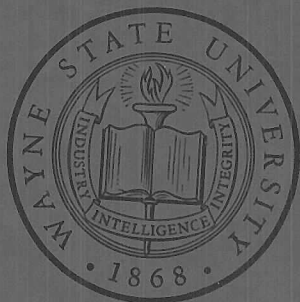


# Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

REVEREND CHARLES HILL

ROBERTA McBRIDE, INTERVIEWER  
MAY 8, 1967



Wayne State University  
Detroit, Michigan



REV. CHARLES HILL TAPE

Date: May 8, 1967

Interviewer: Roberta McBride

Interviewee: Rev. Charles Hill

Mc: What was the year you came to the Hartford Baptist Church?

H: 1920.

Mc: So, it is since then you've been at the Hartford Baptist Church?

H: That's right. They only had 35 members at that time.

Mc: So, there've been some changes there? You came in 1920. That was right after the close of the first World War. What kinds of activities did your efforts to improve race conditions consist of in the 20's?

H: Well, in the 20's it was primarily the housing problem because this was the first area that was opened to Negroes come out of the 3rd ward. Up to that time all of them were confined there. Following this they opened here and when I came here, they couldn't go beyond Warren, Beechwood or Tireman and they couldn't locate too often on the Boulevard. And so as a result, they began to pressure to expand. When some of the soldiers came from World War I, they had gotten used to larger privileges and so they were making a demand and pushing in order that they might live wherever they wanted to live. And so the first family moved about 10 blocks from the church, the other side of Beechwood and, of course, a mob tried to run them out.

Mc: That was in the early 20's?

H: The early 20's, yes.

Mc: I see.

H: And as to the family, of course, finally they blocked and forced



them out and they couldn't rent it at all. It wasn't long, however, before others moved in there and they didn't have any trouble at all.

Mc: Now, in the late 30's when my reading of some of the newspapers started, I saw that you were a member of many committees formed to help on the problem. Were there committees in the 20's too, that you worked with or how did you attack the problem?

H: I worked pretty much alone as far as it was concerned. I know many of the ministers were a little bit hesitant about speaking out because they were afraid that it might cause them to lose their prestige with their church and because many of the folks were just coming from the South and naturally had certain prejudices and hates too. I remember when I first took the church, at any time when a white citizen came in, they'd ask what business they had here. Why don't they go to their own church?

Mc: So Negroes were no more happy to receive whites than whites were to receive Negroes?

H: It was the same attitude on both sides. And, I've told them all along that don't put all the blame on the other side. That you are just as much responsible in thinking that many times the whites are just taking advantage of you. And there are some among them that want to see real decency practiced on the part of all.

Mc: Now, the 30's one thinks of as the depression years. I expect that was a period when there were great losses in every way for the Negro-- unemployment, housing, etc. Along toward the end of the 30's we were

getting into the period of Detroit, arsenal of defense?

H: Yes.

Mc: And that meant many people coming in and the housing situation getting worse all the time?

H: Yes. It was very bad in those days. Of course, Ford's was the first factory that started employing Negroes, about 10%, but they were all in the foundry. Then, of course, he was the first one to give \$5.00 per day. And that was a big wage at that time. And, so that's one reason many of them were opposed to the union because some of them looked upon Ford as almost being a "god" and treating them better than any other factory that we had in Detroit. So as a result, of course, their attitude was, when I took a stand for the union going into Ford's; 100 of them left my church saying the church had no business doing anything in that area whatsoever. I was happy after the CIO won out that most of them came back and admitted that, after all, the church ought to be interested in all areas here on earth, as well as talking about going to heaven. Because I used to tell them, "Well, if you don't have a little heaven here, you'll create hell over there."

Mc: I see. Well now, how come you were so convinced that unions, the CIO at least, held good for the Negro?

H: Well, because the CIO had control of the mines; and they insisted that there be no discrimination at all. And I know, I forget who was president at that time, said that the Negro takes as much money to live as anyone else. He eats the same food, dresses the same way and so he is a human being. And so, they pushed through that. Why, of

course, that helped them to play their part in the mines throughout the country. So, that is one reason that I had much faith in the CIO--not because they actually practiced what their constitution called for. And, so I was interested in the CIO coming in because it said, "If they come in, you would have an opportunity to be promoted and to advance. But, if the AFL comes in, they're discriminating even now and they'll carry out their same program." And, so many of them came to find out that that was so true; and they were very happy and have been very devoted to the Ford Local every since. Because of the stand I took, they made me an honorary member.

Mc: An honorary member of Local 600?

H: Yes.

Mc: What were some of the things that you were able to do to help the union come in?

H: Well during the strike, when they had a large number of ours in the plant, whites would come out; and so I went out to the Ford factory and I pleaded with them to come out; I told them that they could not afford to make any advance by themselves; they had to learn to work with other workers and that their hope for the future wasn't that they were going to be by themselves but rather that they were going to be with all other workers.

Mc: Now this would be April, 1941 during the strike?

H: Yes.

Mc: When the Negroes, some of them, were staying in?

H: That's right.

Mc: Not really understanding what it was all about, so some have told me.

H: A good many of them belonged to my church and they had confidence in everything--every stand I took. So, they came out and the others followed them.

Mc: So you were actually out there with a loud speaker, maybe, on the picket line?

H: Yes, a loud speaker. The union gave me a loud speaker and I could talk so that it would carry into the factory. So, I told them, "Now is your hope, for the union wants to help you. But, they can't help you unless you take the right stand." Many of them, after they came out, thanked me very much for urging them to come out. There were only two of us, at the most three of our Negro ministers that could take a stand.

Mc: I was going to ask you that. You and Canon Dade?

H: Yes and...

Mc: And Horace White?

H: Yes. From the Plymouth Congregational Church. Those were the only ones. Because of the strike, the AFL published a paper in Cleveland and brought it here every day or so in which they tried to make all kinds of accusations against me. But, it didn't get them anywhere at all. I'm very sorry though that I haven't kept any of those papers because some of the things they said were ridiculous.

Mc: We have some copies of them at the Archives.

H: I see.

Mc: And, they denounced you personally?

H: Yes they did. They said that I was being paid to take the stand that

I had taken and I said to some of the ministers who were influenced by the AFL, "I challenge a single one of you to find any evidence anywhere where I got one penny, because I don't do these things for what I can get."

