E. Shelton Hill Oral History Interview, Part 2, July 7, 1983

Title
"E. Shelton Hill Oral History Interview, Part 2"

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Summary
In this second recording of E. Shelton Hill, Hill talks about the variation in working conditions on the trains, especially sleeping accommodations. He discusses unions and how many of the members were summer workers who had less to fear if they were fired in retaliation for joining. Hill recalls his experiences in the Air Force, which he volunteered for due to his draft status. Hill also talks about his schooling and his involvement as a board member on the Urban League of Portland. Hill talks about some of the issues the black population in Portland faced in the 1940s, such as public accommodations, housing and employment.

Interviewee
E. Shelton Hill

Interviewer
Michael Grice

Website
http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/hill2/

Transcript

Michael Grice: Well how did you—or when did you meet Big Chappy?

E. Shelton Hill: Oh, I don't know. It seems like I knew him forever [laughs]. I'm talking about—you talking about your father or your grandfather?

MG: I'm talking about my grandfather.

EH: That's who I'm talking about, your grandfather.

MG: When did you—you said it seemed like you knew him from the time that you arrived here when you worked on the road?

EH: Yeah, seemed like I did, seemed like I did.

MG: Was he working on the road?

EH: Yeah, he used to be a Pullman porter at one time.

MG: Mhmm, yeah.

Unknown Speaker: Well one of—don't you think you ought to talk about chair car porters too?

MG: Well, the reason that I [inaudible] on different occupations, because I'm talking to different people who had different occupations, and so some of them are taking care of the chair car porter.

EH: Yeah, he was a Pullman porter once. I think he's finally a club car, wasn't he?

MG: Yes.

EH: But he used to be a Pullman porter when he first came up.

MG: Yeah.

EH: You had to be some kind of railroad person to get here, I guess. [Tape cut].

MG: What did they—what do you recall was there—how did they manage to get to Portland?

EH: Well, Mr. Ivy was originally from Florida and he told me—

MG: This Clarence Ivy?

EH: Yeah. And he went to New York as a valet for some rich somebody who'd been coming down to Florida, and he worked and did quite well, but he wanted to see some of the world, and so he went back, got hired by the Pullman Company. But when you first get hired by the Pullman Company, you run wild a lot until you get your regular run. And they sent him to the coast all the sudden, and then he deadheaded up here to Portland to pick up another car, but it was around two or three days, and he looked around and he liked it and saw the cars and everything, working and so forth, so he applied to the president of the SPNS, the railroad was just been built or something, because he'd had this valet experience, and he got hired as the cook and waiter on the president's car. And then later he got off and started Red Capping. And Mr. Reynolds, Wallace's daddy, was in the service. He was from Louisiana. And he went in the army way back, like when he was sixteen or seventeen years old, in the regular army, and was in the Philippines. And then he was in, I think he's told me about nine years. He got transferred to camp up there in Spokane and he was a mess sergeant. And he kept renewing every three years, and something he wanted he didn't get, that he thought should have gotten [00:02:36 unintelligible] or something, and so he just didn't renew. And he met [00:02:40 unintelligible] there in Spokane; they got married, he came on down to Portland, became a Red Cap. So a lot of—because I was interested in how did the person from somewhere, you know, end up way out here.

MG: Were there many people, many blacks who lived in other cities but ended up running to Portland? Or did most people who worked for the UP—

EH: All of them lived in other cities originally when you're talking about the most part, when they started running here, because they wouldn't get here any other way, because if they had fare out here, they was doing good where they was. They didn't need to leave if they had railroad fare out to Portland Oregon. Most of them got—came on the railroad.

MG: Let's talk about working conditions. You might put that at the time here—

EH: The working condition varied, and the working condition, even though it was acceptable, because that's all they knew, but when you ran on the dining car then back then at night and you ran to Omaha, which was about a seven-day round trip, including your day layover three nights, and you—and in the dining car there's a place that open in the—you take up all the tables, you roll the carpet back, there's a hole in the middle of the floor called a possum belly. You open that and there are mattresses rolled up and there are cots. You get those mattresses out and the sheets are in them, where you slept in them night before, and you set those up and you slept on those cots at night where the people going to eat the next day. But you got up early in the morning and rolled them all up, put them down in, put the carpet down and put the curtains all back and everything. So that went on for a number of years, and it was really in the latter years that they had what is called a dormitory car, which was a regular type of a Pullman car where they could sleep at night and all, offhand. But you slept in the dining car, which it wasn't the most sanitary thing to do, but that existed. And the pay, as far the pay was concerned, the years that I worked for the dining car I—see my salary, that wasn't more than sixty dollars, except those three years when I ran in the summer on a club car and it was eighty dollars. You got sixty dollar but you didn't —and you got paid every two weeks. But you had to work a month before you got your first pay. They had a two-week holdback. When you start to working for the railroad, they hold back two weeks. Now, whenever you quit or get fired you got it.

