

# Black Leadership in Los Angeles: John Lamar Hill II Interviewed by Ranford B. Hopkins

Department of Special Collections

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## Restrictions on this Interview

None.

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## **1.1. Tape Number: I, Side One (June 28, 1984)**

Hopkins

Where were you born?

Hill

I was born in Los Angeles, California, at 1601 West Thirty-fifth Street.

Hopkins

And when were you born?

Hill

June 11, 1923.

Hopkins

Let's talk briefly about your parents, if you don't mind. We can start with your mother. Do you remember when she was born or where she was born?

Hill

My mother was born in Georgia in a little town outside of Atlanta-Newnan, Georgia. The exact year I don't recall. My mother and father [John Lamar Hill, Sr.] used to have an ongoing joke between them as to who was the older. Until the day my father died, he professed that he was a young man that married an older woman. [laughter]

Hopkins

What was your mother's full name?

Hill

Her name was Elizabeth Bernetta Reid.

Hopkins

What about her education? Did she attend school?

Hill

Yes, she attended- I'm not familiar with all the schools of the South, but she attended the normal schools and then taught school. Then she also attended

Spelman [College] seminary. There was great pride in the college structure of Atlanta in those days: Atlanta University and Morris Brown [College] and Spelman. All these were located in that area and were closely associated. I don't know any more than that.

Hopkins

Did your parents speak of Newnan, Georgia, at all? Do you remember anything about the town from what they said?

Hill

Yes, my mother did. I've been there three times in my lifetime. Once when I was three years old, I think. Once when I stayed there overnight, visiting an aunt, my mother's sister. The last time was when I attended a black broadcasters meeting in Atlanta. Then I journeyed on to Newnan, some thirty-nine miles down the very fine highway, to witness some of the stories that my mother told me and to see some of the places that I thought might be of interest. There I found the house, 30 Penson Street, where my mother had lived, and a few doors down the street, on the corner, the schoolhouse, as they called it. It wasn't a school, it was a schoolhouse-a wooden-framed type of structure, in good repair, painted white. Then, just to the rear of that, about a hundred feet, began the church, the Baptist church. Now, the house was the house that my mother lived in. The school was the school that she attended with her brothers and sisters. And the church was the church that she was married in. So their whole life took place on one street.

Hopkins

[laughter] That's interesting. Did she use her seminary training?

Hill

Well, she was, as I said, a teacher in the public schools-I think it was in the lower grades-for some time. In fact, I think she was teaching at the time she was married. She was married in 1914, so that was back before we were thought about.

Hopkins

[laughter] I see. After she married your father, what did she do for a living?

Hill

Well, they moved to Atlanta, as I recall. She was a housewife at that time. I think that she lived on a street called Beckwith Street, if I'm not mistaken. My mother reminisced about everything. Her schooling was involved with rote training. She committed many things to memory. In the early years in the funeral business here, my mother used to drive the pallbearers. It's customary for the burial service of a Mason-when the Masons are in charge of this service-to use the poem "Thanatopsis," O death where is thy sting? This task falls to the master, and quite often they can't remember all of that long, long poem. My mother used to stand at the grave and prompt them. Because, again, from rote, she could recite Paul Laurence Dunbar and many things that were in existence. She enjoyed reaching back to bring up something I'd never heard before. The day before she passed away, I had a long conversation with her in the hospital, and she recited poetry that I'd never heard before, probably stemming from her original schooling, learned that way.

Hopkins

When did she die?

Hill

She died in January, 1966.

Hopkins

Where was that?

Hill

Here in Los Angeles. She lived right down the street here at Sixth Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street.

Hopkins

As I recall, you said something about her being at California Hospital [California Medical Center] when she died?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

Did most blacks go to California Hospital for treatment, or could you guess about that?

Hill

No, no, that wasn't the reason. She was at California Hospital because the coroner of this county was required at that time to be involved in a case if the deceased person had not been attended by a physician within the last twenty days, which is a very short period. We found that many people became coroner's cases, and that it overwhelmed the coroner's office. They were not equipped. The law had been originally thirty days, and there was even some leeway on that. But when they took it down to twenty days to give them more business, they got so much they couldn't handle it. I had asked a doctor friend of mine if he would stop in and see my mother within twenty days, so that in the event anything happened-she was aging-she would not become a coroner's case. So when he did detect that there was a problem, he called in a doctor, a very fine doctor, Gregory Murray, who was on staff at California Hospital, and he placed her in the hospital. He was just a wonderful man. I was very pleased with him. And I might say that Greg Murray lived right down the street from our home on Thirty-sixth Street, going to 'SC [University of Southern California]. He was from Washington, D.C. He was living in the residence of Mrs. Henderson, a widow of a former architect here in Los Angeles. My mother would see him all the time. When he graduated from medical school and served his internship and began to practice, he was known to the community. I take it that he was referred to by many doctors, because he was a specialist in his field. He was a surgeon. During the time she was in the hospital, we had our whole family gathered around the bed. My daughter Jan [Marie Hill] was in Tennessee at the time. We brought her back and all the grandchildren. Doctor Murray came in, and she said to him, "What is wrong with me, doctor?" He said, "Mrs. Hill, you are very sick, very ill." She said, "Well, could I die from it?" He said, "Yes." She just shook her head to acknowledge that that was a fact and went on and accepted it. It wasn't any big thing. So that's how she got to California Hospital, because Dr. Murray was on the staff there.

Hopkins

Would you consider your mother a religious person?

Hill

Oh, yes.

Hopkins

What church or denomination was she affiliated with?

Hill

Well, she was originally a Baptist in Georgia. If I may digress just for a little bit to tie this together-

Hopkins

Sure, please.

Hill

When she was ill, we brought her to my house and she didn't leave. Prior to that, she came over three times a year-Christmas, Thanksgiving, and her birthday-and that was about it. She wouldn't ride in the front seat of the car because she thought my wife should ride in the front seat of the car with me. But when she got ill (and I knew it, she lost weight rapidly), I suggested that she come and stay with us. So we made a room up for her. She was there in the house. When she turned, became jaundiced, I called Greg Murray, and he had her taken to the hospital immediately. He performed an operation on her, and he said that he would be able to clear up the jaundice, he felt, but that she had other complications and that it would only be temporary (this was in late November, early December, of '65) and after the first of the year that I could expect a problem. So that's exactly what happened. When she came out of the operating room- She was very fair, but she turned, she had jaundice. He performed the operation without giving her an anesthetic, by doing a nerve block. She came out, and she was clear as a bell, just peaches and cream. We brought her home, and we had Christmas with her and everything. And in January she died. So he was the type of man- I sound like a walking commercial for Greg Murray, but he was the type of man that was honest with me, has always been that way. And he was a help to her.

Hopkins

You mentioned that your mother moved to Atlanta. How did she come to do that?

Hill

Well, I don't think that the distance between Atlanta and Newnan was very far. It was thirty-nine miles. Her marriage was in Newnan. But, as she stated, there was a trainload of people. They had a car that brought the people down to Newnan from Atlanta for the wedding. It was probably about as far as from here to Thousand Oaks [California]. My dad was working at the Atlanta Athletic Club. He was the headwaiter, a maitre d', I guess you'd call him. I have some photographs of that, incidentally. So because he was working there, they had to live in Atlanta. And that's probably why.

Hopkins

On a racial basis, could you describe Newnan?

Hill

Well, I don't know much about it because I was there only a few times. But in talking to people, when I drove to Newnan to see the city, I noticed the huge homes there, almost like Tara in *Gone With the Wind*, that type of thing. I had a cousin, and I asked her, "What do these people do here? How do they support these homes?" She said, "They don't do anything. They came here with money, and they just live here." I didn't see all of Newnan, and so I don't know that much about it.

Hopkins

Where was your father born?

Hill

He was born in a little town called Oakland [Georgia]. Now, I never went to that town. We went searching for it, but it was described as a wide place in the road outside of Newnan. So I just never got to see it.

Hopkins

And what was his educational background?

Hill

Very little. He was a man who was the oldest in his family. My father worshipped his mother [Bessie Lamar Hill]. My father was a responsible person. He worked to support the family, to help when he was old enough. When I say old enough, I'm thinking of twelve on, at least-maybe earlier than that. He went to school, but he didn't have any formal education. As a result, it was one of the things that he regretted many, many times. However, Dr. [H. Claude] Hudson said on one occasion- He was complaining about the fact that he hadn't gone to college, and Dr. Hudson said, "What are you worrying about that for? You're around here hiring college people to work for you." [laughter]

Hopkins

What did your father do for a living?

Hill

Well, he was, as I said, the headwaiter at this club, the Atlanta Athletic Club. Then he later got a job as a Pullman porter on the Southern Pacific Railroad. That started him traveling and was eventually the cause of their coming to California and was the reason that I was born in Los Angeles, although I was born nine years after my mother and father were married.

Hopkins

I want to bring us to Los Angeles shortly, but I had another question about your mother. I remember in our previous conversation, you mentioned that on your mother's side there was some Scottish background. Could you explain that to me, please?

Hill

Well, the afternoon before she passed, as I sat with her in the hospital, we talked about everything. She started to reminisce about the football games, Morris Brown [College], and how she had a yellow dress and sat on the grass to watch the game, just started to talk. Finally, I asked her a few things, and I got to the point where I said, "Well, Mom, where was your father [Delbert Reid] from?" I said, "I'd like to know some of the history of the family." And she told me what she could. One of my aunts I've never seen, one of her sisters. (In fact, I have a cousin here in Los Angeles that just came recently, and I haven't seen her yet. I've spoken to her twice by phone, and we haven't

been able to meet. She's within a few blocks of here. I understand that she's a very pretty young lady in her early twenties or something. She is here for a little while.) I asked my mother about her father. I knew about her mother [Sally Morris Reid], because Grandma Reid was an Indian-looking type of person, a practical nurse, and a very responsible person, strong, very strong. When I asked about her father, I asked where was he born, and she said Scotland. And that, as I told you, tallied with the pictures that I'd seen. I'll bring you those pictures so you can see them. Then we went on talking about other things. So that's where I got the information. But there were two parts of the family. I think that was kind of common in the South in those days. I don't know in that case whether all the children had the same fathers. I think they did on my mother's side, but on my father's side they didn't. My father's sister, her name was Hannie [Eva Hill], or maybe it was Hannah, a derivative of Hannah, I don't know. The Hill side of the family, those that I knew, were just tremendous, strong people. My aunt [Hannah Eva Hill], we called her Nanny, because that's what she was. She was a nanny to us. She took care of us. She was like the Pied Piper; she just attracted children. She never had any of her own. She was one who loved to fish. They had different fathers. My father called her Judge. I asked him once, "Why did you call her Judge?" He said, "Because she reminds me of her father." Of *her* father, not *my* father or *our* father. Then on one occasion, my father told me of someone he knew who went to open a door. He touched the doorknob, and when he touched it he felt a great jolt of energy. He opened the door, and there on the other side stood a man with his hand on the door to open it also. They looked at each other for a period of time, and they passed and never spoke. He had said the man was from England, and they never spoke. I had a feeling that he was saying that he knew who his father was, and that that person was his father. I got a feeling it had something to do with the Athletic Club. So that was the knowledge I had about my father's father and my mother's father. One was from Scotland, and one was from England. I wish my dad had spoken more of it to me, but he was a very peculiar man. He didn't talk very much. And when you get to my dad, I'll tell you about that.