Mc: We're talking still about your contacts with your own parishioners when the union came and how you helped out. In the days before the union came, I believe you loaned the use of your church. Why was that useful? Why couldn't the union just meet any place?

H: The reason the union couldn't meet any place was that if they met in a regular union hall, then some of the spies from Ford Motor Company would take their automobile license number and they lost their jobs the next day. By holding it in church, it would be difficult for them to prove that we were just discussing union matters. And so, as a result, they got together regardless of their race or nationality and saw that what was going to be done would help every one of them. And one of the officers of my church---I know that they threatened to fire him if he didn't say out of the meetings. So, when he came he wouldn't come in his car; he would walk so they couldn't tell. And then after the CIO won, why up to that time, he was hardly able to make enough money to pay his rent even though he was doing a comparable job where whites were getting 3 and 4 times more pay. Within six months after the union succeeded in going into Ford's, he was able to accumulate enough money to make a down payment on a 2-family flat. And, so he had much better conditions; from then on, he was one of the best and

most loyal men I had. He got up two or three times on other issues and said, "Reverend here is honest and he is interested in helping you and so we ought to support him." He took that stand because a number of times, I was accused of being a Communist and I didn't let any name keep me from doing the thing that I thought was right to help all of humanity.

Mc: After the union came the conditions were much better for the workers at Ford. How about women---were they being employed?

H: Not at that time, but during World War II, women were able to get into Ford's. There were enough men here. So, many had been shipped in here from the South, so they had plenty. But, when the war came, many men were drafted; then there were openings that only the women could fill.

Mc: What were some of the things you had to do to get the company to recognize the potential in employing women?

H: The only thing we did was to keep pleading with some of their men that women could do the work okay if they gave them the opportunity. I said, "You ought to try a few." After trying a few, of course, they added more too. They found that the women could do all of the work that the men were doing so far as that's concerned.

Mc: Would the Rouge plant be one of the first places that the women were employed in war industry?

H: I think it is. Yes, I'm quite sure it was the first one. But, of course, in employing women, they kept them in the foundry where they had most of the men. But, as the union grew, then they would insist

upon a promotion and opening up of their departments, and some of the women went into other departments also.

Mc: Were they employing white women then? Or, were they just against Negro women or against all women?

H: I never made a plea for Negro women--I just made it for women.

Mc: So women weren't being employed in the early '41; but, by the close of '42, they were starting to put women on the production line?

H: Yes.

Mc: Now, I'm wondering why you were able---why you were willing to be more independent than many of the other Negro ministers?

H: The only reason was I depended completely upon my congregation where some of the other ministers--to some of them different business places were making contributions and, of course, when that happened, they would try to dictate what to do. I told them that, when we were building our building, that we were going to do it out of our own pockets so we can be free to take a stand at any time for anything that is right and not have someone say, "If I had know you were going to do this, I would not have made this contribution." So, we had no difficulty at all because we did it by ourselves.

Mc: I've been told that Ford Motor Company--Mr. Ford--offered contributions to a number of churches, I guess, in order to obligate them somewhat. Did you have to turn down contributions ever?

H: No, they never came to me because I was never one that they could get close to.

Mc: It was plain to them there wouldn't be any use in trying that?

H: Yes, that's right.

Mc: I wanted to ask you in particular about your activities to allow Negroes to go any place that they liked for housing. We were talking of the fact that the situation got tighter as Detroit began to produce for defense?

H: Yes, that's true. They tried to keep them all in the 3rd ward. When they got pretty much together in the 3rd ward and were about strong enough to elect a Negro to the Common Council, that's when the Council's number in Detroit was changed. We used to have a 42-man Council and then they changed to the nine-man Council. That was because the Negro was so well organized and there were so few whites in that 3rd ward that there was no chance for a white man to be elected.

Mc: I see. I had known about changing from the ward system to electing a smaller number, at large, but I didn't realize that it was connected with the race situation.

H: Well, I think that's what it was because they were getting stronger then. Of course, they were beginning to push out <sup>from</sup> the 3rd ward, and as I said, this area here was the first one in Detroit to open up even though it was limited to Warren, Beechwood, Tireman, and the Boulevard here; it wasn't long before one of the first members to go beyond Beechwood was out of my congregation. They stoned the house and when I went there, the police said, "What's wrong?" I said, "You ought to be willing to give more protection to these folks. If it had been me, you would not have to worry about anybody



being injured." I believe that we ought to have the privilege, at least to go where we desire and I know that it was an officer's wife who threw a brick at this woman in her bed. She turned around and shot a gun and I said, "Now you have a gun, whichever way you see a brick coming, shoot in that direction," and so she only missed this officer's wife by a foot. She was arrested and I went down to the court and said, "I'm going to demand that you release her to me because she has no business being in jail because she was just protecting her home--the police weren't doing it. I know." I went to the police, what is now the McGraw station, but used to be Vinewood station and the inspector at that time said, "Don't you know we could hire somebody to kill you by your carrying on this way?" I said, "Yes, you would do it, but what do you think we're going to do? After all, if you start anything like that, then I pity any man who wears a blue coat and brass buttons." Then he said, "You won't have any more troubles. If you have any more difficulties, see me directly." We had no more difficulties until about ten or fifteen years later, over on American Avenue. When one of our undertakers moved in there, he asked me if I would support him. I said, "Certainly, whenever you move into a place--move there to stay--not for yourself, but you'll be opening the door for others." So, they stayed.

Mc: Was he one of your parishioners?

H: No, he was not.

Mc: But you gave him help where it was needed, nevertheless?

H: Anybody who needed help, who was conscientious and sincere, then I

would help him. It didn't make any difference; I was glad to help him. When I went out there, we found a white man who was in business on Milford. He was out there in the crowd trying to run the man out. I came back and had some of the members to keep anybody from going in there. In two weeks, he had to move out. He said to me, "You did not treat me right." I said, "You had no business out there trying to keep that family from going in there and if that's the way you feel, then you have no business having a store in an area that's 100% Negro." He moved out and never came back.

Mc: Now, the case I've always heard about is the Sweet Case. Was that before or after these two happenings that you described?

H: That was before. After the Sweet Case, in many of these areas they would get these restrictions--try to prevent the whites, even if they wanted to sell--to sell to Negroes. It wasn't until after the court's decision that outlawed restrictions that they were able to go into all areas.

