



E. Shelton Hill Oral History Interview, Part 1, July 7, 1983

Title

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Date

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Location

Location Unknown.

Summary

E. Shelton Hill was born in Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma, where his father was working as an interpreter. During college in Kansas, Hill held summer jobs as a waiter in local hotels. Hill was recruited by a friend to join the railroad. He tells the story of his recruitment and working for the railroad every summer during college. Hill recalls the Golden West Hotel in Portland, the second largest black hotel in the country. He also discusses the Oregon constitution's exclusion laws which prevented black persons from living in the state if they were unemployed and kept the black population low for many years even when the railroad began employing black persons. Hill describes the positions available to black workers on the railroad and the hierarchy among those positions, as well as the jobs that were unobtainable, regardless of skill level. Hill then describes social life in the black community of Portland, including women's groups.

Interviewee

E. Shelton Hill

Interviewer

Michael Grice

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/hill1/>

Transcript

E. Shelton Hill: And then he finally just stopped off in territory after enough years got up, and then he picked up five other tribal languages: Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek, and later when it became a state, why he became an interpreter for the federal government because he spoke five, yeah. Because he spoke five—

Unknown Speaker: Did he speak Kiowa too?

EH: Well, Kiowa is a minor tribe. The major tribes were Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek, but the number of subtribe teachers' college in Illinois—and she can—I know I say teaches college in Nevada, but she came down in the territory teaching in the reservation. And that's how they happened to meet and got married.

Michael Grice: She came to teach there on the reservation and your father met her there.

EH: Mhmm. [Tape cut]

MG: Okay, we're going to proceed in the interview. I'm going to try to let you do some talking, and we're going to focus on a couple of things, try to identify significant events and try to identify least-known facts, things that people wouldn't otherwise know, as well as your own story about where, what you experienced in your childhood, how you got involved in the railroad, what the railroad really represents, some of the things that were going on when you were serving, and that you participated in. I know that you didn't work all your years working in the railroad, but the role that the railroad played in you settling in Portland and the role that the railroad played in other people's livelihood. And also, because this will be in one, or in several ways, related to the history of Portland and/or the history of Oregon, and we can elaborate on that as you can recall. So it's pretty freeform; that's why I say we may have to do some other time, some other things at another time to make sure that we don't—

EH: Have you come across the [00:02:07 unintelligible] occupational status of Negroes in Oregon that I wrote? I'm going to give you that because that will contain a lot of what you asking about. I'll give you a copy of it.

MG: Okay, alright.

EH: Yeah, which traces up to 1950. And it has a lot about railroad in it.

Unknown Speaker: Michael, why don't you take a look— [tape cut].

MG: 7/7/83, interview with E. Shelton Hill in his home, Portland Oregon. Okay Mr. Hill, we're here to explore some of the significant factors that brought black people to Oregon. Now, we know that the railroad played a particular role in that, and we want to talk about your involvement with the railroad, your involvement with Portland, your involvement with the black community. Would you point out where you were born and how you—your early experiences in childhood, just very briefly?

EH: I was born on an Indian reservation in the Indian Territory, which is now the state of Oklahoma. At the time I was born it was the Indian Territory. And I grew up on the Indian reservation until I was six or seven years old, and of course all of the people that I saw were Indians also. My—and how I happened to grow up on it; my father, who had been in the Indian Territory since he was about sixteen years old, he had earlier been a drover, a cattle driver, and driving over the Chisholm Trail, driving cattle from west Texas into Wichita and Abilene and those kinds of towns where the railroad came. He had picked up five of the civilized tribe language: Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee and Creek, and was a—and later became an interpreter for the federal government. But at this time he was the interpreter for the reservation. So all I saw was Indians. Actually, I was six years old when I saw a white person, and I ran [laughs]. I thought it was a sick Indian. And from—as I grew on up in Oklahoma in the Territory, then later in Oklahoma, we lived all around over the state because of traveling where there were federal courts and so forth. I did not attend a public school except one year. I attended private school all of the time. And then in high school I went to a very excellent private school in the state of Oklahoma at that time, I attended, and when I finished high school—and I always had in mind was going to college. I didn't know how I was going, and I might add that my family, like most of the family, didn't have any money, and wasn't too many were thinking about college anyway.

