "I think I might enjoy coming on home, getting here early." I didn't say a word, because I knew I wasn't going to work for nobody who had two that were not toilet trained and I had to clean both of them up and I had to cook dinner for the whole family and clean the apartment and wash their clothes. I felt if I was doing all of that for her children and her, and mine couldn't come there in the evening, that they could have their job. After she paid me, I said, "Now you be sure and get you somebody." I was headed to my car when I said it. And I left there and never went back....