Mc: The Sweet Case was on the east side? Most of these were nearby...

H: Yes. But, the effect was all over. Dr. Turner moved on Spokane? I tried to tell him if he wanted help, to let me know. But, he depended upon the doctors because he was in Harper Hospital and he was the only Negro doctor in any of the hospitals.

Mc: On the staff?

H: Yes. He thought the doctors would protect him because one of them lived next door. He tried to move there in the afternoon; by night,

they had him back on Warren again.

Mc: The Turner Case was before the Sweet Case, wasn't it?

H: No, following the Sweet Case.

Mc: I have read of your activities with the Sojourner Truth episode; that would be in the early 40's, wouldn't it?

H: Yes.

Mc: What was that situation?

H: That was a situation where the government was trying to build a home for Negroes out near 6-Mile Road. They put a sign up 'Sojourner Truth' and it was in a strictly Polish neighborhood. At first, the Poles thought that Sojourner Truth was a Polish woman. Then, when they found out that she was a Negro woman, they tore the signs down and did everything they would to prevent it. I had to go from here to Washington every two or three days to meet different senators and different groups there for almost a month. Then Jeffries, when they tried moving in, he wouldn't let them in at all. Then we asked the government to send the soldiers to let them go in. They sent one man from Washington to ask me to change my mind. He said, "If you do that, we will build many homes." I said, "NO. I'm not going to agree with you. You started it for Negroes, so I'm going to insist that they go into it. Then, after they are in it a while, if they want to integrate it, that will be perfectly okay. But, you had no business starting it just for Negroes." They offered me \$25,000 if I would change my mind.

Mc: Who offered you \$25,000?

H: I don't remember---a representative from Washington. He said he came here from the President. I said, "What can I do with \$25,000?" He said, "Well, you can go to Hawaii." I said, "You mean, I'm going to leave all my friends here just to go there. Well, you're mistaken; I've been honest with them. I'm not going to betray them now." He said, "Well, you're not going to live in the building." I said, "That's true. But, I'm not interested in myself. I'm interested in helping others who want to live in the project." He even went to Rev. Crane, who was a very good friend of mine at that time. He was the only one of the white ministers that took a definite stand and put it in the church paper and spoke out from his pulpit. He went to Henry Crane to have him approach me and have me change my mind. Crane told him, "He doesn't change that way and I can't change him even if I wanted to, and I don't want to." He was the one who published the information about the project in his church paper and asked anyone who could to help in the situation.

Mc: How was the Sojourner Truth episode finally resolved?

H: The army sent soldiers here and the Negroes moved into it. Once they moved in, they didn't have any difficulty whatsoever.

Mc: That was just a little while before the June, 1943, race riot, wasn't it?

H: Yes, they had a riot there even.

Mc: At Sojourner Truth?

H: Yes. That's the reason we called on the soldiers because the police would not protect them. When the soldiers came there, they wouldn't

let these pull together at all. Some of the meetings that the Poles had were in the Catholic church and that made a good many of the folks anti-Catholic. They felt the church should not use its facilities against another group.

Mc: Shortly after you got the Sojourner Truth episode straightened out, I think, according to the things I was reading, there was this matter of housing defense workers out at Willow Run?

H: Yes.

Mc: You worked on that committee too, didn't you?

H: I worked with them. That's out in Ypsilanti, but they didn't have too much difficulty there.

Mc: You just held strong and it wasn't so long before Negroes were allowed to come there?

H: Yes, they were allowed. Many of them were soldiers. In the end, they demanded the right to have part of the project and, of course, one area was given to them, but, now, they live all over the area.

Mc: Well, now, have there been other dramatic episodes since then as regards housing, I mean, lots of move-ins, etc., where you've had a hand?

H: There were different areas where when one would move in, the mob would try to run them out. After I would talk to them and tell them, "Don't become frightened." Because after all, I remember when I moved here, one of the parties said, "You can't live here." I said, "No, but I can die here." I got ready to move--I was living on Hartford at that time and I told the movers... It took two vans;

both came together, so we could move everything at one time. I had seven children at that time and I told them all to just play in the yard; don't go to the neighbors and create any problems at all. Within two years, the neighbors became very friendly.

Mc: When was this?

H: That was in 1941.

Mc: That you moved here to 1916 West Grand?

H: Yes, Gwen was just one year old. We never had any trouble at all, except, I remember one of the white neighbors... It happened to be snowing like everything and I was out there shoveling snow. She said, "Well, I didn't make it snow, did you?" And, I said, "No." That was the first time she spoke to us in two years.

Mc: So, you were completely surrounded by white neighbors?

H: Yes.

Mc: It took about that length of time for the barriers to break down?

H: That's right.

Mc: I have read of several places where it seemed to me the Federal Public Housing Commission was trying to <sup>b</sup>bride the Negroes into not holding out for housing projects in formerly white areas. Was that one of those areas up on Eight Mile?

H: Yes, that is true. The government was not willing to take a stand because we could organize the group together and one thing, we had some very liberal whites with us. We were never purely Negroes. There were many of the liberal whites who would take a stand and

sometimes they would go in and buy the place and let us go in and help out that way.

Mc: I never introduced the other person in our taping session, Mrs. Hill. I would judge that she must have shown a good deal of courage when her husband's life was threatened, etc. Was that something that happened every once in a while?

Mrs. H: It kept me concerned and somewhat worried. Especially when you have a family you worry about, "Oh, what would happen if I have to raise this family by myself?" I don't know to what particular incident you are referring.

Mc: No, I'm just referring, in general, to the threats that he must have received.

Mrs. H: The first time when the riot was on, they had thrown a rock into the car, you know the color that my husband is, medium, so people evidently thought he was someone else. He was driving a Packard and when they threw the rock into the car after the car stopped they said, "Oh, my God, we got the wrong man." But he was able to come to and drive on home with a great big hicky on the back of his head about the size of an orange.

Mc: I was going to ask if you, at any time, had you suffered physical harm? So, there is an instance.

H: Well, that was the first one, and the boy who threw the rock said, "I'll drive you home." I said, "No, I'm okay, but you ought to stop

throwing rocks; there are a lot of good whites who will be coming through here to look over the area, and you're not helping the situation." A peculiar thing, when I came on the east side,--white area---they threw rocks at me; so I got them from both sides.