[00:05:09]

Now there's no way, at the time that I was working, there's no way for you to draw on the first or fifteenth more than twenty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents, because they deduct it for hospitalization and insurance, and so. But many didn't even think about their checks because they were counting on the extra money they made as tips so forth, when working. But salaries weren't a—and then the unions were beginning to move in various aspects—

MG: What year? When you focus on a—when the unions became a [inaudible]—

EH: Well I'm talking about unions nationally. When I say unions, they were actually beginning to [00:05:46 unintelligible]. The Pullman porters had had their— Philip Randolph had had that suit which went on against the Pullman Company a long time until the Pullmans could organize the Pullman Porters Union. That was along '25, 6 or something in there, mid-twenties. It was much later the waiters, when they had their various places, so they tried to get them here. The waiters, you had to get a number of them to sign up that you wanted a union, like you do in—but a lot of the older waiters did not want to sign up because they're afraid they'll get fired and they had too much seniority. So then their son who hadn't work so long—and then it happened that was when I was able to play a part, because I was working in the summer and I had all these guys that I brought out there working in the summer. So then I signed it and I got all my buddies and everything to sign it, so when they presented we had enough numbers who were requesting the union. And they couldn't hurt us; we going to quit anyway in September. And then others joined, nobody got fired and they finally got a union. And then the whole working condition and the salaries changed, and the salaries went on up to what they—to a decent salary, union salary. But all my working was prior to, for the most part, the unions.

MG: And the supplemental income, saving tips, still remained.

EH: Still remained the same. Still remained constant. You'd still get your tips. On the streamliner, out on the streamliner, they pooled tips, and all the tips that you got going across went into one big container, and at the end of the trip, why the pantry man, he'd counted it all out and everybody got the same thing. But other than that it's just whatever you—each person had his own money.

MG: Any preference for either system?

EH: No, they liked it, they liked it for either system, and even pooling they liked it because everybody made as much—and it was very cooperative working group. Nobody was trying to lay down on the job. You helped the next person after you was off at the—you know, it was getting overloaded in terms of customers and so forth, but everybody helped everybody.

MG: When the union entered it and wages became better, did it affect the relationship between workers or the kind of work? Or did anything else other than specific working conditions change? Did attitudes change?

EH: No, attitudes didn't change. They, as I said, they have been very cooperative already because there were just some more brothers, and it's all the—all the cooks, for the most part, were white. None of the cooks had a union. And there were only a few black chefs that turned up in the early days, and so the cooks were white. And so everybody got everybody, but we all for us, see. We can help each other in that. Now, they may have differences on the outside not related to work or something, may have other differences, but normally they wouldn't.

MG: After the unions were formed, did—people were more likely to settle in Portland than before?

EH: Well, I'm not sure the unions caused them to settle, because they're working anyway, but—and I don't know personally too much about after the unions, because I never—after '42 I never worked for the railroad company anymore. And where I had normally been coming and working in the summer, there came a point in my professional career that, as I said, I always liked Portland, and I thought that Portland had a future and I thought—and at this particular time, I was teaching school and I was out that summer and out this summer in '41; they were just beginning to build the shipyard. We hadn't had any Pearl Harbor or anything, but the defense movement was going. And I said if I can get out there, back out, and I was single and I had a new car, which was still down south, going back, get my car and I'm coming back out there, because stuff is going to break and I want to be on the ground. I had the sense of working while I'm waiting for it to break because I can work for the railroad, and I did in '42. In '43 I went with the Air Force and I was a—I got a presidential appointment to the Fourth Air Force as the education and recreation director for black troops. At that time they had a separate unit. And from that I moved on from one to the other, and other jobs began to develop and more people came in because they came in for defense work and for the railroad. And various other industries began to open up because they need the foundries open; because they needed manpower during the war period. And I thought Portland had the potential for becoming a good, good city.

[00:10:22]

MG: What were you teaching? What level?

EH: High school, high school. I was science teacher; chemistry. And I went out to college, I was a pre-med student and I, I planned to take medicine. I don't know why I had made that plan, because I didn't have money and my people didn't have any either. So that's how I got on the railroad; I was trying to make enough money to go to med school, see.

MG: That's what you were putting your energy towards.

EH: And so, and then when I got a job in teaching chemistry, chemistry and physics, chemistry and biology science, which I taught off and on but always came back in the summer. But I never made med school, and then when I got involved in social problems, then my graduate work was in social work.

