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revised
by her.

THE PAUL ROBESON STORY

By: Erma Henderson

My avid interest in the history of African people began in my early childhood. I can remember clipping articles from the Pittsburgh Courier Newspaper regularly -- especially anything written by J. A. Rodgers, noted historian and author. I became a lecturer, speaker and supporter of programs that seemed authentic and honest in search for truth.

Long before I met the famous artist Paul Robeson and the renowned educator/author, Dr. W. E. B. Dubois, I had worked for a long period as a volunteer supporter of the Council on African Affairs, a New York based organization formed by DuBois and Robeson and directed by Dr. Alpheus Hunton. The literature published and distributed by that organization sought to educate Americans, particularly African-Americans, on the truth of life in Africa. I recall distinctly organizing young people in Baptist churches to help me distribute and sell booklets to various missionary societies so that the horrible working and living conditions of the African people in the Belgian Congo and South Africa might become well known.

Both Paul Robeson and Dr. DuBois were well known for their

lectures on Africa, but Paul chose also to use every opportunity to speak out about the terrible conditions under which African-Americans were subjected to in the United States, and he lent his time and talents to fight injustice in many American cities, including Detroit.

Detroit, in the early 40's was having a terrible struggle over who would occupy the last permaneny housing project to be built for the duration of World War II. Federal housing was segregated. African-Americans had been promised the housing. The location of the project was in the midst of an all-White community and six blocks from the closest African-American neighborhood. Public rallies were called. Speakers from across the country came in support of African-American factory workers who sorely needed the housing.

The Honorable Hopson R. Reynolds, who then headed the Civil Rights Department of the I.B.P.O.E. of W. was joined by the distinguished artist and speaker, Paul Robeson at one of those rallies, adding significant potency to the protest. The African-Americans won and were permitted to move into the Sojourner Truth Homes, even though the federal decision was the catalyst accelerating the 1942 race riot.

I recall many occasions when Paul came to Detroit to support the labor movement -- marching and singing on the picket lines.

So, in addition to the concert stage, where he captured the hearts, minds and imagination of many people, Paul Robeson became equally famous for his role in speaking out boldly against injustice everywhere.

This great man, in size, in voice, in determination and in leadership, was as much at home as a lawyer, athlete and actor as he was on the concert stage. He seemed to gather strength as he walked and talked with the poor, the disenfranchised, the laborers and the children.

Although I had enjoyed a working relationship with Paul, it was only after my Mother and I attended Othello at the Shubert Lafayette Theatre, that I got to know him personally. We were invited to an after-theatre party where for the first part of the evening, everyone was so overwhelmed by his outstanding performance that it was difficult to quiet down.

As the evening grew late, those of us who could, sat entranced by the stories of his travels and the folk songs he sang from around the world. I can only vaguely describe the joy of that "once in a lifetime" experience.

It was shortly after his, now famous, Peekskill speech that Paul Robeson was banned from the concert stage. His speaking out "politically" was not accepted by those, both in the

concert arena or political "power" circles.

He came to Detroit immediately following Peekskill, and was denied housing accommodations by the management of Detroit's world-famous Book Cadillac Hotel. People who knew and loved Paul rallied in picket lines to protest. Rental halls, for public appearances, were closed to him. When the anxiety and fear became so prevailing, a committee was formed to find a suitable place where Paul could sing and "speak out". We visited my dear friend, Sunnie Wilson, who owned the famous Forest Club on the corner of Hastings and Forest Avenue (now I-75). It had a bar, a lounge and a large hall occasionally used for meetings, a skating rink or a dance hall. Although Sunnie Wilson was young, he was one of the most influential and successful African-American business leaders in the City of Detroit and State of Michigan. He agreed to allow Paul Robeson to be scheduled at the Forest Club.

When Paul arrived, he was pleased not only to see a packed hall, but long lines of people wrapped around the building trying to get inside. Many police had been assigned to keep tabs, but they were NOT counted on for "protection". Instead, the trusted citizens who prepared for Robeson's appearance provided a dignified entourage of protection and support. The predicted "riot" which brought out hundreds of Detroit Police never happened.

An enthusiastic crowd of well wishers, supporters and curiosity seekers stood in awe as Paul Robeson sang song after song, and spoke elegantly about his tragic experiences which subsequently led to his banishment from the concert stage.

I had the pleasure of knowing his wife, Eslanda, who was not only an avid activist on behalf of her husband, but a successful anthropologist. We shared many conversations and some correspondence. I also had the privilege of serving as her host when she traveled throughout the State of Michigan enlightening people on the subject of "Land Use" in support of her husband.

Paul Robeson was the son of an AME Zion Minister who had once pastored at the famous "Mother" Zion Church, so it wasn't unusual for him to want to return to his church roots for spiritual support. He was so warmly received at "Mother" Zion, that he began to travel to churches of all denominations around the country.

My own church then, Calvary Baptist Church (under the pastorage of the lage James H. Mastin), hosted a major Paul Robeson Concert with Roberta Smith-Barrow and I as Co-Chairs. The supper was tremendous and the concert was a huge success.

One of my treasured momentos is a live taping of the Calvery Baptist Concert. Whenever Paul came to town the African American churches became his concert stage. I remember him singing to a capacity audience at Macedonia Baptist on Mullett and St. Aubin and many more.

Later, when he came to Hartford Avenue Baptist, on the corner of Hartford at MILFORD on Detroit's west side, Rev. Charles A. Hill talked him into making this appearance a vacation as well. The Planning Committee decided Paul would stay at my home. They also organized a guard service of volunteers who would accompany the artist at all public events.

Needless to say, my family and I shared one of the most memorable experiences of our lives. This giant of a man filled out the space in every doorway in our home and even though many friends and neighbors did not have entre into the house, they did keep tabs of his goings and comings and they were thrilled to watch Paul Robeson play ball in the alley with the neighborhood kids. In the evenings, we had sing-a-longs and exchanged tall tales, enjoying a close family relationship that extended to my closest friends and their families.

Having been born in April himself, Paul thought it a good idea to celebrate his birthday with Arthur M. Carter, my Godson and his brother, Raymond, who were also born in April. Joined by my children, Patrya and Philip and a few neighbors and friends, it took only a matter of minutes to demolish a 21 pound rib roast before polishing off all the ice cream, cake and candies in the house. But it was a very good party. And in Paul's own words he often referred to it as his "Special Birthday Party".

As Paul's visit came to a close, we all enjoyed an enriching concert experience at Hartford Baptist Church.

Detroit and Paul Robeson were inseparable during a perilous time in our history. We shall always cherish and never, ever forget that extraordinary journey through pain and despair -- courage and victory, with Paul!

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