Mc: This was in the June '43 riots?

H: Yes.

Mc: You had quite a hand in investigating the causes of the riots and taking a stand afterwards?

H: Yes. I was on the first interracial committee Mayor Jeffries had. Our committee consisted of five whites and five Negroes. They had two very liberal whites. We contended and requested five different times for a grand jury to investigate so that they would find the truth that the Negroes did not start the riot, but actually the police did; Jeffries was so mad because we wouldn't change that he dismissed us without even announcing it.

Mc: The whole committee was dismissed?

H: Yes, the whole committee, every one of them. The committee was renamed-- then it was the Mayor's Inter-Racial Committee--and they changed the name to something else, Commission on Community Relations.

Mc: This entirely new committee was appointed after the original ten were dismissed?

H: Yes.

Mc: I never did understand just how that evolved to this day. Do you find that the attitude of the police has changed a great deal from those days till the present time?



H: Yes, a whole lot. I think many of the police at that time were from the South. They said that we know how to handle a Negro as to brutality. I took part in many of the cases where there was police brutality--just deliberate shootings, etc. Finally the commissioners began to tell the police to be careful what they do; then they changed the type of men they put on the force. At that time, they did not have to have an education of high school and college, like they do now. If he was from the South, he could get on the force.

Mc: No wonder there were all kinds of frictions and violence. I didn't really know that.

Rev. Hill, I have been interested in your record in political campaigns. You ran for Common Council more than once?

H: Six times. Almost every one of those times, some liberal whites would run with me. Take Judge Edwards, we ran twice but what I found out in many cases was that when he came to Negro groups, he would lift me very high; but he was very quiet when he went to white groups. That is what happened in so many cases. The papers were very vicious during that time.

Mc: The News and the Free Press?

H: Yes, they were very vicious. They put out all sorts of rumors. In many cases, they said that I was a Communist and that the Communists were supporting me. I told them, "When I'm running for office, I don't care who supports me. It isn't that they're going to dictate

to me what I should do. Everyone who runs for office wants to get every vote he can." I said, "The reason they want to accuse me of being a Communist was to discourage some of the folks." I said, "No one can be a preacher (at that time, I had been in my church 25 or 30 years, pastor of the same people) and grow, if he were a Communist."

Mc: You feel that your various campaigns helped to pave the way for eventual elections of Negroes to the Common Council?

H: Yes, to Common Council and even to judgeships. I ran, one year, for the Congress.

Mc: Oh, you did? I didn't realize that. So you're run not just for the Common Council but for other posts?

H: I came very close to being elected to Congress. That was in this district here.

Mc: Now, do you feel that, because you ran, a lot of your friends who otherwise would not have registered perhaps, or taken part in politics, became active in politics?

H: Yes. Each time, the second time I ran, there were over 100,000 Negroes registered. Each year they kept on increasing. At one time some of the churches said, "We don't bother that way--we leave to the Lord." I said, "The Lord isn't coming down here to vote for you; you've got to vote for yourself." Now, I don't know of a single church that is not willing to play its part in these elections.

Mc: Aside from the fact that many of the churches didn't support the unions, perhaps because they'd received money from Ford, have many of the churches not taken an active part in social welfare and betterment of the Negro?

H: Most of them are doing a little something along that line.

Mc: But not real active as you always have been?

H: They are not always active because they sometimes wonder whether people would believe in social welfare. Anytime a person accepts leadership, he has got to have the courage of his convictions. If he will have the courage of his convictions, he will keep on and ultimately find that there are many others willing to join. But, they just won't believe it.

Mc: Rev. Hill, I've often heard people say that you can judge a man by his family. Let's hear about your family.

H: My family--it all depends on who is doing the judging. In the case of my oldest son, when they put him out of the Air Force because of the stand that I had taken--they accused me of being a Communist--he wrote a letter to the press stating that he could not dictate to his dad, and that his dad was not governed by him. We got enough pressure on it and they finally dropped the charge completely, but he never was allowed to go back to Selfridge Field to fly again.

Mc: Was this at the height of the McCarthy difficulties in the early 50's?

H: A little before that--before McCarthy had become so prominent.

Mc: How many children do you have in all?

H: We have eight children. Four boys and four girls and twenty-two grandchildren.

Mc: Where are those children now?

H: They are all in Detroit, except one of the grandchildren, and not a single one of them has been any problem to society.

Mc: Are they strong fighters in the cause of race relations? In good social conditions for all?

H: They believe in intergrating in every way. All through high school, they had many white friends and I know when they used to come here, they would bring them with them, to different parties. They have no prejudices of any kind.

Mrs. Hill: I would like to mention this: in the very early days, when Dearborn was much worse than it is now, through the church and our children, and the minister, Rev. Owen Gear in Dearborn, and our church had a very fine relationship. They would get together frequently on Sundays and they would exchange. They would come to us one Sunday night and give a program and play afterwards, then we would go to them another Sunday night, give a program and play afterwards and sort of dance together. In fact, Rev. Gear had a son, Wesley, the same age as my Wesley and a daughter, Roberta, the same age as my Roberta; but Owen Gear is gone. However, we felt that was one of the first instances of showing any inter-racial relationship between Dearborn and us.

H: During the housing situation, I met some people out in Dearborn who use to live on Tireman. They said, "We sold our place; Negroes made it go down." I said, "You've made a mistake. I'll make an investigation; I'll come back here next week and give you a report and let you see how you were cheated." The real estate man had gone to her and told her if she didn't sell her property, when Negroes moved in, the value would go down, so she sold it for \$5,000. The Negro family

who bought it paid \$9,000. When I went back to her I said, "You see how you were cheated? The family who is living in your house now paid \$9,000. The real estate men are misleading many of you because Negroes, no more than anyone else, cause property to depreciate," and so she became one of the fine workers for integration. When I bought this place, they wouldn't sell it to a Negro and I had to get a Polish man to come and get it for me.

Mc: So, that's how you were able to purchase it?

H: Yes. In fact, this Polish man brought it in his name and then he turned it over in my name. He said to me--I had never met him before-- "I like you; if you want the place, I'll get it for you providing you promise that you won't let it come to me--because I don't want it." I said I wouldn't buy it if I didn't want it. He bought it for me; we had a fine relationship all along.