Hopkins

Okay, well, would you tell me now, please?

Hill

Oh, sure. He had some habits that were really funny. When he woke in the morning, he would have his bath and dress and he would come down to breakfast. My mother would wait on him hand and foot. Old-fashioned wives were very supportive of their husbands. She would bring his lunch to him at the office on a silver tray with a napkin over it, a hot lunch. She would sit there while he ate it and then take it back across town to where we lived. That was the way they worked. But my father, when he came down to breakfast, never talked until he ate. If he wanted salt, he would shake his right hand. If he wanted pepper, he would shake his left hand. Once he ate, he would commend my mother on the breakfast and everything and kiss her on the cheek, and he started his day. But I don't know- Did I give you that copy of that notice that we found in one of the newspapers that was done on his death?

Hopkins

No, no.

Hill

Oh, I didn't?

Hopkins

I'd like to see that. [tape recorder off] Mr. Hill has just given me a document from a magazine, *Spreading Joy*, which evaluates his father's character. It reads, "He was a silent, strong man, modest and unassuming, with a heart as tender as a loving mother. He was the quintessence of culture and refinement." Do you remember your father that way?

Hill

Oh yes, oh yes. Very well.

Hopkins

Is there something else you would add to that, or does that pretty well summarize his-?

Hill

Oh, he was- I don't know that my father ever had an enemy. He was tops at what he did. Somewhere in some article he was referred to as the funeral

director's funeral director, because he came into the funeral business having worked with the Pullman [Palace Car] company, which was basically a service company, and was a natural. He was a tall man, a little better than six feet. His skin was like a baby's skin. It was light brown skin, very brown eyes that were piercing. He never spoke loudly. We had a dog. (I may have told you this.) He liked the dog, and he had a way with it. He would walk with the dog without it being on a leash. He would talk to the dog, and he wouldn't talk any louder than I'm speaking to you now. That dog would be a half a block down the road, and he'd tell him to come. That's the way he operated. He didn't raise his voice. That's the way he talked to me. I'm not that way. I'm more demonstrative. He died at an early age. He was either fifty-three or fifty-four years of age, depending on when he was born—we go back to my mother and who was the older, you see. I think that my father was older by a year or so, maybe even two years older than my mother.

Hopkins

What did your father die of?

Hill

The death certificate said pneumonia, which was a primary cause of his death. He had internal problems. He knew he was not going to live very long. At the time, I was in school in Hawaii. He came over and told me that he didn't have long to go and that he'd like to know if I would come home. I was at Iolani [School] at the time. I chose to come home, and he and my mother came over. He died a year to the day when we landed on the dock. We were on the *Lurline* coming back. We landed on June 22 in 1941. Six months later, boy! Pearl Harbor occurred in Hawaii. And he died on June 22, 1942. So I'm very glad I came home with him. That year was a tremendous year for me because I think I got closer to him. I was older. I learned an awful lot from him in one year.

Hopkins

Let's bring your parents to Los Angeles, then. You alluded earlier to the reason being his employment as a Pullman porter. Can you recount for me more specifically how he came to Los Angeles and why?

Hill

Well, apparently he ran out here on the road. Eventually, he ran up to San Francisco and ran various places. But coming here, he and my mother then moved to Los Angeles, and he would run from here to Atlanta. Finally, his run was changed to where he was running out of California. They had temporary lodgings, and so my mother, while he was on the trip once, started house hunting. She went over on West Thirty-fifth Street, between Western [Avenue] and Denker [Avenue], east to Denker, which is in the next block. She saw a little house there at 1601 West Thirty-fifth Street and agreed to purchase the house. When my father got in from the trip, he learned that they needed his signature so they could close the transaction. They bought a house for \$3,000 or \$3,500. As I told you, it included the silver, the linen, tools in the workshop, and all the china and everything. It was a nice little house. That's where they lived until about '36, '37.

Hopkins

Did they want to come to Los Angeles?

Hill

Oh, yes. I think that in those days- "Go west, young man," you know. It was adventure, California.

Hopkins

What about Chicago or New York?

Hill

Well, I don't know. They were [from the] South. You're going north if you go to Chicago. Go west, and you couldn't go any more west from Georgia than you could California.

Hopkins

So he was literally consumed with this idea of moving west, not just out of the South?

Hill

Well, he was running [on the railroad] out here, I take it. He liked the place, and he probably went back and told my mother that there were a lot of

opportunities out here at that time. This was long before I was born, before I was even thought of. Then I was born in that house that they bought.

Hopkins

I'm perhaps being unfair, pressing you to talk about events that occurred before you were born, but I did have one more question regarding your parents' move to Los Angeles. Did they have friends in Los Angeles?

Hill

No, they didn't have friends in Los Angeles. They made friends in Los Angeles when they came here. What is a very interesting thing, of the three owners of this mortuary at the time my father died, all of them had come from Georgia and none of them knew each other before they got here. L. G. [Louis G.] Robinson was the first president of the company and the moving member, because he located the Angelus Funeral Home, which was a then-existing company, and sought to purchase it but needed support. And so he acquired the help of my father and Lorenzo Bowdin. But he also acquired the help of some other people, who later sold their stock out. My dad continued to run on the road until they decided that, because they used more red ink in this company than they did black ink, they were never going to make a success of it unless one of the owners was to be on the premises to watch his money and thereby watch the others'. Well, L. G. Robinson was the head of custodians and elevator operators for the County of Los Angeles, which was a good job in those days. And the other member, Lorenzo Bowdin, was a clerk in the post office, and that was a good job. My father's [Pullman] job took him away from home. So the chance to get a job where he could come home every night and be with his family was interesting to him. In 1929, I think it was, he discontinued his job with the railroad and became the vice president and general manager of Angelus Funeral Home, which he kept until the day he died. He was the only investor present on the premises.

Hopkins

Now, he worked for Southern Pacific, right?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

And at one time was he involved with the union [Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters] with Southern Pacific?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

Could you tell me about that, and then we'll move forward?

Hill

I remember that. My father and [A.] Philip Randolph were good friends. Their salary was, so I was told, \$45 a month, plus tips, of course. Tips [were] very important to them. They were not satisfied with their income, and so they founded a union. A. Philip Randolph told them to strike, and they did—they struck. I remember the porters and their families coming to the house, and they would all have potluck or pool their resources to eat. I never knew what the Depression was. Because you never had luxury, so what was Depression? So we were very happy. And my aunt Hannie was just a tremendous person. She would take us to the beach while she fished. She would bundle us all up, stay all night. She'd get a bench, and she would tie us with a rope, a tether of some kind, one end to us and one to the railing, and we'd sit there all night. She'd fill us full of clam chowder, wrap us up with scarves around our neck and our ears and our heads. It looked like we were in the snow or something. And she'd fish all night. She just loved to do that. She'd get up early in the morning, and we'd catch the red car and go fishing with shopping bags in her hands, one in each hand, loaded with food and bait and spare clothing and whatever else. At a later time, it was my privilege, for Christmas, to give her a very special gift, which was a brand-new Ford station wagon with her initials on it, so that she could go fishing without catching the red car.

Hopkins

When was that?

Hill

Oh, that was years later. Well, actually it was after 1951. It was probably about 1952 or '53. I know because the car was in the garage in the house that I built. We had opened all the gifts, and she didn't have anything, and she didn't say anything. Finally, I said to her, "Nanny, come on out. I want to show you something." When we opened the door to the garage that led off of the service porch in the house, why, there was the car with these initials on the door. She just couldn't get over it. But she ended up by being the Pied Piper again, taking all the kids to the beach and that sort of thing. She was very instrumental in my rearing. My mother and my aunt both were. They emphasized being a gentleman, saying, "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am" and "Yes, sir"; stand when a lady comes in; tip your hat. They don't do that anymore, I don't think. Being an only child in the family, why, I had plenty of help from good friends.

Hopkins

Did your aunt or any other relatives live with you?

Hill

No. I think my aunt lived with me when I was quite young, because they used to go fishing. I can recall they had Model T's. We had a whole catch of mackerel, and, you know, there's nothing to do with mackerel, but they figured out salting it or something and saving it for some occasion. I couldn't have been more than five or six years old.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, now we've established that your father was head of the union. Was he head of the union in Los Angeles?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

How successful was the strike that you mentioned?

Hill

Well, I don't think he got fired from it. But the Pullman porters, as long as they existed, were extremely loyal to this company. They used to have a fellow by

the name of James White who took over the union operation here. And there's another fellow that I'm trying to think of his name; I should remember him. But, you see, transportation now on the railroads is just nonexistent, compared to what it was in the years prior. The skycaps came into existence at the airport and made an awful lot of money, which is good. And there was no need, later on, for redcaps at the train stations.

## **1.2. Tape Number: I, Side Two (June 28, 1984)**

Hopkins

Just going back, again, your parents lived initially in a temporary residence before buying the house on Thirty-fifth Street. Do you remember where they lived in the temporary residence?

Hill

They lived for a while with the Bowdins. I think it's on Thirty-second Street. I'm not sure what the address was, but it was by the Shrine [Civic] Auditorium. That was a short period. They lived basically somewhere down in a rented place on Thirty-fifth Street or Place, I think it was, west of Western [Avenue]. I have pictures of that place. They seemed to be very happy from the pictures. You know, freedom. You're out here, and life was different. I remember my father, when I was young, waking me in the morning and pulling his double-barreled shotgun out to clean it. And I knew we were going to Lake Elsinore [California]. We could hunt rabbit up there. He had a Hupmobile touring sedan with the convertible top. We would go up to Elsinore- Of course, they had no freeways or anything like that. It was a good day's ride to get up there. You changed tires maybe one or two times on the way. And you'd stop along the road and eat your lunch- To go to Elsinore! When we got up there, he would go hunting. My mother in the evenings would have to rub his shoulder because of his firing this double-barreled shotgun, with it kicking against your shoulder all day. That was the relaxation that a lot of people enjoyed in those days. Once again, I was probably six or seven years old.

