

This life story is part of a collection of life histories consists of approximately 2,900 documents, compiled and transcribed by more than 300 writers from 24 states, working on the **Folklore Project of the Federal Writers' Project**, a New Deal jobs program that was part of the U.S. Works Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA) from 1936 to 1940. Typically 2,000-15,000 words in length, the documents vary in form from narratives to dialogues to reports to case histories. They chronicle vivid life stories of Americans who lived at the turn of the century and include their experiences during the Great Depression.

SOUTH CAROLINA WORKERS' PROJECT

TITLE: MRS., MARTIN, PUBLIC HEALTH NURSE.

Date of First Writing: February 10, 1939

Street Address: 14 College Street, Charleston, S. C.

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It is a large, rambling old brick house, not far from the college buildings, in which Mrs. Martin and her family live. It is simply furnished, and has an air of continual activity about it. Mrs. Martin greeted me cordially at the door, a friendly smile on her face. "Come in," she said. "You are just on time." I followed her into the living-room, where, amid a collection of drawings and paintings on the floors sat a tall young girl who jumped quickly to her feet as we entered. "This is Edith, my eldest daughter," said Mrs. Martin. "She has been painting, as you can see. I gave her a box of oil paints for a Christmas present and she has spent every spare minute working with them since." There were water colors, pen and ink sketches, figures done in charcoal, and oil paintings of landscapes. It was an interesting collection that showed versatility and originality of thoughts. Edith is tall like her mother, with dancing warm brown eyes and bobbed hair. She has some of her mother's vivaciousness and charm, too. Edith prepared to gather up the things to leave the room, but, after being assured that she could remain, reseated herself on the floor, and went on with her painting, while, her mother, Head nurse of the Public Health Center, prepared to tell something about herself and her work.

Mrs. Martin, R. N., is tall and good-looking. She has snapping brown eyes, dark brown hair, worn parted on the side of her head and twisted into a loose knot at the nape of her neck, and an exhilarating air of vitality. Before she could begin her story, I heard the sound of footsteps lightly treading down the stairs, and in a moment a little old lady, very spry in spite of her obviously advanced age, smilingly tripped, almost fairy-like, into the room and put her arms affectionately around Mrs. Martin. "This is my great-aunt Lily who lives with us," she informed me. "She is eighty-seven years old and stone deaf. Her eyesight is failing too, and she cannot see you distinctly." Turning to her aunt she said: "Yes, dear, I have brought you a package. Here it is." Mrs. Martin placed a small bundle of varicolored embroidery threads in her aunt's hands, who, satisfied, left the room.

Aunt Lily has a small bundle of her own, and when she was left alone in the world, elected to come and live with us, although others in the family were better able to look after her. But she is happy with us as you can see, and we like to have her," Mrs. Martin explained. Then she returned to her story.

"We moved to Charleston about twelve years ago from Newberry, after we had lost our house and almost everything we owned through a bank failure. We managed to save about two hundred dollars out of the wreck, enough to start over again. My husband, who is a university graduate, went into business here and for a few years did very well. He had a flourishing bicycle shop and we were able to get along and look after our five children comfortably."

"But this was not to last. Following a nervous breakdown he was sent to the veteran's hospital in Columbia, and I tried to run the business. I had to give it up in the end, and a time came, when, for about three

weeks, I was really desperate, realizing that I was faced with the task of supporting a sick husband and five children."

"But let me go back to my girlhood. When I finished high school, I wanted to become a nurse, so I went to the Magdalene Hospital in Chester, where I was born and lived, to study." Mrs. Martin paused reflectively for a moment. "Do you know, my maiden name was Nancy Stephenson, and my family comes in a direct line from Robert Louis Stephenson? she asked, pride creeping into her voice. I cannot tell you more about it, but I know it is true because my family has the records. It may be of interest to you to know this, although I seldom speak of it to anybody."

"But to go on with my story. After my graduation I kept right on and took a post-graduate course in Columbia, South Carolina. From there I went to New York City and took another course at the Maternity Institute. That was during the World War. It was while in Columbia that I fell deeply in love with a young officer and we became engaged, shortly before he went overseas. He was killed at Belliou Wood." There was a wistful expression in Mrs. Martin's eyes as she told me this.

Edith collected her paraphernalia and left for the college glee club practice. There was no fear of interruptions now. Mrs. Martin resumed her story!

"Later, after a swift courtship, I married Mr. Martin. I respect him and he has been a wonderful father to our children, and we have had a happy married life, but" - she paused, "I believe you can only love once."

"We have five children, four daughters and a son. Edith is a second-term freshman at the college. She will be twenty on her next birthday. Then my boy, Tom, eighteen, and a freshman at the Citadel. Frances, Mary and Jane, who are seventeen, fifteen and eleven years old, are the younger girls. Jane, the baby, is up stairs in bed with a cold, which I believe may be a touch of flu, so I am keeping her isolated, much to her resentment."