[00:05:06]

But I was decided I was going, but for me to go to college it was going to have to be—now along when I was going to the high school, I worked in the summer at a local hotel as a waiter, so I wanted to go where there was a college near a big city so I could work and help myself to go to school, because at that time you weren't getting athletic scholarships, any other kind of scholarship, for that matter. So I went to Kansas City and at Quindaro Kansas, that's out on the suburb of Western University, and I enrolled in it. I had saved up all my money that summer and I thought I had enough to go through college, I had a hundred dollar, but when I got through the first month it cost seventy. So then I had to work and go to school. But I did go on and I would work in the summer at the hotel, bellhop in different hotel jobs. And one summer I was sitting on the porch, on the porch where I was rooming, because I've been on my own since I was sixteen; my family was all back in Oklahoma, so I was strictly on my own. And one fella came by that I had known and began talking to me. And we were friends, I mean we had—well, at least we were acquaintances, and the lady with whom I was rooming asked me if I would like to have my friend some homebrew. Now homebrew was something you made at home then, and I asked him if he wanted it, I gave it to him.

He never was noted for telling the truth well all the time, but after he asked me what was I doing, I told him I'm working hopping bell at the nice big hotel. He said "why don't you come and go with me to Portland?" I said "Portland what?" you know; Portland Maine, or—he said "Portland, Oregon." I said "for what?" He said "to work. You'll make more money than you going to make down at that hotel." I said "doing what?" and he said "being a waiter, dining car waiter." I said "well, I've worked on a diner." He said "oh, but you a waiter [00:07:03 unintelligible]." I said "well how, I wouldn't have enough money to get out there," and he said "I get you out there free." I said "well, even if I do and save that money, it costs me all of it to get back." He said "oh no, I'll get you out there free, you can come back free." I said "you mean you can get me to Portland Oregon free and I could work on the diner and make this money and come back free?" He said "yes," he said "that's what I'm here for; I'm picking up some waiters for Union Pacific in Portland." Well, I'm still very, very young, you know, and Portland Oregon is a long way from Kansas City, so I said "could you carry Alf [spelling?]? That's a friend of mine." He said "sure, I'm carrying ten. Be down at the station tomorrow at ten o'clock." He told me exactly where to be. And I was down there, and sure enough they were sending people to Portland. There were about thirty people lined up, but he was nowhere in sight. So the man who was interviewing them would ask what railroad they had worked. These were all men, these were all—and many of them were experienced waiters, but he would weed them out for one reason or another, and finally he got to my friend. I'm counting, because this fella said ten, and he was giving them slips to go to the dock then, so he gave my friend, after he questioned him, and I counted that was ten, and then he got to me. He said "you a dining car waiter?" I said "yes." I don't know why I said it. He said "well, you mighty short, how do you reach over by the window?" I didn't even know dining cars had windows in them, and I said "I'll reach them." So he told me to come back at one, which I didn't do, because I understood he was going to send ten and he'd given—but later on my friend called me and said "I thought you was going to get on and go to Portland with me." I said "I thought you were going to be down and fix it with the man." He said "what did he say?" I said "something about dining cars having windows on them." "I'll fix him." But later the man called me, not because of anything he said, and asked me to come back, as one of the persons had failed his physical, and I got shipped out. And that—I got shipped out and worked there the entire summer, and then at the end of the summer, on the next July, I talked to the superintendent, whose name was Alesha [spelling?], about coming back next summer. He said just let him know in time. So then I would come each summer and work during the summer. And I also had friends and I, because I'd gotten that one that he asked about could some friends, said "fine." So I began to bring others, and they liked then hiring college students, because when the season was over they would quit anyway, so you didn't have to lay anybody off, so then it became a lot of the summer help, and that's how I happened to—and then I came every summer.

MG: To Portland.

EH: Yeah.

MG: Stop please. I just want to get another angle. [Tape cut]

EH: --was a little status job and you needed a little training. I said "what about the job in the linen room? I want to stay in." And he said "no, no, we can't have a"—in other words, people of your color working, and that is for the whites. And he said "I'll tell you, why don't you get you a job, why don't you go down south and get you a job teaching school?" He said "I used to run from San Antonio to somewhere down south, and I met several fine Negro teachers down there." He

said "you ought to be a teacher, get you a job, be a teacher." I said "I don't want to live there"; he said "wasn't no colored jobs here but the railroad."

[00:10:31]

So that's why I wasn't here the twelve months out of the year, but I would come back in the summer and work during the summer, even after I was working somewhere else professionally, with the exception of the years when I went to graduate school. So I came here every year and just liked Portland.