Mc: I believe the other time I was here you told me about the place where you spend your summers. You'd done a little good in the field of race relations there too?

H: Yes. I took one of the dentists here, a white dentist, asked him to go up and get the place for me--he and his wife--asked them to go up and get the place for me. "See what it is and if you think I'd like it, get it." It was a place 80 feet wide and 900 feet long from Hwy 25 to Lake Hurron. The wife went up there, liked it real well and put \$20 down as a down payment to hold it until the following Monday. We had George Crockett's law firm to handle it. They didn't know that we were colored. His wife said, "Rev. Hill, had it been anybody

else but you, I would have taken that lot myself because I really liked it." I said, "I am glad you are as loyal and devoted as you are, and you can come and visit whenever you want to; we'll be glad to have you." The folks who lived in that block, Williams Inn, up there held a mass meeting to run me out. We didn't find that out until after we were there. They even had called the FBI. They said they didn't want any Communists here. The FBI man told them I was no Communist and that they had no record of any kind and they they'd better not bother me because I didn't run. "He stays where he is." And now those folks are the best friends I've got up there.

Mc: Have you found any change in the attitude of the people near your summer cottage?

Mrs. H: Yes. When we first went there, we noticed that they seemed to resent us. Even when I would go to the drug store, they always gave us what we wanted, but it seemed as if they did not want to touch our hands. They'd drop the money in our hands. We'd get a little odd feeling but afterward they found out that we dressed as well as they dressed and we ate the same thing and our place looked as nice as theirs and better. Through the man at Presbyterian Church, they seemed to begin to accept us because we went to church. When we went, we always had two rows full of family. They'd say, "Here comes the whole Hill family." They have a very nice relationship now. He preached there at the Presbyterian Church; our choir sang.

Mc: I believe you told me that you exchanged ministers? Do you exchange pulpits with the minister from that area?

H: Yes. We met this man at my 46th anniversary last November--Miller.

Mc: Rev. Hill, I've been looking through some of this material that you have assembled. Looks to me as if it's real interesting. I'd just like to know a little bit more about it. You have some pictures. I wonder if you can tell me a little bit more about the pictures.

H: Some of these pictures have to do with some of the children and the adults that we had to deal with and also like Sonny Edwards, both his children and the position that he took because Sonny Edwards was somewhat cooperative and as a result, of course, pictures were taken and these are a few that happen to be on hand now. It takes in many areas especially around Sojourner Truth when we had the early struggle to get open housing for our folks. As a result of that stand and finally winning out through cooperation of the government, through the armed forces, better days began to be experienced here in Detroit.

Mc: These would be after your demonstration march in April, 1942. There was a near riot there at the project?

H: Yes, there was a riot.

Mc: Some of these apparently are that.

H: Yes, that's what it is and Sonny Edwards is the photographer; he might have some of those.

Mc: Oh, he might have some more pictures?

H: Yes.

Mc: I see. I'm going to make contact with him. Now, I notice a handbill here, a very vicious one I would think. What was the occasion for this?

- H: This is where they were opposing the Sojourner Truth--put out by the Polish and so there was a united effort to come to Nevada and Fenelon. "Sunday and Monday, we need your help." We wanted to prevent, in many cases, our folks going there to see what the buildings were like, etc.
- Mc: And this picture of Sojourner Truth, what was this?
- H: We used this at various meetings we had at my church. This was used, also, so that all who were really interested in the Sojourner Truth could buy one of these and whatever was benefited from it help in that struggle.
- Mc: Was that your chief source of income for these different brochures that you issued?
- H: Well, that was one of them. We met almost every week at that time at what was then the YWCA on Elizabeth and St. Antoine. There we would always lift a collection asking everybody to give whatever they could so we took advantage of everything because of railroad fares going to Washington.
- Mc: I wondered about that. You said you were a commuter to Washington several times a week.
- H: Yes. Being the head of the Sojourner Truth structure, everytime any department in Washington wanted information, they expected me to go. Since I was pastoring the church, I could get away a lot easier than some of the folks working in the factories.
- Mc: It's in the same connection that you have letters here that were sent to Senator Diggs and a letter from Thurgood Marshall and to Senator



Robert Reynolds. He was a southern Senator, wasn't he? You were asking that he come out in favor of the...?

H: All of them, whatever they could do for this Sojourner Truth, because some of them were changing their attitudes. What happened in that case, many of us may not know, was really the Polish thought Sojourner Truth was a Polish woman. As soon as they found out that she was a Negro woman, they tore down the sign. Then there was that struggle to get the Congressmen to take a definite stand. After all, the war was going on then and the Negro youth had to go in and fight the same as anyone else. They were trying to give freedom abroad when we needed freedom at home. Therefore, there should not be any discrimination on the part of the government providing homes for the needy.

Mc: You have a very forceful letter here to President Roosevelt dated August 29, 1942.

H: Yes, I tried to get him to take a stand to eliminate the discrimination that there was in railroad cars. At that time, Negroes could only go in certain cars and so I said, "Now since you are fighting for freedom for everybody at this time, you could be like one or two of the other presidents--you could take a stand that would help to really advance our country so we wouldn't be criticised in some areas because of the way we treat somebody; and not only Negroes but some of the foreign born ones who were having terrific trouble at that time. So I said, "You ought to take a stand and make everyone feel that as long as they're got the price, they can use all the facilities there were."

Mc: I noticed in some of the other correspondence there was communication

from the American Council for the Foreign Born. You apparently made that effort for all, not just for Negroes?

H: No, for everybody. I was a member of the Committee for Foreign Born. That's when I went before the un-American Committee: they wanted to know why I was taking a stand for the foreign born. I said, "Well, injustice to anybody is going to affect everybody." I reminded them that they were deporting some because they belonged to the Communist Party. At that time the Communist Party was on the ballot and I remember two or three times a Communist running for president of our country. No one should be condemned for being a part of something that was acceptable years ago. I said, "When you mistreat some of us, and here you are talking about other countries; when you send somebody back to a country that he hadn't been in for years, he certainly isn't going to carry a friendly message at all. You won't help America in the foreign fields under those conditions."

Mc: I noticed a very interesting exchange of correspondence with the Detroit Bible Institute. The man who was quoting from the Bible...

