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Dr. Mary Ross

I came to Shiloh in June 1930 as a bride, the Pastor's wife. He was my senior for a few years, and he taught me in high school. But nothing went on there. I went to college, and I didn't know what he was doing, and he didn't know what I was doing. I came out of college, and I ran into him in the railroad station. I was teaching in Augusta, Georgia, and he came to Augusta to do a revival for one of the ministers there. He came to help save souls and, yes, he got a soul. He proposed to me on that trip, and we didn't have a long courtship. Pretty soon I found myself in Detroit, the wife of the Minister of Shiloh Baptist Church.

There were a lot of people in this city, and especially in Shiloh, who thought that he might not make a bad husband. The question was, why go all the way back to Georgia to find a wife with of these people up here out of whom he might have found one. You see, in those days people thought a lot about complexion. Some of them thought White is right. I guess I didn't look too bad, but I wasn't White. I wasn't even very fair. Their conception was the way a person looked to them. The inside view would never occur to some people. They thought he should have married somebody with long hair and she should be of fair complexion. He didn't marry that kind of looking person. He was such a gentleman that I think he was responsible for keeping down some of the animosity that could have been shown, that some of them would have wanted to show. He had respect for his wife and acted in such a way that he made other folks respect her. Just because you didn't get me, I'm not going to deny her anything that I can do for her or get for her. all

He didn't choose anybody from up here, I think, because he was studying people. He knew the people in his church. He couldn't marry them all who would want to marry him. He had not seen in the people in the church what he thought he needed in a wife. But he knew Mary Brookings reasonably well and thought there is a person who will fit into the program and with the children. And, so, we got started.

My husband had lost his first wife by death, and there were four children, and I reared those four children. I added Davine to the four that we had when we first got married.

When we got started, they were the years of Depression. Detroit was hit very hard. We, being in the ministry, had to endure a lot of things. During the Depression we cooked meals down there and served the hungry people on the street.

Then there was the matter of jobs that people needed. My husband wrote letters to the Ford Motor Company asking that they give certain men in our church jobs in the factory. They did a good bit of hiring because he did a good bit of asking.

We were also at Shiloh during the days when they talked about

communism. The White people weren't as kind to Black people as they ought to be and vice versa. All of the racism is not being practiced by the Whites. There are some racists as far as Black people are concerned. Whenever Black people in yesteryears did some thinking for themselves, and if it were not the thinking of some of the Caucasians, then they'd think that you had to be communist. That's why it was so hard for Paul Robeson.

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Paul Robeson was labeled as a communist. People in Detroit and in some other cities were afraid to have any association with Paul Robeson. There were two churches in the city of Detroit where Paul Robeson was able to go and speak to the people and perform before the people. Hartford Avenue, it's Hartford Memorial now, was one of them. Shiloh Baptist Church was the other church.

I remember very distinctly when Paul Robeson came to our church one night. The people were all out in the streets and all in front of the church. The church was full of people. The police officers were there for what they thought they might be needed for. I walked up the front steps, and one of the police officers said, "Lady, you can't get in there. No need for you even trying."

I said, "Well, I get in there every Sunday, and I'm down front every Sunday in this same church, and I expect to get in there tonight. In other words, I'm the minister's wife if that does anything."

Then they said, "Well, we better move over and let this lady in."

Robeson wasn't a communist. He just wanted to be free, that's all. His whole talk was centered around our being a free people and being unafraid and being willing to risk something.

He was a great baritone singer. Not only did he express his feeling verbally as a Black man living in America, but he sang these spirituals. A lot of them were Negro spirituals, borne out of the hearts of slaves. They were so happy in those days to see a man and to hear a man and know a man who was willing to run the risk of expressing himself because so many did not feel that they could afford to do it. Paul Robeson was a very brave man, and we needed a brave man during those years.