MG: What were the other men's impressions? Similar?

EH: Well some liked it and some didn't, but those who were going to college liked it. Those who was going to college liked it because it helped them to get through college, and then we'd get a great number from Wilberforce; from the Howard, University of Kansas, and most of the—and a number of the black colleges that were up north, and then I would bring my friends out from the colleges; University of Kansas, and some of the people that I brought out, that came out, like Attorney Plunner [spelling?], who just passed, and his brother, his brother's a lawyer back in Kansas City; Richard Neil [spelling?], who's a pharmacist, who was my roommate out here, he was a student in Wilberforce and later in Meharry, so some of them, they'd come back in the later years.

MG: What were your accommodations when you stayed here in the summer?

EH: Well, the first day they arranged for us to stay in the Golden West Hotel, but after you made one trip you were on your own; they no longer stood for it. So wherever you could get a room, if you wanted to continue to live there you could, and pay it. And I liked it, I liked staying there with my friend and me—that's because I had never seen bigger gambling house; they had the biggest gambling house on the west coast. I could go down there and see this big money roll. And that's all I'd do, is look at it. So I liked it. But I came back one trip and Mr. Allen, who was running it, told me that my friend had moved—and we had moved with a private family—and to go down to Holiday's Barbershop and he would tell him, because we roomed with Mr. Holiday. And what had happened; he had met a young lady here, Ingersoll's [spelling?] daughter, and told my land—they said we didn't have any business living over there because we were too young to be living over there, and said "move." And so from then I lived at—roomed with private families, and then later on others roomed with private families.

MG: Quickly tell me about the Golden West Hotel, the years that you remember it being in operation, and its stature.

EH: The Golden West Hotel, which many people did not know, was the second-largest black hotel in the United States, exceeded only by the Theresa in New York at five stories; elevator, bellhops, everything, but—and was a very profitable operation, but that is because out of here seventeen boat lines ran out of here, plus the railroad, plus the Union Pacific and the Southern Pacific, the Great Northern, SPNS, where people would work, and most of these were men without family. And then seventeen boat lines ran out here with men who was working on the boat, and so you always had a full house and restaurant. And plus the fact it had about the first or second largest gambling house on the west coast.

MG: Gambling was legal?

EH: No, it wasn't legal, it was payed off in mail. I'll take that back, I played off somebody, but I didn't know it wasn't legal. I thought it was legal.

MG: There it was.

EH: And it just ran right on and on. That's where the town operated. The whole town was open, and the blacks in there would open right along with it.

MG: Was it mixed clientele at the hotel?

EH: Only the top ones, and there's some top whites who used to come down there and gamble who were big business men here now, who owned some of the big business in Portland, but they were from New York and they were young men. But normally it was black. Normally it was black. And standing around the Golden West Hotel, like some of the old picture,

were nothing but Cadillacs and Lincolns and [00:14:29 unintelligible] at that time; huge big cars, big new cars all owned by big gamblers and people who were in the sporting world.

MG: Were—did you mix with men who had other occupations?

EH: Well, as late as 1941 when industrial survey was made, ninety-eight and six-tenth percent of all blacks who lived in Portland worked for the railroad company; ninety-eight and six-tenth percent. And about four-tenth of a percent worked for private industry, and those were the women who worked at Meier & Frank and the people who worked at the Portland Hotel. At the Portland Hotel they had black bellhops and waiters and so forth. Other than that, you worked for the railroad or you didn't work. You left town.

[00:15:26]

And that is—the population in 1890...let me get this right...was seventeen hundred and ninety. I'm talking about black population in Oregon. In 1940, fifty years later, the population was eighteen hundred and twelve. They got—gained twenty-two people in fifty years. That's much less than the birthrate would have been.

MG: What was the reasoning for that?

EH: The reason, the only reason for it's a lack of employment opportunity. Once you got unemployed by the railroad, time you left town. Because there was no other jobs.

MG: Was that a blatant factor or just a tacit understanding? Was it that a lack of opportunity truly, or a lack of knowledge about it?