Hopkins

What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in?

Hill

Oh, a very nice neighborhood. It was a neighborhood that consisted of blacks, Caucasians, Orientals, Japanese. And the property was well kept. I had some very lovely neighbors. Some of our dear friends were the Harrisons. I just recently buried Mrs. Harrison. She was ninety-some-odd years of age then. But I have a picture of her holding me when I was a baby. She was present on the front porch, waiting, while I was waiting to enter the world, and while the doctor was delivering me inside, along with the other ladies and people on the street, because I was the first child born on the street. I was very fortunate to have good parents and fortunate to have good friends.

Hopkins

The people who lived in your neighborhood, did you have a sense of what most of them did for a living? If you can characterize or generalize about that-

Hill

Well, if I thought about it, I could probably go back and do it. Once in a while, I drive past that area, and the house is still there. But you wouldn't recognize it, because they've stuccoed the house. It was a frame house, which I restored, and it looked very nice. Two of my children were born while I was working on the house. I say that because I can recall working on the mailbox. I had just painted the house, getting ready, and my wife [Anthenaise Houston Hill] started to have pains, and she had to go to the hospital right away. Her mother came and took her to the hospital, and I cleaned up and changed clothes and followed there, in the waiting room. And then the next time another child was ready for delivery, why, I was still working on that same house, in about the same area. It perhaps was a couple of years' effort. My first child [Jan Marie Hill] was born while I was overseas, while I was in Europe. That was January, and I wasn't present, of course.

### **1.3. Tape Number: II, Side One (July 3, 1984)**

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, in our last session, we concluded our discussion by talking about the birth of your two children. In this session, I'd like to go back and bring forth a couple of questions that I still have. I don't believe, at least on tape, that we

got the names of your grandparents on your mother [Elizabeth Reid Hill]'s side.

Hill

On my mother's side, my mother's mother was Sally Morris, her maiden name. She was married to a man by the name of Reid. His name was Delbert Reid, I believe.

Hopkins

Okay. And on your father [John Lamar Hill, Sr.]'s side?

Hill

On my father's side, my father's mother was Bessie Lamar, maiden name. My father's father, whom I don't think my father knew (I think he knew of him, but didn't know him), was from England. That's where the name Hill came from.

Hopkins

Did your father have any other brothers or sisters?

Hill

Yes, he had a lot of brothers and sisters.

Hopkins

Can you recall the names of-?

Hill

Well, one was Hannah Eva [Hill]. That was the one that I had told you once that he called Judge, because he said that she looked like her father. Now, my father didn't have the same father with the other children. There was one brother named Howard. (All these people have passed on, of course.) There was one sister named Bessie, and there was one sister named Dora, I believe.

Hopkins

Of these aunts and uncles, are there any that are outstanding in your mind?

Hill

I didn't know them.

Hopkins

I'd like to ask you the same question for your mother's side.

Hill

My mother's brother- She had two, I think, two brothers. One was Roberts S. Reid, who was a dentist in Chicago, and another one they called Candy. His name was Andrew [Reid], a very handsome fellow. He died at an early age, in his twenties or thirties or something like that. I, of course, didn't know him. My mother was in her thirties when I was born, so he had passed on prior to that time. My mother had a sister, Violet [Reid], very tall, fair, silverhaired, as I remember her. A very, very, very nice lady. She had a sister, Lucy [Reid], also, and I don't think I ever met her. [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, there was one aunt you mentioned that shared a lot of activities with you and actually helped your mother raise you at some point. What was her name?

Hill

Her name was Hannie Eva. We called her Nanny because she was a nanny to all the kids. She took care of them. I think of my father's sisters, she was the favorite. She was just one of those nice people. In my early age, I lived with her for a few weeks or something each summer. She lived right down the street from the house that I was born in. A bunch of kids stayed there at the house. It was during the Depression, but we didn't know what the Depression was. But I do know that they were very concerned that it cost them \$5 to go to the grocery store. They came back with several armfuls of groceries to feed all the kids for \$5. She had a way with herself, by not just giving you something to eat. She always qualified it with an adjective. She would say, "If you're good, we're going to have cowboy beans tonight." Then when she'd taste them, she would say, "Yum, yum, yum, yum." She'd really psych you. Those beans were the best-tasting things you ever had, you know. [laughter] She was just that way. She was the lady that would take us fishing and tie us up with the rope so that we would not fall in the water. Wrap us, bundle us, she'd fish all night. In

those days, they used to have a Coleman-type of lamp that they would lower down to the water from the pier. The light would attract the fish. They'd come up, and they could catch them. (It was legal in those days. I don't think it's legal any longer to do that.) So they dropped that with a rope. Then she would tie us up with a rope, bundle us, and feed us. She always carried clam chowder and things like that and stuffed us with that. Then she got three of us or so on a bench, or four, and tied us all in with a robe all over so we wouldn't catch cold. And then the other end of the rope was tied to the railing, so if we fell over she could pull us back up. She was just dedicated to fishing and was one of the nicest people that I have ever met. She didn't have children of her own, but she was nanny to an awful lot of children.

Hopkins

Was she married?

Hill

She was married. She had twins, which she lost in childbirth. Her husband died. She was divorced though before he died. Her name was really Raffee, but she took her maiden name back. Her husband died in a drowning in Mexico, on a lake there fishing or something.

Hopkins

I see. You mentioned that you attended a broadcasters conference in Atlanta. Eventually, of course, we want to discuss your broadcasting career and ownership of KJLH. Now, however, I need to know what was the name of that association, if you can recall.

Hill

Well, there was an organization that was founded called NABOB. I think it was the National Association of Black Broadcasters [National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters]. Are we going to get into that now?

Hopkins

No, we don't have to. That's fine. Just so I have the name. Because it came up, and- All right. What was the name of the Baptist church that your parents attended in Atlanta?

Hill

I'm sorry, I don't know the name of it. They were married in it also.

Hopkins

All right. Were either your mother or your father self-conscious about the age difference between them?

Hill

No. It was a joke between them all the time. He was older than she, but he always claimed she was a year or two older than he.

Hopkins

Okay. Well, that concludes the questions I had from session one. Moving on now to new questions, as I remember, you were born June 11, 1923.

Hill

That's correct.

Hopkins

And you were the only son?

Hill

Only son. Only child.

Hopkins

At one point, I believe you mentioned in the preliminary interview that your parents had considered adoption.

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

Can you expand on that?

Hill

Only from what they told me. They told me that they were making plans to adopt a Mexican child-not an Hispanic, a *Mexican* child, just like that-when my

mother discovered that she was pregnant. She was elated about it, of course. Since there had been no children born on that street-there were some younger children, but they had moved there-it was an occasion for everyone. Times were different then. We didn't have television. The only thing they had was a wind-up phonograph and a crystal set.

Hopkins

Crystal set? Like a radio?

Hill

Well, it had dials on it. It didn't have any linear dialing, all rotary dials. There was a crystal, a rock, that is used to select stations. You're not aware of crystal sets?

Hopkins

I know that kids played with crystal sets, if I'm not mistaken. I didn't have one myself, but-

Hill

You had a cat whisker, a little piece of wire that you'd put on this crystal at one point to find a frequency that you wanted. Because it was a rough cut, it had different frequencies on it. We used to make them that could be that size. [gestures] You could put a pair of earphones on and listen. You had to have a pretty good-sized antenna. There's no amplifier, you see. I would listen to that. I used to listen to "Billy the Kid: Boy Detective" on KFOX in Long Beach. It was pretty interesting in those days. I kind of got the reputation of being a bad kid. I had a fellow that we used to call Wings. He had big ears, and he was kind of a mother's boy-you know, he was close to his mother. His father was a policeman, very nice. The whole family was nice. My mother took me down to one of the department stores. There they would call you [to] talk to Santa Claus. They'd give him your name, your age. Then he would call your name and age up, and they would throw down, on a slide, I guess, a gift for you-slide it down and give it to you. I got a set of golf clubs, with irons, too. That was when I first started becoming interested in golf. I went home, and I was playing with it around the fishpond out there. And this fellow Teddy White, whom we called Wings because of his ears- His ears reminded me of bat wings, because

he was fair and you could see the veins in his ears. They were sticking way out like this. And as I was swinging this club, he stepped around over here and turned around to look at me swing it. When I came through, I just sent that iron right up his nose. You could just see the nose wrinkling, all of the purple go into it and everything. I broke it. He didn't say anything. He touched his nose with his hands, and he saw the blood on his hands. Then he went into hysterics. He started running around the fishpond. I finally tackled him and grabbed him. I said, "Teddy, your nose is broken." So that happened. Then next door to us was a family by the name of Threekes. We were playing leapfrog in the backyard. When you play leapfrog with a fellow that was bent over, usually he can give you a ride by standing up just when you got to a certain point and really throw you a long way. Well, this kid was leaping over me, and I lifted up on him. He fell and broke his wrist. So my mother made me stay in the house for a while. We used to have these high windows, up high, so you could put a couch under them and it wouldn't bother you. I used to stand on the back of the couch and put my elbows on the windowsill up there, and I could look outside from up above. I was looking out, and I saw Teddy White coming down the street. Alfred Threekes was leaning up against the palm tree. Teddy said to Alfred, "What's wrong with your arm, Alfred?" He said, "Lamar Hill broke it." And he said, "He did?" He said, "He broke my nose, too. He's a bad boy." [laughter] So anyway, I had to kind of stay in for a long time. Go ahead. I'm getting off the subject.

Hopkins

No, that's fine. Did most of your friends call you Lamar?

Hill

Yes, because my father's name- My name was John Lamar Hill. So to differentiate when they were referring to one of us, they would call my father John. Some people called him JL. They called me Lamar all the time. I didn't start to use the name John until after my father had passed.

Hopkins

Did they ever call you Junior?

Hill

Yes. My mother always wrote it that way, John Lamar Hill, Jr. You see it on some of those pictures there.

Hopkins

Right. In also looking through your scrapbook, I see John Lamar Hill II. Is there one you prefer, "junior" or "the second"?

Hill

I made my son "the third." He always gets me into trouble now, because he always answers the phone and says, "Hill speaking." Then I'm in trouble from then on.

Hopkins

[laughter] I see. Okay. Just back to the adoption a bit. Do you have any idea why your parents considered adopting?

Hill

I think they wanted a child. I think that my mother was a very loving type of person. I know that when I was young she took me with her all the time and talked to me constantly about things and talked to me about her youth and the things in Atlanta. She was just a housewife. She didn't have very much to do. So having a child was nice, I guess.