MG: Did you take another type of employment in Portland before you moved here? Or did you move here and complete your stint with the railroad and then find other employment?

EH: Yeah, I drove back down. When I moved it was nobody but me because I'm single. I got a car; I got everything I got in my trunk, which is clothes. I just drove on back out here, started working for the railroad, and at the same time applying to various several things. I kept applying around trying to get into something, and I got into—I got this appointment. And of course that's another story entirely about how I happened to get the appointment, and—

MG: This with Air Force?

EH: It was Air Force. And I don't know whether you want that story or not.

MG: Yeah, I want you to elaborate on that. I'm interested in your trail of jobs. Now we're getting into Portland.

EH: Something personal in there that's—okay. I was in 1A, I was always in 1A because I was single and my mother and father were living, and I was in 1A.

MG: That was your draft classification?

EH: Yeah, it was my draft classification, 1A. So I was called in service, but at that time when I was called in you had two weeks; you had fourteen days before you had to actually go after you got your letter. Well while I'm waiting for my days, I got a message that my father was very ill in Oklahoma, and I go down to the—I went down to the draft board and showed them the telegram and told them my father's very sick and I wanted to go, and they looked up and told me what day I would go to Fort Lewis, and I said "I'll be back before then" and got permission and went. My father did not get better; he got worse, but trying to come back in order to catch my group to Fort Lewis, I overstayed by a day or two, and when I got back—because he passed—when I got back, why my group had gone. But I had a letter from the doctor and everything down there that, you know, why I was delayed and so forth, and I went down to the draft board. Now when I went the first time it was noontime, about noon, and the secretary had said—I told her who I wanted to see—said they in a meeting. Well no, the first time they were in a meeting, and I told her what I wanted, so she went in, got the chairman who came out and I told him and he looked up, and he was the one that gave me permission. But when I went back it was during the noon hour, after I had made the trip, and the first thing she asked me was "how's your father getting on?" and I said "oh, he passed." She said "oh, I'm sorry about that. Does that change your draft status? Does that make your mother your dependent?" I hadn't thought of it all the way on the train, and I said "yeah, I think." She said "well go home and you'll hear from us." The next day I got a blank to send for my mother to sign out that she was my dependent. Well, I know my mother ain't going to do that, because my mother was a very religious woman and she wasn't going to sign nothing like that, because she wasn't. So I got changed back to 1A again. [Tape cut]. So, but soon I was right back, right back in 1A, but I'm walking downtown on Washington Street and I walked face to face to a person who I was in graduate school at Ohio State with by the name of Davis Cruickshank [spelling?], and he was uniform and we were glad we were classmates back then, and shaking hands. He said "how you fixed up with service?" I said "oh, I guess I'll go any day now." I said "I'm in 1A." He said "why don't you volunteer for special services?" said "there's a shortage in special services and you can volunteer," said "with your training and experience that you have had, you can get right into special services, and then they send you to OCS and attach you to a special service unit," said "that's why I'm out here in Portland, I'm at an airbase, special service." "Fine," I said "how do I do it?" He said "I'll get you all the blanks," and he did. And I filled them all out and sent them in volunteering for special services, and with my educational background and so forth.

[00:15:24]

So, in about a couple of weeks I get a letter that I have been accepted for special services as a volunteer in the special services, as a special service officer. And for my personal interview, set a date and time for my personal interview, fourth floor of the Mead Building there in the town. So I went down, and when I walked in there was four men—I mean when the reception carried me, I mean of course I had to wait—the men with these eagles and all these things on their shoulders and everything, and I walked in, they blanched four colors lighter than they were already because I turned up suntanned, and at that time in World War II you had separate units; you had Negro units and you had a white unit, but on my case did not indicate, you know, because...so they was pretty fuzzled, and I got my letter. They said "well, what we want to tell you is that there's no openings in Negro units in special service at this time, and so we will release you from the draft board and you will hear from us soon." Now, I didn't know at that time that Negroes didn't just walk off the street and walk in and get a commission unless you were a doctor or a registered nurse or something; not a lawyer, not a [00:16:52 unintelligible], not special. So in about three or four weeks I got a letter and it said I had been appointed with a special presidential appointment to the Fourth Air Force as educational and recreation director for Negro troops and attached to special services and assigned to Portland Oregon Air Base. And that's where I stayed the whole three and a half years, in Portland Oregon Air Base. But I had more difficulty: finally war's over and all the days are over and by this time I'm married and got a job, so I decide I better quit and try to get me something bigger in jobs before everybody comes back, so I went to there and I said "I want to resign." And of course they had many officers had changed in that three and a half years, and so they had to pull my file. Then he said "you resign?" He said "you belong to the War Department, you only signed to us. You belong to the War Department." And I said "well, I don't understand that." He said "well we'll look through it. We'll chase it back and see what we can do about you." And they called me later and told me that the War

