

Sidney Barthwell was proprietor of nine pharmacies. An ideal employer, he treated those who worked for him as family--providing training in work habits and skills. He is loved and remembered by many of his former employees. An active member of the business community, he served as president of the Booker T. Washington Business Association from 1953-54.

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HIS

SIDNEY BARTHWELL

I graduated from Cass Tech in 1925. I went to Wayne University Pharmacy School. When I graduated I didn't have the \$25 to pay to get my degree, and the Dean loaned me the \$25. His name was Roland P. Lakey. I got a lot of help along the way from different people.

I spent quite a bit of time job hunting and finally found a job with a small Black drugstore. At that time there were a lot of drugstores on Hastings, but all except one were operated by people of the Jewish faith. They didn't seem interested in hiring a Black pharmacist at that time.

I went to work for a fellow named Fred Green. He had a store on Russell and Alger, so it was my first job as a pharmacist.

I opened my store in 1933. The store I was working at failed, so I went into a partnership ~~with~~ with another individual and we changed their store into our store.

Back in those days, all the small drugstores had a fountain in them. The store that we leased had a fountain. A couple had opened up in the Black neighborhoods that were double-dip specialists. They were selling huge ice cream cones for a nickel. So they took all the fountain business. Just as I was doing fairly good, this company came down the block from me and opened up the place. I never knew you could sell that much ice cream at one place till they opened. They had throngs of people every night, and my little fountain business just went down to nothing. One morning a circular came in the mail about a kind of freezer for soft serve ice cream, so I got the guy up here. He finally came, and I told him I was interested in getting a freezer. This is when I made the rude discovery that I didn't have any credit. I gave the man what he said was a down payment. I kept looking for them to deliver the freezer. I didn't know what happened. I guess this man was working behind the scenes frantically trying to get me approved so he could make his delivery. What happened was he finally came back and told me that my problem was that I didn't have any credit established, and he had finally gotten me straightened out. He told them that he had so much faith in me, if they would ship it to me, he would let them hold his commission until I paid for the freezer. This is how I got in the soft ice cream business.

I put a sign in my window. Those guys were selling a double dip for a nickel so I started selling a triple dip for a nickel. So then I certainly got going in the ice cream business. The crown was at my store at nights. crowd

I went ahead. About every two years I'd open a store. I finally opened two stores where we were selling just ice cream. One on Hastings was the first. It had a low counter with stools. We were operating that store from 12 Noon until 2 a.m. I forgot how many seats we had, maybe 20 or something like that. My father had been

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laid off from Fords, so he was helping me all he could. One night about _____ I was working a shift at the store on Oakland. He called up and said, "Son, close up and come down here. They're lined up on every seat and standing against the wall waiting for a guy to finish so they can get it." We did a tremendous business. I just went from one thing to another until I had nine stores.

We had meetings every two weeks with my employees. I had maybe 140 employees, so every two weeks we had a meeting after we closed. We would talk to the people about things that were very essential to you being a good clerk in the store. One, we told them, don't be chewing gun in the store. Don't be cross-talking. We told them that taking a bath was not enough, that you had to use deodorants and take a bath daily. It helped a lot. We just told the people that they had to conduct themselves in an acceptable manner. I think we were doing a lot of things almost like a family that helped us along.

I was the first Black member of the Detroit Retail Druggist Association. I had a very good rapport with everybody. When the Race Riot came, various store owners that I knew would call up and ask me whether it was safe or not to come back. I told them all to come back. There wasn't nothing pointed directly at them.

During the riots they called me up about 3:30 in the morning and told me, don't go to work because hell had broke loose. Naturally I got up and drove over to Hastings Street, and it made my flesh crawl. Where you'd see all those steel bars, they guys had just put a tow chain on the back of the truck and just drove off and just pulled them off. All of Hastings Street was just wide open, full of people just looting all the stores. Some of the stores that had whiskey, they had gone as far as getting trucks, backing them up and loading them up.

I saw children pull children over the broken glass to throw merchandise out of the store. Guys would go back to their homes with half a shoulder of meat on their shoulder. I remember one funny thing. Up on Oakland there was a shoe store. They had broken in and there were street guys in there. They were calling the ladies in: "Baby, don't you need some shoes? Come on in here." So they were grabbing everything. A guy said to them, "Ain't no use getting something that hurts your feet. Sit up here and let me try them on."

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The funny thing about it, I think there was some racism because the Police ~~Department~~ had a large percentage of southerners. I think they were almost as much against the Jewish people as they were against Blacks. Two and three police were on each side of the street and they did absolutely nothing to try to stop these things. I had a friend who told me that when they were tearing out the Jewish stores across the street from him he stood and laughed because he thought, "It's good they're gone, then my business will be better." But he told me that a couple of months later, he was locking up one night, and a guy put a gun in his side and made him

go home and give him money. It just came to him then that crime was a way of life for some people. When they had the choice, they didn't bother you. When the choice was gone, they had to still live, so you became the target.

I think World War II was the greatest setback to Negro relations in general. I think that one of the mistakes that Black people made was when they thought they had integration, they gave up their own institutions. I think every ethnic group needs a place where they can get together to discuss things that are peculiar to their problems.