Hopkins

Well, the question remains, why the planned adoption of a Mexican child? Why not adopt a black or a white child?

Hill

I don't know. I don't know if they were joking with me or what. But they both told me that at different times. They were getting ready to-

Hopkins

Okay. Mr. Hill, would you walk me through your educational experience, beginning with primary school?

Hill

I first attended the Thirty-sixth Street School, from kindergarten through the sixth grade, then went to Foshay Junior High School, then went to Manual Arts High School, transferred from Manual to L.A. [Los Angeles] High School for one semester, and then I went to Hawaii. In looking through some pictures this morning for you, I ran across a letter my father had written me in Hawaii, which was interesting to read. As I think I told you, the intent was to go on from that school, which was Iolani [School], a rather fine prep school there, into the University of Hawaii. However, my dad had become ill and had gone to Mayo Clinic. They had informed him that he had a short time to live. So he came over to Hawaii. In this letter, he was mentioning that they tell him when our school would be out so that they could make their reservations to come over. When they got over there, I was going to stay and then go to the university the following year. The next year (I was in the eleventh grade then) I was going to finish at Iolani and go. But he told me that he didn't think he had much time to go. I think I told you that he died exactly one year to the day that we landed on the *Lurline* here in Los Angeles. It was in 1941, I think it was, because Pearl Harbor was 19- When was Pearl Harbor?

Hopkins

Nineteen forty-one.

Hill

'Forty-one?

Hopkins

Yes.

Hill

That was in December '41, wasn't it?

Hopkins

Right. December 7.

Hill

So that was in 1941 that we came back. Because it was in June that we arrived, June 22. Then Pearl Harbor happened in December. My dad died June 22, 1942. It just came out right. That's correct. I graduated from high school at

that time. The war was afoot at that time. I remember our class was the Grenadiers. Everything was oriented to some type of combat. In the fall of '42, I entered the University of Southern California. Some of my friends were going into the army. I wanted to go into the air force; I didn't want to go into the army. Some of them had gone into the air force, but you had to be- I think it was just about six months or so prior to that that they were taking Negroes- they didn't have blacks in those days- into the air force, when they were forming the Tuskegee Air Force [School]. I was just a little bit young at that time to get in, but I wanted to go in the air force. Uncle Nolle [R. Smith], we called him Uncle Nolle, in Honolulu, arranged with a commander of a wing there for me to be inducted over there and be assigned to his command, which would have gotten me into the air force. I did that because I had a pilot's license, and I once had an airplane. By the time I got over there, I was there, but my papers weren't there, because they came by boat convoy. By the time the papers got there, the wing had moved out. We used to come home and sit at the table in his house, have dinner, and talk. When I was informed that the wing had moved out, my feathers fell, because I felt that the only alternative I had then was to go in the Hawaiian infantry. That meant Okinawa and everything else down there, you know, and it was entirely different. You could see them training in Hawaii, and it wasn't at all appealing to me. I came back to Los Angeles and contacted my draft board here. The kids I went to school with were working there. Paul [R.] Williams was president of the draft board.

Hopkins

Oh!

Hill

Well, which was normal. They would select esteemed people and have them head the various organizations.

Hopkins

Was George [A.] Beavers [Jr.] on the draft board as well?

Hill

Not to my knowledge.

Hopkins

I see.

Hill

He may have been on a draft board, but I don't think he was on the one here. They didn't have the papers for me to get in because they were in Hawaii. They did arrange where I could volunteer to go in, so I did that. Then I went downtown for the physical exam. They gave you a week or something like that, or two weeks, before you report. I didn't do that. I just went right on in to Fort MacArthur, and they sent me to Seattle. There in Seattle they had a call for so many black troops to go to Alaska, and I went to Alaska. I had the application in for the air force. Finally, it came through, and I came back to Juneau, Alaska. I was one of the first cadets in there. It was called a pre-aviation cadet center, where they did the screening and everything else. I was the only black there. I was the only black in Juneau. There were none there, no black soldiers in Juneau. They used to go to the USO [United Services Organizations]. For fifty cents, you could stay there for the night. They had bunks and everything for the GIs. George Montgomery, who was, I think, the first husband of Dinah Shore, was there all the time. We got to be pretty good friends. Finally, after some time one of the officers from a company up in a place called Excursion Inlet, where we were, came down to Juneau, which was south of that point, saw me, and wanted to know why I was still there. I said, "They didn't know what to do with me." All the fellows were coming through and being processed; but what were they going to do with a black? He made some contacts. I got out of there pretty fast after that. First available-

Hopkins

Where did you go?

Hill

To Keesler Field, Mississippi [Keesler Air Force Base]. There I took all the tests there for pilot, bombardier, and navigator. I was fortunate to have qualified for that. I was in class 29A. You spoke of Beavers. Both Beavers boys, Leroy and what's his brother's name [George A. Beavers, Jr.], were in that class. Quite a few fellows were marching down to the train station. They had spur lines in that camp there. All of our baggage had gone on to Tuskegee

[Alabama]. We were in good humor and good spirits. Some sergeant came along and said, "Hold up!"-that they had cancelled the training program there. We laughed about it, that it was sort of latrine rumors that happened. But it was true. They had orders come down from the chief of staff that anyone who was in the air corps originally could continue, or anyone who had begun flight training could continue, but anyone who had come from another branch of service and who had not been on flight training should return to that branch of service. Hindsight is 20/20, because what they were preparing for was D day. The training time for that was too long to make those pilots available for that. So then we got shuffled all around, dispersed, and reassigned.

Hopkins

Were there any blacks who had entered the air force initially, so that they could be eligible for-?

Hill

Oh, yes. This is late, really, going in. Willard Woods, over here next door, was in the 332d, a pilot. Elbert Hudson was, I think, in the 332d. I think I gave you the names of some fellows that you might contact. It's a big thing with them. There's a 99th and the 332d.

Hopkins

Were both of those units-?

Hill

All black.

Hopkins

They actually flew missions and so on?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

Distinguished themselves?

Hill

Yes. But they're all older. Now, Willard is older than I; I don't know how old he is. Elbert is older than I. I think it's about five years' difference, four or five years' difference. The whole thing had been started prior to that. There were a few fellows with me that I went to school with. I never did figure out how they got into the air force. There's a church here called Hayes Tabernacle [Christian Methodist Episcopal Church]. Reverend Hayes-he's dead now-had two sons that went in. Kenneth [Hayes], who was killed. His plane went down in Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. I think that's where it went down, in Pontchartrain. And Milton Hayes became a major in the air force, now retired and living in the country somewhere. But those were the only two at my age that I knew that got in. I don't know how they did it.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, how were you treated by your fellow countrymen in Alaska?

Hill

Well, it was an all-black company.

Hopkins

In Alaska?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

I see.

Hill

There was no integration in World War II; there was no integration in the air force. The only integration that you could say that there possibly was was on a ship, where they had no alternative. But when I was in Mississippi, we went to Camp Van Doren, Mississippi. It was tough, tough by the standards we had here. In Keesler Field, they had a PX [post exchange] there. In the lunch counter, blacks sat on one side-and they were Negroes-and whites on the other. Sometimes you would see someone that you knew who was on the

other side. Good for them if they made it. You wouldn't blow their cover. But it seems difficult now to envision the segregated armed forces. It existed very much in World War II.

Hopkins

What about interracial relationships in the army? Okay, you weren't in the same units, but could you have social relationships with, say, white crewmen?

Hill

Now, you're speaking of the air force when you say crewmen.

Hopkins

Okay, air force, or-

Hill

Well, I wouldn't know. I was in the screening, in the pre-aviation cadet training. When you left there, you went to Tuskegee, and that was all black down there.

Hopkins

Okay. Well, in the military itself, in the army.

Hill

Well, I went to OCS [Officer Candidate School] at TCOCS [Transportation Corps Officer Candidate School], and there were-

Hopkins

For the tape, can you explain OCS?

Hill

Yes. That's Officer Candidate School. That's where they made the "ninety-day wonders," you know, [laughter] came out a shavetail, and all that sort of thing. I had a fellow that was the I&E officer-the information and education officer-at Indiantown Gap [Military Reservation], Pennsylvania, that was very much responsible for my going to OCS. I think I was a sergeant at that time. He suggested that I apply for TCOCS, because we were in the Transportation Corps then, you see. I can't think of his name. Through him I applied, and I did

go. It made life a little softer. I got an awful lot out of the army. With the Transportation Corps, you had a means of getting around without using your feet, except on a gas pedal or brake. When we graduated from OCS, we were all put in a replacement pool to replace the officers over there. I was assigned to the 3544th truck company. I was a platoon officer. You had sixteen trucks and a jeep. You could have a weapons carryall. There were usually four platoons to a company, and then the company platoon itself, which was administrative. I had a fellow that was from- His name was Goth; he was a CO [commanding officer]. He had just been moved up because the regular CO had gone berserk and they'd sent him home. He was a nice guy. He realized that it was difficult because I was the only black officer in the company. They were all white officers and all black troops. I had some officers that were just- People weren't liberal-minded in those days, you know. So whenever I wanted to go anyplace, I had some connections in the battalion and group. I could get out on the road for a week, two weeks, wherever I wanted to go. One of the fellows in the battalion headquarters and I went to school together at Manual. His father and my father ran on the road together.

Hopkins

Was this guy white?

Hill

No.

Hopkins

He was black? All right.

Hill

The battalion was black, the whole thing, you see. One of the owners of Angelus Funeral Home had a niece that was in group headquarters [Jean Robinson, the niece of Louis G. Robinson], so you had a string coming all the way down. Group sent down the orders to battalion, and battalion sent down to company. So I could reach up a little bit and get a trip going just about anyplace I wanted to go. The CO had agreed that anytime I wanted to go anyplace, just to let him know. So I got to travel from Marseilles [France] to Hanover, Germany, and München Gladbach [Germany]. I've retraced those

steps, incidentally, with my daughter Jan [Marie Hill] and my family. Maastricht [Netherlands] and Wavre, Belgium, and various places. It's interesting. I've done it twice.

Hopkins

How did the Europeans treat you?

Hill

Beautifully. They were very nice. Well, the American GI wasn't the greatest ambassador in the world. They kind of got the opinion, I think, that we had saved not only their country but the world. Blacks were a little more friendly, were more earthy with the people over there. If we didn't have someone from the Deep South, some Caucasian from the Deep South, to show a different way, a different attitude, why, everything went well. It was an experience, and I recommend that every man, not necessarily go through a war, but put some time in the military. It's good for him.