"But let me tell you about Tom. When he was graduated from high school last summer, he decided that he wanted to go to college, but, in order to do so, he had to earn the money. So he got a job delivering milk for one of the dairies. It was hard work with long hours but before the summer was over he had two hundred and fifty dollars in the bank. He is six foot three inches tall. I wish you could see him in his uniform," Mrs. Martin added proudly. "Frances and Mary are in high school and Jane is still in the grade school. They are bright girls, chiefly interested in sports at this stage."

"When my husband was in the hospital and the situation was so desperate, I knew that I had to do something quickly. Fortunately I had nursing to turn to. It was in 1933, in the day of the FERA, before it was changed to the WPA, I applied for, and succeeded in getting, a place with the public health department, and went to work. I worked very hard, and when a change was made in the administration and all the other nurses were let out, I was kept on and put in charge of the newly organized department."

"Then in 1936 I heard that there was a vacancy in the City and County Health Department I know that if I should get it that it would be a permanent position and would take me off the WPA. So I applied, and to my surprise, got it. I really hated to give up my work on the WPA, and shall feel eternally grateful for the chance given to me through the New Deal. But I had to think of the future."

"There was a Great deal of ill-feeling evident when I first went to work at the Health Centre, but I am glad to say that it has gradually faded out. The other nurses resented the fact that I, who am an outsider, should be put over them, and I can understand how they felt. I even went to the board and offered to resign in favor of someone else, but the board refused to listen to me. Anyway, today we are very proud to be able to claim the best organized and smoothest running health department in the state. There are twenty-eight nurses on the staff and twelve clerical workers, all of whom are under me."

"You would like me to tell you about a day in my life? Very well. But first let me show you a letter which I received a few days ago. It will give you an idea of some of my experiences." Here it is, written in pencil: "Dear

Mrs. Martin- today is two weeks I've been confined to bed very ill now little Helen has had feaver since Saturday very high fever all night if the nurse comes there today tell her to please be sure & come here to see about her for me. Thanks Helen's Mother

"I went to this house which consisted of one large room - nothing more. It was almost bare. In a corner some sacking had been nailed to the rafters in order to give a slight amount of privacy to the bed and its occupants, for mother and daughter were in the same bed. I found that the neighbors had become so concerned about the condition of the family that they had taken up a collection to pay for the services of a doctor. So, of course, I could do little for them. I did, however, bathe and freshen them up as much as possible under the circumstances, and left a note for the doctor telling him what I had done. I had given temperature readings. The little girl's temperature was 103 degrees. If he had not been called I would have telephoned an ambulance and taken them to the hospital immediately, but public health nurses never interfere when a regular doctor has been called. The child has double pneumonia. It is a pathetic case, though only one of many."

"At nine o'clock every morning I am at my office. I spend an hour checking over reports and letters, and taking telephone calls. Then the doctor and I attend to these calls before visiting at least one, and often two or three, schools before lunch time, where we examine and test the children for various symptoms of disease, including eye-trouble; teeth, heart and lungs affections. Every child is weighed, and a card index is carefully kept of each case. After lunch I go to the hospital and work in the wards doing dressings until five o'clock. Often at night I attend classes, either teachers' classes or first aid."

"Yes, my days are very fully occupied and I have little time to spend at home with my family. I was invited to conduct some night classes in first aid recently, but I did not feel that it would be right for me to take on any more work than I am doing now. My husband, after coming out of the hospital seemed to lose his grip for a time, but this passed. He has found a job working for the bridge company, and has also taken over Tom's milk route, so we are able to get along nicely once more, and I am getting a good salary."

"Would you like to hear what I did last September?" Mrs. Martin asked, "Because I would like to tell you about it."

"I decided that I would like to take a post graduate course in Public Health Nursing at the Peabody College for Nurses in Nashville, Tennessee, so I asked for and was given a three months leave of absence. I felt very young as I started out alone very early on the morning of September 24th and the ride through the country was thrilling. I felt as though I were on the verge of a glorious adventure, and, in a sense this was true, for I studied hard and made a new circle of friends. I took five subjects and passed them all. Let me show you my report card." The subjects listed were: Fundamentals, Principles and Organization, Preventive Medicine, Recreational Rhyth, and Intro to St. of Sco. sc. After each subject the letter "P" was written. It was truly an impressive report card.

"While at Peabody, ten of us formed a club which we called the RX CLUB, and we had a lot of fun in our spare time. There were midnight suppers and picnics. We were all young together. Before parting for our various homes at Christmas time, we agreed to write to each other every Birthday and Christmas".

"I think it is a good thing to get away from your family occasionally, because it does make them appreciate you more. I find the problem of four grown daughters in this modern world is a real one. That is why I am attending these night classes and studying psychology, hoping to find the answers to the many questions and problems which arise daily - so that I will be able to understand my girls better. I am attending a class this evening which begins at eight o'clock.

It was growing late. Edith had returned from her glee club practice, and the other girls were home too, so I took my leave. Mrs. Martin, was preparing for her evening class as I slipped out of the house.