H: Yes, trying to show that I wasn't justified in taking a stand particularly in the Sojourner Truth and the only white minister who was able to take a definite stand was Henry Hitt Crane who was then at the Central Methodist Church. He told me one or two men who gave large contributions said, "If you don't stop that, we're going to leave." One of them did leave, but Henry Crane had the courage of his convictions and has had it on all issues.

Mc: Did they eventually come back to his church as they did to yours?

- H: I don't know. Of the ones who made large contributions, one joined a church out in Grosse Pointe. Some of the others, I don't know how many, came back. He not only spoke on it; he carried it in his booster.
- Mc: I was interested in a daily news bulletin, the Sojourner Truth Daily News that came out for a real short period of time. What was the occasion for that?
- H: That was to inform all who gathered at our meeting every week or two. We would have a meeting on Sunday and give the information as to what progress had been made and what were the real problems.
- Mc: We think that our demonstrations are a rather new device but I was reading in your Sojourner Truth Daily News that everyone was being urged to come to "a gigantic march for democracy next Sunday." What kinds of techniques did you use then to rally support?
- H: We had different pastors to announce as well as putting some of those in every church. In some cases we had it in the various drug stores or business places of our folks so that if they had anybody buying anything they would include that with their goods. I think we had 500 or more, not only Negroes, but many whites were in there also making that march to try to get our city to take a definite stand that this project which was started for Negroes should be fulfilled.
- Mc: One of these bulletins makes reference to a Klan attack. Was the Black Legion in the Klan? Did it have some power at that time?
- H: The Klan did have some folks up this way. There wasn't any Black Legion as I remember. A lot of folks came from the South here during

the war and, of course, they brought their customs and traditions they had there. I said to the police one time that they should not let the Klan march anywhere. We finally got Council to pass that they couldn't have a robe on and disguise themselves as the Klan usually do when they put on their uniforms.

Mc: You have one brochure here aimed at loyal and patriotic Americans living near Sojourner Truth home; that was such an area?

H: That was a Polish area. I had one or two outstanding Polish leaders who were willing to do what they could but they didn't seem to have much influence. The Poles met in the Catholic church, organized, and tried to do everything they could to keep the Negroes from going into Sojourner Truth.

Mc: Now, the other materials relate to your campaign in 1947 that was for the Common Council. That was the same time that quite an effort was being made to enact FEP in Michigan, wasn't it?

H: Yes. All those struggles at that time... You see we couldn't get the support of any of the newspapers at all. The only way we could get the literature out was to get into different community meetings; there we were able to get the information through. So many times the papers came out and said that I was a Communist. At that time, if one was branded a Communist, he lost his job and everything else.

Mc: I was reading the Michigan Manual of Freedman's Progress. I believe it was written in 1915 and what it is is a kind of interesting array of facts about the Negro as of that year. In it I came on the statement that there were two cities that didn't have any Negro ghettos,

Detroit and Cincinnati. That was in the year 1915 and I'm wondering if that was true? Didn't you say that...

H: No, that isn't true because they went on this basis. The 3rd ward was the only area in which Negroes could live; from the river all the way to Warren. Since all of them lived there, they wouldn't call it a ghetto.

Mc: I see. So, it really didn't mean the same thing as I read into it now going back to that statement?

H: No, not at all. That's the area that they've torn down under this urban renewal. To me the urban renewal has caused more trouble because much of this crime that is going on now is because these people have been uprooted, no interest shown to try to relocate them and when the parents are disturbed and uprooted, then the children are the same.

Mc: It seems to me, too, that urban renewal has produced more problems than it has helped by a long ways.

H: I told Mr. Weaver's assistant that they should stop tearing down these areas and instead of giving the money to these cities, arrange to give it to the people whose homes are dilapidated and let them bring them up to standard and then they wouldn't be tearing up an entire neighborhood. You take in Detroit--right now it is a terrible situation because here they are raising the taxes on folks who have descent homes because they've torn down so many areas and haven't put up anything in their place.

Mc: I wanted to ask you--maybe you've answered it in a way--what you

regard as the greatest remaining battle in the field of race relations?

H: The housing. If they can get the freedom in housing so that people can go where they have the money to go and not go where they're forced to go, I think that would help the city a great deal. That means they've got to change the attitude or the thinking of people. For a long while it was thought that Negroes dilapidated property, it went down, which is not true; and they're finding out it isn't true, but you can't change some folks. One reason they can't keep the property up the way you'd like is because the wages they get aren't equal to what the other man gets. Once the Negro gets the same wage for the same type of work, he has the same desire to keep his home up to standard as anyone else.

Mc: And so, believing that, you have worked always for a union as protection of the working man and his wages? I wondered--you've been at this game quite a while--when you look back over it, do you see any places where you would now have changed your emphasis?

H: No, I don't. In fact, I tell my folks, "Thank God I've lived long enough to see everything we've struggled for become a reality. Today you're not treated if you take a stand for open occupancy or for jobs for everyone or for training of all, etc. Detroit is a better city now because of what many folks did back there than what it would have been if we hadn't taken a stand and started changing the attitude, the understanding of the folks.

Mc: You think you've had your rewards in this life for the things that

you've done?

H: Yes, very much so.

Mc: Do you regard Detroit as ahead of some of the other urban areas in this field of race relations?

H: I don't think it's ahead but I think that there's a relief in one way. I've been to many of these other cities that haven't permitted the Negro to scatter out like in Detroit. In Detroit Negroes are in every area, so, that at least, we've taken advantage of. On the other hand, what has happened, some real estate men have boosted the price that they wanted for property and I have advised some of my folks to speak to me before they buy. I tell them to let some white friend get it for them; they'd get it cheaper, just like I got this place--for \$7,000. I remember one Negro who tried to get it some years before when it was \$15,000. They wouldn't even sell it to him. I had a Polish man get this place, the same way with my cottage up near Harbor Beach. They wouldn't sell to Negroes at all. I got a doctor to do it and after I was there a year, it was changed in my name. That first year, they tried to get that mob together to run me out. As I told you, they even had an FBI man and the excuse they made was that "We don't want any Communists here." Of course, the FBI man said, "Rev Hill is not a Communist. We don't have any proof of any sort and he is not one who will run, so you better leave him alone." So, from that day on, we had no more trouble. And, now those same folks are as fine friends as I have any place else, because they've seen the situation was not true; they thought the property would go down after we moved in there. They used to

brag until I went there, there were no Negroes north of Port Huron. I was the first one to do it and naturally was the first one who had problems.