Hopkins

When you were in Europe and you were on leave and you had time for social activities, what kinds of things did you find the black troops doing in Europe?

Hill

Well, I can't answer too much about that because I did get- It depends on where you were. I crossed onto the continent from England. I went to England first, in a staging area there, and then across the channel. Then I came into Le Havre [France], I think, then up to northern France, right on the tip of Belgium, up in the pocket there. And from there I was assigned to a company in the 157th Battalion. From there we were just nomads; we were moving all around. With a transportation company, you didn't transport only personnel, it was supplies and everything else. You didn't stay anywhere very long. Your main concern was to stay warm and have enough to eat. That wasn't hard because the army did a beautiful job of supplying their troops. The morale was good, as a whole. It was an education within itself to experience it, to be representing a country like ours. You didn't need any money. There was very little you could spend money on except your personal things, like your toothpaste and that sort of thing. It was an experience that- It's unfortunate

that so many had to die for that, but an experience that I think is- You couldn't buy it.

Hopkins

Did your attitude change about race relations in this country, given your experience in the military? Not today, but just in that period of time?

Hill

No, well, I was- It was a little tough, because I had been born in Los Angeles, on the West Coast. Not having experienced that sort of thing, that was my first- I'd heard about it from my mother, about lynchings in the South in the earlier days and the Ku Klux Klan and other things. I'd heard about it, but I'd never experienced any. I didn't experience any of that. I served on a court-martial one time. A fellow was a black soldier, and he was on guard. He was guarding the camp. There were white soldiers in the camp also. Some of the soldiers came into the camp, and they advanced on him. He gave the necessary command, which was "Halt! Who goes there?" Then the person should respond, give their identity, "Sergeant So-and-so," and then he could say, "Well, advance and be recognized." But they didn't. Instead of that, they thought it was funny. They'd been drinking, apparently, and they wanted to dismantle the guard. And he fired on them. He shot the fellow in the leg. They prosecuted him; they brought him up for court-martial. The interesting thing, I was the junior officer on the court-martial. It was my task to burn the ballots. They all went to the latrine before this started, and I found myself in a room by myself. So I decided I'd go to the latrine. In there they were deciding on how they were going to vote. They were going to start at the lowest penalty, but if they didn't get a unanimous vote, they would raise it, and they'd keep going. It wasn't long before I realized that I'd better vote. I didn't want to vote against the man. I'd better vote for something in order to get the quorum. He got, I don't know how many years. Now, he didn't serve this, I'm sure, because they got those sentences commuted later on. The inspector general would come through and look through those things. And, incidentally, B. O. [Benjamin O.] Davis [Sr.] was an inspector general.

#### **1.4. Tape Number: II, Side Two (July 3, 1984)**

Hopkins

You were saying, B. O. Davis?

Hill

B. O. Davis, Sr., was an IG-inspector general-and his basic job was the concern of Negro troops. In fact, one of the officers in the 3544th truck company that I was first assigned to had been reclassified by B. O. Davis for maltreatment to troops. He was pretty bitter. He was put in this company. He could not be a CO. You had to have a rating of superior to command black troops or Negro troops. If you didn't have a superior rating, you couldn't do it. That was a good thing.

Hopkins

Were they selective about getting someone who at least said they didn't have racial prejudice?

Hill

No, I think you went through all that some time. That was all on your record, and they could tell pretty good. I was lucky. I had some good officers. I had only one bad officer. He was out of South Carolina and stayed drunk all the time. They would have liquor rations. You could draw a liquor ration from Marseilles, from Brussels, from Paris, and from Reims. We were right in the middle of it, in the hub of it. And this guy would send an officer to all-Now, you got different types. You got champagne and wine from Reims. No, you got champagne from Reims, you got wine from Marseilles, and that sort of thing. From Brussels, I think, you got bourbon. You got scotch from somewhere else. Well, they'd send out four people to draw the liquor rations for the same company. The GIs got beer. They got so many liters of beer per man. It came in a keg. Now, we're in tents at that time. This CO would stay inebriated constantly on his cot. He never got up, hardly. He would send and bring the beer into his tent, put it right in front of his cot, get some ice and pack it all around it. And he'd drink. He'd invite his other friends to come and drink the company beer that belonged to the GIs. When it got flat, then he'd put it out in the company street. By that time, his emissaries had come in with all the liquor he'd acquired from all over the theater there, and he was in good shape. The company was being redeployed to the South Pacific. Now, I'd already been in the Alaskan theater, the Asiatic-Pacific. Now I was in the

European. They thought they were coming through the U.S. and then to the South Pacific, but- I remember that the troops there all gave me their guns and everything else to bring through, because they couldn't bring them through. I collected the P-38s, the Lugers, and things that they had, and I stayed behind. He arranged for me to be transferred-I was a superior rating; he wouldn't dare do anything like that-so that he could take one of his friends with him from another company back to the States. He got to Le Havre, or wherever it was, and they reclassified him there. That was B. O. Davis's job to do that. The treatment that he had had- The beer incident was just a minor thing. That was the only bad experience that I had with personnel in that theater.

Hopkins

Did you feel your troops were discriminated against, in terms of assignment per se?

Hill

Oh, sure.

Hopkins

Could you recount maybe one or two instances of that sort of thing?

Hill

Well, we had pulled back to Chaudfontaine, Belgium. They had a place there where they had mineral baths. I'm saying maybe they had fifty mineral baths there. They had four set aside for the officers, four or five. We had an officer from New York, and he would not allow the troops to use the mineral baths, because the officers were using them. It was a real tough thing for them. They kept coming up to me and saying, "Lieutenant Hill, why can't we use the baths?" I mean, they were there.

Hopkins

In terms of being given the most dangerous assignments, or something on that order, did you experience that?

Hill

No, I didn't experience that so much. It was possible to get behind the lines, and we did. The only weapons we carried were side arms and fifty-caliber machine guns mounted on some of the trucks. But I do remember going into München Gladbach [Germany] late one afternoon. We were behind the lines then. The people would draw their shades and everything. We were all scared. I know I was. You didn't know what to expect.

Hopkins

Finally, on your military service, I remember you talking about being very close to General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower.

Hill

No, not as a person.

Hopkins

No, not as a person, but in terms of-

Hill

ADSAC. Well, that was later, when I became a company commander of the 3544th car company. That's when our job was to drive all the brass. They had ninety-one vehicles. There were about four weapons carriers, and all the rest were Cadillacs and Buicks and a few jeeps. The brass had their favorite driver, who would take care of them. They'd take them to Paris, and they'd take them wherever they wanted-to Reims. They would take them to the officers' PX, where you could buy your uniform there, buy them the pinks or the greens. Those were the two colors that were used, dark green and a pinkish-gray color pants. You'd wear a green tunic-blouse, pink pants or grays; or you could wear a green tunic with green pants. I'm speaking of the officers. They would buy these clothes for them, and they wouldn't put any insignia on them. They wouldn't put any rank on them. Then when they came back to the company, they were all out of uniform. My task was to get them back in uniform, in their ODs [olive drabs], the bully woolies, which were the real heavy ones. Then I'd get a call from some officer, field-grade, "Lieutenant Hill, when I put so-and-so into uniform, why, you leave him in. You understand?" "Yes, sir." What are you going to say?

Hopkins

That relationship. Did you consider reenlisting?

Hill

No. [laughter]

Hopkins

When were you discharged, Mr. Hill?

Hill

I don't know when I was discharged. I got out of the army in November of 1945. You had some time due you, so you actually drew pay for a while, even though you were out. You went on leave until it was time for discharge.

Hopkins

Do you recall when you came back to the United States?

Hill

Sure.

Hopkins

When was that?

Hill

It was that time.

Hopkins

Oh, it was that time. When you were discharged?

Hill

That time.

Hopkins

When you left the army, where did you go first?

Hill

Well, they didn't tell us anything about the housing problem here that they had.

Hopkins

In Los Angeles?

Hill

Yes. Everybody thought they were just going to get a house and start. But they didn't do it. I had a house that I was born in, but my father had rented it out for \$35 a month, which was a lot of money in those days. The lady was getting \$180 by subletting the rooms in the house and wasn't about to give it up. Going through the rent control process and all that was a real job. So we paid \$35 for a one-room and bath and dinette. You pulled a little something aside, and there was a stove and a sink and that was it. It was in Santa Monica [California], which was really a motel. That's all we could find. I remember my first daughter, Jan, was very small, and she had developed strep throat. She was just wheezing and crying with it. My wife [Athenaise Houston Hill]'s parents lived over, I think it was, on Sixth Street, in Ocean Park or Santa Monica. I can't tell what the line is there. We were probably less than a mile away from where they were living. We went over to their house with the baby. I got in my car, and I went and found a doctor. I don't know how I did that. I think I called somebody from somewhere, and they gave me a doctor. The doctor happened to be a very famous doctor. His name was Dr. Lascolli. He was the doctor to Esther Williams's children and everything else. When I first saw him, he had a beard and an old car. You really questioned whether he knew anything about medicine. But he came in the middle of the night, and he gave a prescription for me to get for the child. I got the prescription, I gave it to Jan, and she got better. He came back the next day or so and he was altogether different. He was clean-shaven and dressed nicely and he had a nice car and everything. He was the doctor that was involved in a case where they were going to- He was charged with murder or something later on. Do you remember that case last-? Dr. Lascolli?

Hopkins

Lascolli. Not offhand, but-

Hill

Well, he was a fine man. I really felt something I should have done- When he was going through this, and I realized who he was, my first inclination was to

write to him and say something nice to let him know that there were people who believed in him. I kept putting it off and putting it off and putting it off. Finally, the jury went out on him, and the jury came in and acquitted him.

Hopkins

Oh, acquitted him.

Hill

Yes. But it would have meant much more to him. It's like giving somebody a raise after they've just gotten their paycheck. The money is not important until they lose it, you see. So I regret that. [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, when you returned to Los Angeles, had things changed, to your mind?