Department said I could be transferred to another federal agency, from the war department to another federal agency, and lists two or three federal agencies, one of which was Federal Public Housing. I said "okay, fine, transfer me then." So then I was transferred to Vancouver Housing Authority across the river. At that time, they had all the temporary housing; McLoughlin Heights, Bagley Downs and all of those. And then I went over there as a tenant relation advisor. That's forty—that's late '45. Well in the meantime the League, Urban League, was formed here and I was a member of the board and so forth, and they hired a job development person they called the industrial secretary at that time, who was later killed out here on the highway in a car accident. And this is '47, later than '45, so Barry, who was the head of the League at that time, kept asking me about coming over and being on the staff. He'd say "you know a lot of employees here, the people you were recruiting out during the war and all of that, and you know a lot of people because you've worked with them, you know." And I told him but he couldn't pay me, because I was making more money, but finally he said if I could come in September, why—and first of the year—they would raise and say "you'll be on a permanent job." Anyway, I went—I mean I went to Housing Authority and told them I'm going resign, and they go back to my file and they said "you can't resign from us," said "you was transferred to us from the War Department," said "we got nothing to do with your hiring, we didn't hire you." And I said "hell, the war's over, ain't nobody fighting." They said "but you was on the —your files here say you were War Department. We can get you back to the War Department." I said "I will go to the War Department." So they said they would see, and finally and after all those years they got my release and I went to the League, to the Urban—

[00:20:16]

MG: So then you started with the League as a staff person.

EH: Yeah, I went to the Urban League as a job development person, staff person. I attempted to create job opportunities in areas in which there was no employment, so far as the blacks were concerned.

MG: What do you recall as the major issues at that time and progressing through?

EH: At the time I went, the major issues, as all the issues, was employ—except—was employment, public accommodation, those were the two, and housing. But the major was employment and public accommodation, because you could not use many of the public accommodation facilities. There are only a few places in town which you could eat in a restaurant; you couldn't stay in no hotel in town.

MG: This was the forties.

EH: That's right. No hotel in town. Even Mary Anne Allison [spelling?], who came here the first time, she had to stay with people up in the Height. Next time, and that was when I was—next time she had to, she stayed at The Benson on the condition that she would use the freight elevator and have her meals in the room. So all of these things were—and in 1950 when we got the fair housing, I went out for a—I tried to get a city ordinance, which was done in 1950. I'll give you a clipping just came in the mail covers all of that part of it. And then trying to get job opport—get industries open, and industry—because as I told you before, that only a very small percentage worked in private industry, so we had to—other than the railroad—so I had to track all industries and try to get them into industries, private industry, private employment and so forth. That was my main responsibility.

MG: Was the black population increasing at this time?

EH: The black population increased. I think I told you earlier at the beginning how it was something like it was eighteen hundred and twelve or something. It went up during the war period that the metropolitan area there were twenty-five thousand blacks. But when the shipyards closed six months later, that twenty-five thousand had dropped down to nine thousand, five hundred. Because some of them just ran a great exodus on the part of the black workers in Portland after the shipyards closed, because they were thrown out of work. And so the great exodus—and slowly it had moved from ninety-five hundred on up to what it is now, because after you got more employment and then young people got grew up, you know, and went different opportunities, so it just continued to grow.

MG: What was the name of the other hotel, the Golden one? Golden West Hotel?

EH: What about it?

MG: The black hotel?

EH: Was Golden West Hotel.

MG: When did it go into or out of existence?

EH: The Golden West went out of existence prior to the war. The Golden West Hotel, which was operated by Mr. W.D. Allen, it was owned by somebody in Canada and he had it rented. He had it leased from him. When his lease run—it had gotten out in baker heater—of course you're too young to know what baker heater mean; baker heater used to mean the railroad people gossip. They called it baker heater. So according to baker heater, they were going to build a new station, railroad station, over where the ship, where the yards are so the trains would not have to come across the river, and it was going to be built at the foot of Russell Street down where the yards are; they're going to build a new railroad station. So Mr. Allen going to be ahead of this jump, he's got this inside information, so he bought the Medley of his, right there on the interstate. So when they build their station here, "I'm right here." It turned out they didn't, as you know, they didn't build it. And he sold it to Stephen Wright and it passed off to his hands and so forth. But that's what happened with the Golden West.

[end of interview 00:24:23]