Mc: Are there any words of caution or words of advice you would give to young people today?

H: Well, the only advice I'd give to young people is that they'd have the courage of their conviction and realize that as they struggle to help others, they really help themselves. By being selfish, in the long run, you don't get the joy and happiness; when you can realize improvement in the community or in the state or in the nation, knowing that you've played your part and made some sacrifices toward them, you will be happy for it. And, the young people have more integration in the schools now so they realize that there's no difference in people because of race, creed, color or nationality. Therefore, they can learn to study and play together in schools, and they ought to carry that forth as they become grown adults.

Mc: That is something of the same point, isn't it, that you made at the crime conference last Saturday?

H: Yes. In other words, become more involved. It is easy to criticize and to find fault but it takes courage to become involved. And realize the best way to correct conditions is to join with those who are striving to improve and as you do it from a dedicated position, then you are assured that there will be some real benefits that will come not just to yourself but to other citizens who may not be able to do much themselves but who are looking forward for improvement.



Mc: I wondered if, as you look back on your career, you can pick out low points as well as high points? Did you get discouraged and think it was all hopeless sometimes?

H: No, I never did because I've always had tremendous belief that God is concerned and like I tell some folks who feel that they've more sickness and trouble than someone else, "Go to some of these jails and hospitals and you'll see some folks that maybe look a lot better than you and yet they are having burdens." So, you don't become discouraged; there is just a matter of having the courage and the patience to realize that improvements do not happen all at once. It may take sometimes years to get the improvements you desire, but if you are honest in your efforts the benefits will come and you won't regret the sacrifices you have made.

Mc: I wanted to ask you, I believe that you were saying that you thought that Detroit had abandoned the ward system partly because they believed they could better control the concentration of Negro vote. How do you feel about the ward system today?

H: Well, I still think there ought to be a ward system. Most of our councilmen now live out in the west side in Ward #22 which is the most prejudiced ward in the whole city. If you have someone who lives in the area who is on the Council, then he understands the situation and he isn't able to dodge issues of the Council and say now he represents all the people. It would be better for him to represent a definite district, and so anybody living in that area having problems can go to somebody that they know ought to be concerned about it. Just like we have districts for Congressmen, or in the Legislature, we ought to have it for the Common Council.

Mc: There is somewhat of a move on, isn't there, in Detroit?

H: Every now and then--the papers don't go for it and I don't think the power structure is interested in it either. With the present situation, they can control the men that go in more than they would if they were in districts.

Mc: I think some of the people who advocate the ward system also advocate partisan election of candidates.

H: I think that's okay too; in spite of non-partisanship, the various... The mayor, for instance, belongs to the Democrats or Republicans; they go on record for them anyhow. They use their influence even though they may not do so much publicly as they otherwise would. But on the other hand, they could do a lot behind the curtain. So I think it's better because if they have a party, then the individual is really obligated to see that the program of that particular party is carried out.

Mc: One of the times I find very interesting is when the Negro people began to desert the Republican party. What about your own politics in 1920 when you came here? Were you an active member of a political party?

H: Well, I've never been tied up to any party because I go by the individual. I try to find out what has been their reputation in the past, not what they promise. Anybody can promise you a lot of things but what has been their attitude and conduct in the past and if that hasn't been for the best interest of all the folks, then I'm not interested in them at all.

Mc: It really gives you a little more power, anyway, doesn't it, not to be committed in advance?

H: Oh yes, that's true. I know when I ran for the Council one time, there was an organization that said, "Now we will underwrite your policy for your campaign and guarantee your election." I said, "What's the price?" They said that "You do what we say." I said, "You've got the wrong man; I don't want any office where I cannot be free to do what I think is best for all the people."

Mc: You decided issues on their own merit, not because they're opposed by certain groups? Rev. Hill, I have not asked you about your relationship with the NAACP or your working with the group. You were president at one time?

H: I was president at one time and at that time, each local organization could make its own decisions. Now, they've got to be governed by the main headquarters which, to me, is not fair because there is no way for those in New York to know the real situation in Detroit or in Chicago or Philadelphia and some other city. So long as the action of the NAACP is not contrary to the general program of the NAACP, they should not be bound or in any way restricted and when they are restricted naturally they are not as active as they were formerly. They need to have this freedom to meet the issues for every city which doesn't have the same type of problems. When you can meet your own problems and solve them, then you will get more folks who will participate. I think that if the NAACP had carried on as it ought, then it would have in the millions in memberships. They've got one program that I've never approved of

and that's that they have each year the \$100 dinner. That doesn't let the ordinary man feel that he is a part. I think that has handicapped them from getting many to become a part of NACCP. After all, to my mind, there is something that's more important than just money: you need folks so that when you make an appeal for any kind of an issue, you've got people from all levels that will give their time and energy and make necessary sacrifices so it can be accomplished.

Mc: I encountered two or three people who think like you. Ed Swan, too, said he regretted policy had to be formed on high and followed so absolutely in the branches.

H: That's right. That's one reason that I got out of it because I wasn't concerned. I don't want anybody to try to control my thinking and my actions as long as they're honest and sincere.

Mc: I'm real interested in the youth section of the NAACP. Was there an active youth section when you were the president?

H: There wasn't too much at that time.

Mc: So, that's a newer development?

H: Yes. I think that they realize that if they can get the youth in and as they grow older they automatically will be a part of it.

Mc: What were some of the enterprises that the NAACP carried on while you were president? Was that in the restricted covenant period when they were leading that fight?

H: Well, there were restricted covenants and there was quite a bit of police brutality going on so that they would take issues there. Also they did

help in the housing; for instance we used them as the treasurer for our Sojourner Truth.

Mc: Was that when you served?

H: No after that.

Mc: I see.

H: We did that so they wouldn't have any doubt as to who was the treasurer. They took a stand on housing, even on education as far as that's concerned, and all of the issues that were affecting the people generally. They would speak out and they would support it by the majority of the folks; at least politically they would take a stand. If they thought some candidate was really honest in his endeavors to make our atmosphere one in which all could participate, they would take a stand for him.