Hill

Yes, they had. But prior to going, you could see it starting. You had Rosie the Riverter, and the- After my father died, I went to 'SC [University of Southern California]. I didn't just go to 'SC, I was involved in working at Lockheed aircraft [Corporation]. That was something. There was a great esprit de corps out here over the war. But there was a great influx of people from all over because of the work that was available here, particularly the aviation industry and some shipyards down around the harbor here. When I returned, there was even more of it. It wasn't long after that that we had even more, particularly among blacks. I say particularly among blacks because those are the people that were living in the same area I was living. What had happened in the past apparently was that as people came into Los Angeles they came in small enough numbers so that the community could absorb them. If there was any change that needed to be done, the community changed them, because of the ratio. But after the war, those soldiers that had been through here and knew something about it came in such droves, with families and everything-I say soldiers, military people, period-that we were unable to change them. By numbers, they changed us. That's what really caused the change. I remember listening to the music coming off the radio that was just the noisiest, raunchiest thing you could think of. During World War II, you had people like [Count] Basie and [Duke] Ellington and [Benny] Goodman and [Glenn] Miller. It was a sweet

sound. It was a smooth sound. Strangely enough, the kids reacted that way. They weren't raunchy kids, you know. It is pure nostalgia when I hear that music. It takes me back. I can equate one to the other, what we were doing at a time like that. I don't want to get into trouble here, but the housekeeper we had referred to it once as Texas music. So it, apparently, had gotten to Texas first, before it was brought here. It was a noisy type. I won't say noisy, it was a spirited type of music that hadn't been here prior to that time. People started to change. Kids started to change. We've had it ever since.

Hopkins

What kind of music is that in this period? What was it described as? Is it rhythm and blues or is it-?

Hill

Well, rhythm and blues is a little slower pace, as I know it. It was something like a faster tempo and quite a bit of noise. The use of guitars and the use of anything else you could get, drums or anything else you could get, to speed up the pace of dance and movement. The war had happened. The war did a lot of things. It turned a lot of people around. It changed their lives. It introduced them to new environments and new people and new ways. They changed, and we changed, but we changed like they.

Hopkins

I see. Of the people who came to Los Angeles, this new group of people, how did they differ from the people who had lived here before?

Hill

I think the people that were here before were very complacent. I'll give you an example. One of the very nice things that happened to us was that we went through an era when a lot of the professional people who had become doctors and even lawyers-having gotten an assist from the government, through the military, through whatever schools they went to at that time, whether they were dentists, or whatever it was-came to California to hang up their shingles. I remember the social events of that era were- You'd go to a party, and you'd meet Doctor So-and-so, and this is Doctor So-and-so. One was going into dentistry, and another is a physician, and another is a radiologist. It was a very

social period for us. We were young, the country was on the move, the war was over, and there was still a lot of money around and a lot of opportunity for those who worked. Now, those who were from California-not all, of course, certainly not-but it appeared that many of them did not aspire to become the doctors, etc. Some of them did, but most of our doctors were people who had relocated here from other states, particularly out of the South. May I say, that prior to the war we didn't have smog, that is, that I could recognize. It was a slower pace. I can recall so well the Pearl Harbor incident when I was in my yard on Thirty-sixth Street. My dad called out to me and said, "Tramp"-it was his words of endearment- "Tramp, they're bombing Pearl Harbor." He turned the radio up so we could hear it. If you've ever seen any flashbacks of what was happening during the- We're doing the same thing. I had a rifle, and I'd built a rifle range. I was shooting a .22 down into the garage, but I had steel plates so that it ricocheted into sand pits. They were .22 caps, very low-powered. But that was what I was doing. It was on a Sunday morning, but from that moment on life changed for everybody. Six months after that, my dad died. That's the night I graduated from high school. Our housekeeper left the house because somebody died in the house. My mother was soon to be left all alone.

Hopkins

She left because of the death?

Hill

Yes. Superstitious. Well, I went into 'SC, and then I left 'SC, came out of there, because I wanted to go into the air force. I was afraid I was going to be put into the infantry. So my mother was all alone. She was not the type of person that was accustomed to being alone. So a lot happened in a brief period. When my father died, I remember the next day walking around the block, trying to figure out why in the world he should have to die at his age. Little did I know that the whole world was going to change fast.

Hopkins

Let me just discuss this issue of old Angelenos versus new Angelenos, if I may use that term. Certainly before the war there were upper-class blacks and middle-class blacks and lower-class blacks-if you can follow those terms, I

mean on a socioeconomic basis. Then after the war, or during the war, there were many blacks who came who were workers and were looking for jobs and were looking to better themselves, in most cases. At least this is the way the story goes in history. Did this new influx of these work-seeking people change the character of Los Angeles society?

Hill

Well, there were two basic categories, as I see it. One was the work-seeking people, coming out here to live under more pleasant conditions than apparently they were living wherever they lived and to earn money and to have a better life. Then there were the professionals, who had prepared themselves and had chosen to come to California, to Los Angeles-or some went up north-to again hang up their shingle and start life over again. Perhaps most of them had a wife, and they had gone through the war, and they had reached the promised land. Now, both of those people had every right to come, and I think that Los Angeles benefited from their coming here, most of them. Those who were professionals certainly were welcome, as far as I'm concerned. Those people who were just laborers were welcome. There was no shortage of jobs at that time. The biggest problem, as I see it, was housing. Because the exodus from the city had not occurred, people had not moved out and created all these new homes and tracts and developments in the countryside. The majority of those living in Los Angeles were Caucasians. You could never have elected Tom Bradley at that time. It just couldn't have been done. They usually came in from the South, when they came in that way. They came in from the Watts area, not Compton even, Watts. Because Compton was predominantly a white city at that time. Then they migrated, and they worked their way up. They came to the east side of Los Angeles, and then from the east side, they came to the west side. Then those people who had prospered had the money, and they moved into the Leimert Park area and then to the View Park area. Then years later they started to get into the Beverly Hills area and that sort of thing. But View Park up there was about the cream, and there were very few in it for a while. This area here, no. Back in 1964, when I bought this property, I had to fight to buy it. In fact, I couldn't buy it. I had to get the governor of the state-the former governor of the state [Goodwin J. Knight]-to intercede for me to buy it. That late. Because this was

predominantly a Caucasian and Oriental neighborhood. So we just didn't think that way here in those days. Yet as a kid I used to hunt rabbit here.

Hopkins

Over in this section, the Crenshaw district?

Hill

Yes, right in here. Up against the hills there. I used to play golf at Sunset Fields, which is that area where the Consolidated Realty building is. If you go up Santa Rosalia [Drive] and look up to the right, you see some old pepper trees up there. It's kind of an abandoned area up there, big, large parking lot that's not being used, other side of the hill. That was the first tee for that golf course that doglegged to the left, coming out of there. This course ran from Crenshaw [Boulevard] to La Brea [Avenue]. It was two courses. That's all it was out here, just a lot of land. Then they built those very nice homes in the Baldwin Hills up there, but they were not for blacks. Later, when a few got in, they began to move-those who had it first-and made more space for blacks to come in.

### **1.5. Tape Number: III, Side One (July 12, 1984)**

Hopkins

We were talking about your early education and that you had attended Manual Arts High School. Then you mentioned that you transferred to Los Angeles High School. Can you tell me why you left Manual?

Hill

I first entered Manual Arts High School after graduating from the junior high school, Foshay Junior High School. I was interested in football and track. The football year, the first year of that, because of my size, I was put on the varsity team. At that time, Tom Fears played the left end. Tom Fears, you may not know of him, but he became a [Los Angeles] Ram in the early days. He was quite a fellow. The Fears brothers were quite good athletes, very good athletes, and were going on to UCLA usually. But I came up with some fellows that were good football players. The team was coached by a man that- Well, let me say that integration had not reached the point that it has reached

today, in that the coach was not known to be overly liberal. The coach also coached the track team, and the prospect of participating in track with him was not the most joyous thought that I had. So some of my friends were over at Los Angeles High School. They had a fellow by the name of Graves there that was a pretty good track coach, and I wanted to be a part of that. So I talked my parents [John Lamar Hill, Sr., and Elizabeth Reid Hill] into allowing me to go to L.A. High School.

Hopkins

Was it easy to transfer?

Hill

Well, if you knew somebody. I knew somebody who was connected with the board of education, and you could get the transfer. Most of the fellows that I knew that were going there lived on the east side of town and got permission to go to L.A. They were nice people, and they were my friends, and that sort of thing. And then after that, my dad arranged for me to go to school in Hawaii, a school called Iolani [School].

Hopkins

I have a question about that, but let me interrupt you, just for a second, to finish Manual and L.A. Regarding Los Angeles at the time, were college-bound blacks more likely to attend Los Angeles High School or Manual Arts? I guess what I'm driving at, academically, which of the two-?

Hill

I've got your point there. I would say that college-bound blacks- I can't answer that because I don't know. But Manual Arts, from its very name, implies that people were being prepared to do manual tasks and not necessarily academic tasks, in the true sense. They had shops at Manual and that sort of thing. They had shops at all schools, but maybe Manual had more of that sort of thing, as did Fremont [High School] and some of the schools out that way. L.A. High School was farther west, a more affluent neighborhood. I think that their average student was brighter than at Manual because they had quite a Jewish population there, and both Jews and Orientals were good students. They took advantage of everything. The opportunity to go to school out there, if that's

what one was seeking, was there. They would have good classes, good teachers, good environment, everything. And that occurred. The irony of all that is that when blacks finally descended upon L.A. in droves and became the majority of students there in later years- It's now changed to where now the Orientals and Hispanics are there, and the Filipinos are there, and the curriculum is going up again. My son lives not too far from there, and I travel by there every day. It's not too far from where I live. You notice the difference in the students going now, which is a good thing. It's good, I believe. Too much of anything is not the best, I don't care what. Too many Ph.D.'s in one room- [laughter] But intersperse them with those who need it and they can be great help. Next question.

Hopkins

Okay, then. Why did you attend Iolani?