EH: It was a lack of opportunity and it was a tacit fact, as you say, because when the constitution, the Territorial Constitution in 1857, when it was written for the state of Oregon, had included in it as legislation that no mul—Negroes nor Mulattos shall reside within the state of Oregon, and those that are within the state shall be ordered to leave, and if they do not leave in six months they shall be given thirty-nine lashes on their bare back. And if they don't leave then, they should be given every six months until they do leave. So the climate was not good, see, and that was a tacit agreement that—and it also said that anybody who employed or brought them into the state. So there was a tacit agreement if you brought them in here and employed them, like I came and all the rest of those who came, once you were unemployed, you got your pass that day. Now that was a tacit agreement. I don't know what they would have done to them if they hadn't sent away, but at least they carried out that commitment. If you said "I'm quitting," and then they give you a slip for your money and gave you a pass back where you came from.

MG: Not to stay.

EH: Mhmm, but not to stay. So it was a population of the state—oh, to answer the question you asked—for several reasons; one was because of lack of diversified job opportunities and the other was the overall general attitude toward it, and that kind of publicity gets out about it, see.

MG: Are there significant events or incidents on the railroad that you recall, either in transit or around the employment of blacks in the railroad?

EH: Yeah, you didn't have a move up except within the context of waiters, so a waiter might become a pantry man, which was the top thing that you would call a head waiter maybe, in somewhere else; the pantry man who was usually an older person who had been in the service a long time. And you had the pantry man who was number one badge; you had linen man, who was number two, and the silver man who was number three, and four and on down. But other than that you were stayed right in there. And while I'm talking a lot about waiters, but it same thing between the Pullman porters, because it's a lot of Pullman porters ran out of here. And occasionally one might be in charge, and in many cases he was actually doing the conductor's work, but he was still called a—finally would call some waiters [00:18:53 unintelligible], and otherwise you didn't use—there was no promotion. In other words, there was no upgrading in it.

MG: What about your stewards in the dining car?

EH: Some were good, some were bad, some ones I would refer to in that manner; some were good, some were bad. But there was incidences which I know of, of waiters who were waiters but who knew more about the steward's job than he did, especially new stewards, and often did his work for him while they were breaking him in. Many waiters broke in the stewards, but he couldn't become a steward.

MG: How would you rate the quality of service that was performed by the waiters?

EH: Service was good, service was good. Because your income, normally enough it would have been good, because a person likes to have some pride in his work; then also the compensation is good, depending upon your service also, and to have the compensation, but service was good.

MG: Was it compared—

Unknown Speaker: Stop please. You guys are having too much fun and you're not splitting up your answers. That's my job. [Tape cut].

MG: I was asking you whether work was competitive between one waiter or another, or was it cooperative? Did they see themselves as a team?

EH: No, I—they saw themselves as a team. They were very cooperative. The waiters all was very cooperative, and many of them married and had families here in Portland and they participated in the various things like churches and lodges and so forth, but among the waiters themselves they were very cooperative.

MG: What were some of the significant activities other than for the people who move to Portland, work on the railroad, in other words their church and lodging and so forth?

[00:20:31]

EH: The churches, they—if you want to see anybody go to—because at that time they were living scattered around all of Portland.

MG: There were no black neighborhoods.

EH: No. But at church, if you want to see anybody you went to church on Sunday and you'd see everybody, you know; everybody in town. And of course they had the lodges and they had one big social affair in the year. The Elks used to have a dance on the boat which went down the Willamette River, a river boat. Once a year; if you wasn't in town, you missed the affair. But normally, so far as the Negro community was concerned, and with each other, got along fine, got along fine, living in separate society, of course.

MG: Which churches?

EH: The churches then was Bethel Church, which was on Larrabee and McMillan, Bethel Church. Previously Bethel was over on 10th Street at one time. The first black church here was A.M.E. Zion, and it was down on Southwest 2nd Street down there what was called the [00:21:37 unintelligible], because that was one segment where a number had lived for many years. And then Mount Olivet was built, which was the, you know, Baptist church. A.M.E. Zion then moved over on Williams Avenue. And St. Phillip, was St. Phillips Mission, and those were the three major churches then. And we didn't get great expansive churches till after, during the war and during the [00:22:05 unintelligible].

MG: Did the womenfolk play a significant role?

EH: Oh yes, they had their various women organizations and they paid quite a significant role. There were women auxiliaries and they were—there were women's groups from the churches that were various types of organizations in the churches, and there were a few social clubs. And by social I don't necessarily mean—I mean where the women had clubs other than church clubs. City clubs, I would say.

[end of interview 00:22:46]