Mc: I heard your name mentioned several times when I interviewed Snow Grigsby.

H: Yes. He is with the post office. I remember times when I had to go to his rescue because the postman wasn't supposed to take part in any of the political problems. Yet, I think it's wrong: because a man works for the post office, he shouldn't be restricted in being able to work for the man regardless of his party that he thinks will fill in best; but it restricted him and I think we have too much restriction in various areas where unconsciously the fellow in office wants to protect himself so he can stay in there as long as he wants, and by restricting folks who are working for the Government, then he is handicapping them and I think they're handicapping the whole country as a result.

Mc: Mr. Grigsby told me of the activities of the Detroit Civic Federation

or maybe Civic Rights Federation--that tried to get a fairer share for the Negro employed in the government. That was just a local Detroit group. Are there any other ongoing local Detroit groups that you have worked with? I guess you've organized some yourself--Sojourner Truth Committee?

H: Yes. Most of them we did if there was some youth that was mistreated by the police and shot, etc. Then, we would organize a committee that tried to see if they could get justice for the family and things on that order. There have always been something going on all the time. We just don't have any rest.

Mc: No, entirely slack period?

H: That's right.

Mc: Do you have any secrets for getting people to work in committees, to be active?

H: I just think that if the individuals who headed it up have been honest in their endeavors for the community, then the folks will respond; but if it's somebody who has been doing one thing and just talking, there is not the support that they look for. You see, anybody can talk but it takes somebody who's really concerned to be willing to make sacrifices. Back there years ago, when you took a stand, it meant your job; so unless the person was truly consecrated to it, why, he would hold his peace; today you don't have that situation. You can speak out on anything that you think is wrong without having a fear of losing your job. I tell young people today, "If you're qualified, you can always get a job be-

cause many doors are open now and so if you prepare yourself, you won't have to do like they did years ago." I heard many say, "I can't get a job because I'm a Negro." I know some of the school teachers won't let them take Latin, saying, they would not get anything; all they can do is work in houses and so they were discouraged in many ways and I am very happy today about the situation that anyone who is prepared can find decent employment.

Mc: I am told that some of our counselors don't recognize that changed situation so well yet and so...?

H: The reason that politicians don't change as quickly as some of the other folks is because it all depends on who controls them if they are able to go into office; and the public has been the one cause everytime I ran for Common Council; the public made the contribution, so I didn't have a select group that was going to do the dictating and I think for many politicians that's the difficulty they have that some of these concerns underwrite the bill or make a liberal contribution; then you've always got to respect them. However, some issue comes up and they say, "I wouldn't do so and so;" there is nothing they can do unless they're really sincere.

Mc: So you don't want anything that has strings on it? Conditions?

H: No. I think the sooner we get to the place when every politician is free to do the thing that he believes ought to be done regardless of the consequences to some group that has been controlling things, the better.

Mc: Would you care to make any predictions as to the future course of

inter-racial relations?

H: Well, I think that's improved tremendously and I think it won't be long---well, of course, meaning by long maybe five or ten years---where there won't be any issue racially or nationality-wise so that all will feel they can participate. I notice when you take marriages: now you have more inter-marriages than we've ever had before and they get along wonderfully. So, we folks have come to realize all are human beings. I try to tell people sometimes that there's only one race---the Human Race. And of course, you know I'm opposed to this Black Power they talk about. I tell them what you need, you don't need black power you need human power. If you have human power, we can work together. Black power can be just as destructive as some of these white powers have been. If we have human power, we let the learned and the unlearned, the rich and the poor all work together.

Mc: You would seem to indicate that you find bigots not only among the whites but among the Negroes?

H: Oh, yes, that's true. None of these, shall I say evil forces, are confined to any one group.

Mc: Unfortunatly that's human too and is found in all groups?

H: That's right. That's like they use to think that all crime was just committed by Negroes, but now they're finding that crime is committed all over the city in areas where there are no Negroes at all and yet they've got crime. So, crime is not confined to race or to nationality. It's just a human being who hasn't gotten the right training, the right



instruction and who hasn't been made aware that he is his brother's keeper. That's what I tell them in so many places that I talk now. I say, "You're your brother's keeper; if you don't keep your brother, your brother isn't going to keep you. You're not going to be safe yourself. In proportion as you learn by joining block clubs and having your church use its influence outside these four walls why then you're going to benefit the community." And I think in most of our organizations, they're beginning to realize you've got to do what David said to Micael, "My cup runneth over." Until it runs over, we can't help anybody at all and got to learn to run over every time so that someone else will be benefitted by that much benefit.

Mc: That would be kind of a social action creed, wouldn't it? How about political action, are you a strong one for being registered?

H: Oh yes, I believe in it and I tell the folks always to register because it's one way to solve your problem and that is by voting. It isn't enough to pray. Some use to say, "I'm praying about it," and I say, "That isn't enough because God said to you like he said to 'What have you got in your hand, you've got the \_\_\_\_\_'." The ordinary person says there is no need of my voting because the whites are going to do what they want to do anyhow. Yet as long as you don't do anything, they will; but if you get out there and use your vote--remember your vote is just as valuable as anybody else's--and so in proportion as you learn to vote together as in the case of George Crockett. I said, "Let's everyone of us get out there and vote and show that the power structure is no longer going to dictate who is going to be in the council or as a

judge." It was the first time that they united and did what the papers were against, labor was against, the power structure was against.

Mc: But what the the people wanted?

H: Yes, what the people wanted. And so in proportion they learned to use what they have, not just criticize and find fault. That doesn't change conditions.

Mc: We certainly do appreciate your being willing to talk to us about some of your experiences. We hope to build up a file on the contributions of various persons in Detroit to the welfare of the whole group and yours would be one of the outstanding ones.

H: Well, any other way I can help... I want to make the community a better place for everybody and what you're trying to do is really going to be helpful in letting the people know that these things don't come just because they want them but there is some labor that has to be put forth. If they would just realize like the farmer, it isn't enough to say that I want some vegetation, etc.; but you've got to get out there and plant some seeds and then even watch it as it grows to keep the weeds from destroying it; if you don't do it, you won't have any harvest. It isn't enough to state something but to say that I'm also going to become involved with the real solution of all our problems.

Mc: I think that's a very good note to stop on. Thank you very much.