Hill

My father arranged for me to go there because he had a friend there, Nolle [R.] Smith, who was unquestionably the top black family of the islands. Nolle had gone to Hawaii, if I'm not in error, in the very early 1900s and had been a part of the legislature in 1931, as I recall, somewhere around that time. He had a lovely family. He had three girls and a boy. Nolle was from Nebraska or Wyoming or both. He was an energetic, aggressive, competent individual. He insisted that his children would be the same, and they were and are. I was privileged to have gone to Hawaii to school, which was arranged by both my father and Nolle Smith. The school was Iolani, and it is still in existence. It's an Episcopal school run by a headmaster. The coach was an Episcopal priest, a very rugged individual. The members of the first team who were boarders lived at his house. There were a few first-team members that lived right there at Honolulu, but many of the students came from other islands or from the mainland to go there. Nolle went down and told Father Bray, Kenneth A. Bray, that his nephew was coming over to school and he was a good football player. That was the biggest mistake that he made. Because when I got there, I met up with some huge Samoans who had been imported from Samoa for the purpose of playing football in the lower grades and taught the system and then had come to Iolani. Hearing that somebody was coming from the mainland who could be a challenge to them or their position didn't ingratiate

my presence at all to them. So it took a little time to pour a little oil on the water. But we became great friends. It was an experience that I shall never forget. I lived at Father Bray's house, and that was an experience. It was during the war. We were getting from England the magazines about the war, and I remember looking at them. A living room was made into a sort of, well, it was a gathering facility for the boarders there. Father Bray lived upstairs, and the boarders lived downstairs everywhere. He had a porch that surrounded his house, and the beds were placed out on this lanai, they call it. We all had bedspreads; they were either red or white. The colors of the school were red, white, and black, and so they were red with white and black on it or white with black and red on it. I still have mine at home. It looks like an old flag now, tattered and torn, but-When Father Bray would go away, why, when the cat's away the mice will play, so they had more freedom at that time. I remember on one particular occasion we had gone to Hilo to play football. We went down on the cattle boat, and we traveled all afternoon by boat, or all day, almost, by boat, and then went ashore to Kona. They had no dock there, so the boat had to anchor out in the bay there. They brought lifeboats out, one powerboat with several tied in tandem, and we loaded there, which was a real tricky thing to do with the surf coming in and going. Then we went ashore, and we got in a Model A bus, and we drove from Kona to Hilo at night, all night long. At daybreak, just as the sun started to show, why, we descended down upon Hilo. We practiced for the first day and played the second. Back in Honolulu, of course, they carried the game back there. I was lucky. I made a couple of touchdowns in that one, and so I was received back in the family in good graces. Had that not occurred, I think I would have been excommunicated.

Hopkins

What was your position there?

Hill

I played the right half at that time. Very interestingly, I just had a fellow come to visit me, about three months ago, from Hawaii, who was one of those that I played with. He's a Chinese fellow that- He and I were very good friends then, and through the years we've talked by phone, but I had not seen him. When I saw him this time, he was a little corpulent. But he was the same person. And

I, of course, am corpulent. We had two days together that were very nice, and my wife [Mara Simon Hill] enjoyed hearing about all the funny things that happened over there. But the school later moved. Incidentally, I have a funny thing I ought to tell you. Father Bray's house was just off the main street of Nuwano. Nuwano is the street that goes to the Pali [Highway] from the center of town, from Honolulu. And, incidentally, Nolle Smith built the first road to the Pali. He had the first steamroller over there, many years prior to that. But Nuwano is a very beautiful street when you go up a little bit, beautiful homes along it, very lush foliage, and many cemeteries. The school was on Nuwano. Then you walked across the street to a cemetery right there, and then this street that bounded the cemetery there, running into Nuwano, was where Father Bray lived, the third house from the corner. So having envisioned that now- We had no money. My father sent me \$5 a week over there. It was insufficient, because by the time I got my laundry and cleaning and went to the show or anything, I didn't have any money left. When we would go to parties on the weekend, a luau or whatever- By this time I'd become one of the fellows. They kidded me at first. We got to be great friends. But we had no money, and we would go to the parties with leis clear up to our ears. Leis are lehua, pikake, and some of the plumeria. Well, we got those leis because the cemetery was across the street. And when they had funerals there, instead of bringing flowers as we do here, they would bring leis and put them on the graves. So when dark came, why, the fellows would jump the fence and go over and get leis there. Then we would go to these parties with all these leis, which meant we had lots of money, when we had nothing, you see. One of the interesting things that I recall was that the fellows- There was a lava rock wall on Nuwano that was the beginning of the school itself. The fellows used to sit there on that, and it was quite a picture. Because the school had a rule that you had to wear a tie. But they didn't have a rule that you had to wear a shirt or shoes. So you could, in the mornings, going across the street from Father Bray's house over to the school, see all these fellows sitting there with khaki pants, barefooted, T-shirt, and tie-no collar on the T-shirt. Complied with everything. It was just a wonderful experience.

Hopkins

How long were you there?

Hill

Well, I was there for one year and would have stayed there. And that's when my dad came and said that he didn't have long to go and wanted to know if I would come home. And, as I said, I was glad that I did, because he died one year to the day that we got home. I just wish I could have- That changed my life when he died; everything changed as a result.

Hopkins

What was the racial mix of the school?

Hill

Oriental was, I'm just guessing, probably better than half, and that involved Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Hawaiians. I'm just guessing, maybe 15, 20 percent Portuguese. Hapa Hawaiian, which is a mixture, constituted quite a few, evenly Chinese and Hawaiian mixture. Nobody pays any attention to race over there, and that's good.

Hopkins

That is good.

Hill

They don't tolerate any kind of racial difficulty over there. You just don't belong if you get involved, and that's good.

Hopkins

Were there any other Caucasians or blacks? Or were there Caucasians?

Hill

Yes, there were. They call them haoles. They were there and very nice, very nice. Because they'd become a part of the whole thing. They didn't wear any shoes either or anything else. They were real nice guys.

Hopkins

Were you there at the school when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

Hill

No, that occurred between the time that I left, which was in the latter part of June, I believe, and the- About June 17, I think, I left, because we landed on

June 22 here. Between that time- And then December 7 was Pearl Harbor. So that was in the same year that I left. Then June 22 the following year, same day, my father died. So that's how I can equate how the seventeenth happened to be- Quite a bit happened in that time, and Hawaii has never been the same, never will be, as a result of it. You just can't go back and recapture the past.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, was this a prep school or a college?

Hill

Prep school.

Hopkins

Prep school. And it was male only.

Hill

Male only. Right.

Hopkins

Okay. Well, can you tell me about your experience at USC [University of Southern California]?

Hill

When I came back from Honolulu, I went to Manual Arts. It's very interesting with that because Jim Blewett, who had been the coach at Manual Arts before I came-it was a legend in itself-had gone to UCLA to coach the very famous team, the picture that I showed you of all of the black athletes of 1939 and that period. And I was going to be privileged to play under Jim Blewett. He was just a real nice fellow. But I wasn't eligible because my transcript hadn't come from Honolulu. My father paid \$5, which is a ton of a lot of money, for them to send a cable with my transcript over. I then got on and made the team. We played on Fridays, and my dad wouldn't have any funerals on Friday, if he could avoid it, so he could go watch the game. That last year was a very important period in our lives because I got closer to my dad in that period than I think ever before. The track team was still being coached by the same person-his name was Smith-that had coached the varsity football team

when I was there the first time. I was in Manual Arts' district, you understand. [tape recorder off] Coach Blewett was going to coach the football team, as he had always done the previous years he was there. So I had the opportunity to play under him, which I was certainly looking forward to, and did. Incidentally, during that time I played with a fellow by the name of Woodley Lewis, who became a pro later on, went up and played for Oregon and then I think he played for the Rams. Woodley and I had been friends for many years. He wasn't playing first-string there at the time, but he blossomed into a very fine football player and became a pro. When the track team came, I ran the lows [low hurdles], the highs, the broad jump, and was anchorman on the relay team. I remember that we had a meet against Roosevelt High School, which was over in Boyle Heights, and the bus took us over. We had quite a few black students on the track team, and their student body president was running the hurdles. I had only begun to run the hurdles over in Hawaii, in the track meets there. And the fellow that was running, his name was Don Bittleson. He was a very nice fellow, a nice-looking fellow. He was just the kind of guy that should be the student-body president. And he was a good hurdler, but he wasn't too fast. I was fast, and I wasn't a good hurdler, but as the season progressed, why, apparently I improved my form a little bit, and I caught up with him and eventually was winning most of the hurdle races. It was customary for the team to choose the captain for the track team. We were going over to Roosevelt High School for the meet, and the coach said, "When we get over to the high school, over to Roosevelt, we'll choose a captain." It was going to be very close because I had a lot of supporters, and there were supporters that would vote for Bittleson. There was a fellow by the name of Ray Eisen, Raymond Eisen, who had an automobile. They were members of our team. They pulled alongside of the bus while en route there, at the signal, and started yelling and talking out the window and everything. The coach saw this car full of black kids, athletes, in it, and he jumped up, and he said, "All right, now we're going to vote for the captain!" And I lost by two votes. Because he realized the votes were out there in those cars that I needed, you see. That was this fellow Smith. I enjoyed track. Dean Cromwell used to come over. He was a very pleasant individual, usually wore a blue blazer, polka-dot bow tie, white shirt and grey pants, same things we're wearing today. He talked to me and everything. I wanted very much to participate in sports at 'SC, but there were no blacks participating in sports at 'SC, no Negroes, because they didn't

have blacks in those years. But when I graduated from the school in the following fall semester, why, I entered 'SC. I was very hopeful that there would be a change, but it didn't occur. I wasn't at 'SC very long. I left there because in the meantime Uncle Nolle, back to Hawaii now, had arranged for me to go in the armed services, to join a wing over there, to become a liaison pilot there. I knew that sooner or later I would be going in the army, or going in the military, but preferably in the army, and I wanted very much to be in the air force because I had flown quite a bit prior to that and had a plane prior to that. When Uncle Nolle wrote and said he'd made the contact for me to come over, why I went down and asked my draft board-because everybody was registered at that time, you see-if I could go to Hawaii and go in there. They said that I could, that they would forward the papers over. I went to Hawaii, but the papers never came, because they came by convoy in a boat. I think I told you before that it was frequent, it was normal, for mail to be very wet when it got there. I waited so long, and I got a job with the engineers working in the USED. I wore steel-toed shoes and a hard hat and all that and became a cat skinner. And waiting. I was still waiting for that to come through. Finally, the wing moved out, and the only thing left for me was the Hawaiian infantry, which I didn't relish. So I kept working night and day. I had two jobs that I worked at. I was, one, a cat skinner, and I was a timekeeper at night to earn enough money to get back to the States so I could go into the service over here. And that's what I did.

Hopkins

Okay, that's fine. At one point did you have a desire to attend UCLA?

Hill

No, I didn't think I had the grade point average to get into UCLA. In 'SC I could. You needed more money to get into 'SC than you did brains, but- Better take that out. 'SC might hear that and do bad on me.

Hopkins

We can seal that part. [laughter]

Hill

Well, 'SC was just down the street from me, because I lived on Thirty-sixth Street. In fact, I think I may have told you that I could be in bed and hear the chimes ring at Bridge Hall and make my class there in time-get up and get dressed and make it. It was so close to us. I remember I had a course there in Man and Civilization. My manager here, Barrington Tate, is married to a young lady that I introduced him to who went to school with me from kindergarten to college. Her name was [Nita] Hippard, maiden name was Hippard, and she always sat right in front of me in the school. When each semester would start, they would, even in the grade schools, call out the name of the student, and they would have to answer by either giving their telephone number or their address. Her address, I remember, was 2121 West Thirtieth [Street]. She had long hair, black hair, and I used to dip her braids in the inkwell, just like Tom Sawyer did. My wife [Athenaise Houston Hill] and I had some friends over one evening. We invited Barry because Nita was going to be there, and they met and they have been married now for forty years, I guess. I'm the godfather of their son. And Nita sat in front of me in Man and Civ. I was playing golf in those days, and if I wanted to go to the golf course or something I would ask her to get the assignment for the next day for me. But when I went back to Honolulu, then I left 'SC at that time. Then when I came out of the army, I went back to 'SC again. It was very difficult at that time because, as I told you, when you came out of the army you didn't know the housing problem they had here, the shortage. I was trying to remodel the house that I was born in for us to live in, and I got a job then working at [McDonnell] Douglas Aircraft [Corporation]. Prior to going into the service I worked at Lockheed [Corporation]. Then I went to embalming college, California College of Mortuary Science, and that's where I met Barry Tate. He and I went to school there together. He came to Angelus [Funeral Home] and wanted to serve his apprenticeship here. He had an uncle that was in the funeral business in San Diego, and it happened later that he had to go down there because they cut down on the number of apprentices that could serve their apprenticeship here unless they were putting in forty hours a week. That was a problem. I was in 'SC, but I was going to work at Douglas, working on my house, and then I entered the California College of Mortuary Science at the same time. So something had to give there. Again, I had a very dear friend, Dr. Fred Whiteman, who was a friend of my dad's. And he insisted that I should prepare myself for the funeral business because our family owned one-third of

the mortuary. The mortuary would not give me a job in this business. But he said, "Son, you have to prepare yourself. When the opportunity presents itself, you have to be ready." That caused me to enroll in the embalming college. When I graduated from there, took the state board, and got my license, then I got a job at the mortuary, and we had a daughter, a young daughter, and then another daughter. [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

What are their names?

Hill

Well, Jan [Marie Hill] was the firstborn. Jan was born while I was overseas. Dorothy [Elizabeth Hill] was the second child, and then later Johnny [John Lamar Hill III], my son, was born. It was very important that I make a living. When I came to work at Angelus, public opinion was a little severe. The other partners [Louis G. Robinson and Lorenzo Bowdin] felt the best thing to do was to offer me a job, and if I didn't do well they could say that, "Well, we tried." So they called me down to the mortuary on December 23, 1946, I believe, and they offered me a job. I had \$100 a month coming subsistence from the government, because I'd not been out of the army so very long. They offered me \$90 more if I would work seventeen hours a day one day and only ten hours a day the next day, and they would alternate that back and forth. I could commence work on January 1. I said, "No, I'll start now." So about three o'clock that afternoon I took the job. I called home and told my wife that I wouldn't be home-I had a job at Angelus. So when all this occurred, something, as I said, had to give. The thing that had to give would be 'SC, which I said I could do that later. I went to work at the mortuary, and in 1949 I became president of the company.

Hopkins

Okay. I want to follow a chronology with that, beginning with your father's founding the company. We'll pick that up after this. I want just a question or two more. How were you treated at USC? Was there discrimination in sports? How about in the classroom?

Hill

No, no. There was no discrimination in sports by anyone but the policy of the school. I didn't really feel discriminated upon. They just wouldn't let me participate. Nor would they let anybody else, you understand. You know, you really wanted to do it, and, I guess, because they wouldn't let you, you wanted to do it even more. You felt that it might work into something if you had an opportunity to be on the track team.

#### **1.6. Tape Number: III, Side Two (July 12, 1984)**

Hopkins

Was it a shock to you, Mr. Hill, that they wouldn't let Negroes participate? I mean, what was your frame of mind when you learned that?

Hill

Well, I didn't learn it. I guess I absorbed it through osmosis, because it was always there. Even when I was a freshman at Manual, I knew that you couldn't go to 'SC and- You could go to UCLA and participate. Once again, it was a question of grade point average to get into UCLA, and I didn't have it. So either I had to go to junior college and spend a lot of time or go to 'SC. And I decided, well, I would go to 'SC. And maybe, just maybe, Dean Cromwell- In retrospect now, I don't think it was his option to allow me to go. I think it was up higher than that with the school and with the chancellor and with- It was von KleinSmid at that time, and-

Hopkins

What was von KleinSmid?

Hill

He was the chancellor [president] of the school.

Hopkins

I see. There's a building named after him now.

Hill

Rufus B. von KleinSmid, yes. Well, I don't know that it was he. Someone said that corruption and success starts from the top down, and I think that that's true. That doesn't necessarily mean that it was von KleinSmid. It could have

well been the trustees. But it was up there some place that the decision was made that no Negro was to be participating in sports.

Hopkins

What of Jewish people or Orientals who may have attended the university at the time? Did you know of any similar-?

Hill

Oh, there were some Jewish people that were participating in sports.

Hopkins

Orientals?

Hill

I don't recall any, but I would certainly not think that they were having a difficult time.

Hopkins

For the black community in general, or people that you knew in your circles of friends and so on, which was the most prestigious university, UCLA or USC?

Hill

I think that 'SC was more prestigious than UCLA, for the very reason that it cost more to go to. But you couldn't but admire the students that were going to UCLA and taking advantage of that opportunity.

Hopkins

I think we're about ready to start the funeral business with your father. But there's one thing that I found interesting about your life. You told me you've done a lot of flying and you owned an airplane very early. Let's talk about that. Okay?

Hill

Well, this is not much to talk about, except that I was an only child and there were certain hobbies that I liked. I developed model-plane building and flying later and an interest in aviation. I was interested in automobiles, old cars, and I had these seven and a half Model T's. The half Model T's ownership, before

you ask me, was between Nolle Smith's son and me. We owned the Model T jointly. That's the one I rebuilt over in Honolulu under the same conditions that I rebuilt them at home, by putting the car in the only garage that was available, which was Uncle Nolle's garage at that time, tearing it down and working on it as I did with my dad's here. I would put any car that I got in his garage and would tear it down before he got home. There was nothing he could do but leave his car out as a result. So he was very anxious to have me get rid of the Model T's over a period of time. I grew up in an area where Japanese were very prominent. Many of them were gardeners, and they had Model T's. So one way or another, I acquired them for \$2.50, \$5 apiece, for a Model T. One time I paid \$27 for a Model T.

Hopkins

Why would they have so many Model T's?

Hill

Well, they drove Model T's in those days. They were inexpensive and available. The gardeners drove Model T trucks and also drove Model T touring sedans. One I purchased from a fellow right down the street. I became somewhat of an expert on repair and maintenance of Model T Fords.

Hopkins

Is this self-taught or did you have-?

Hill

Yes, it was the school of hard knocks and broken hands. I broke my right hand cranking one once, and there were- My father had to come and tow me home. It was some sight to see him driving this Cadillac limousine down the street towing this Model T, with me sitting up in the Model T steering it.

Hopkins

How did you acquire your first airplane?

Hill

Well, that's a funny thing. My dad gave them to me. My dad was in ill health then. He bought me a car. (This is before I went to Hawaii.) It was a 1939 Ford, two-door, green, beautiful, nice paint on it, light green. He bought it from

Tuchman Motors, which is where Felix Chevrolet is now at Jefferson [Boulevard] and Figeroa [Street], and he got the pink slip. He was ill. This was during the time when he had been to Mayo brothers clinic [Mayo Clinic]. Finally, one day he said to me- He was in bed, and he said, "Tramp, bring my pouch." My dad seldom talked in the morning without eating, but he did. I went to his closet and reached into his coat pocket and brought his secretary out, which was a pouch. In that was a pink slip to this car that was in the name of John L. Hill, John Lamar Hill, I think it was. He gave it to me, and he said to me, "Happy birthday" or something like that, I think it was. Then he gave me a long lecture about being careful and all that and that it was given with the understanding that I'd get rid of my Model T, which I used to drive to school when I went to Manual. You'd have to jack up one wheel to get it started, and then you could crank it. Because that wheel acted as a flywheel. As soon as the car engine started, you'd push it off the jack that you had it on and try to hold on it to keep it from running away. He gave me this car, and there was some condition about it, that I couldn't pick it up for a certain time. But it was there. I went down and looked at it. It was under cover. They'd put it in the corner, so I wouldn't see it. But when I brought the pink slip down there and told them my dad had given it to me- I got some fog lamps to put on it and began to fix it up. That date was something important that I had to wait for. Maybe it was before my birthday, perhaps, and I had to wait till my birthday to bring it out or something. I used to go to the airport, Gardena Valley Airport, which was down around Western [Avenue] and El Segundo Boulevard, right down by where Western Avenue Golf Course [now Chester Washington Golf Course] is now, just south of that. I'd get there early in the morning, and I would do whatever work I could to get some time for flying in exchange for it. I used to go down with my Model T. Then I came down with this new car there, and they all looked around at it and liked it. They had a [Piper] Cub down there that cost \$990 and some-odd cents, less than \$1,000. I loved that Cub. We ended up where I traded the car for the airplane. But I still had the old Model T, and I started driving it again. My dad didn't see the new car, and he saw me moving. Someway he got onto it, and he went down there and he talked to the people down there. Johnny Hanson was the fellow's name. Johnny Hanson was related to Virginia Knight, Goodwin [J.] Knight's, the former governor's, wife. They were all Norwegians. Funny how later on I buried Miss Emma Herschberger, who was Virginia Knight's mother. I buried

Goodwin Knight, the governor. He was buried twice, but that's another story. At that time, Johnny Hanson called me when this happened, this was probably eight years ago, something like that, seven or eight years ago. He said, "Lamar, this is Johnny Hanson." Well, I knew who he was right then. Many years had passed. He was quite heavy, and he was no longer flying. He had lost his legs; [they'd] been amputated. He lived over on Hill Street, right off of Santa Barbara [Avenue, now Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard] there. I'd gone to his house in the past. He said, "I just read the obituary where you buried Virginia's mother." I said, "Yes." He said, "You know, she's a relative of mine." So then I was talking with Virginia about it, and she said, "Yes, Johnny's-" She spoke very nicely about him. So it's a small world that all that came together. Well, he was my instructor, and he accepted the trade of the automobile for the airplane. I was willing to drive a Model T Ford if I could fly an airplane. That was fine. So when my dad went down there and told them they had done business with a minor and that the- He worked it out with them that they returned the car and I had to return the airplane. But they talked my dad into paying, let's see, I guess it was five dollars an hour for seven hours of time. Thirty-five dollars was the amount that he paid. Or seven dollars an hour for five hours of time or something like that. With that I got my pilot's license. I was very much involved with it and enthusiastic about flying. I really wanted to be an aeronautical engineer. The theory of flight always fascinated me. I used to watch birds and a lot of things. I'd drive along with my hand out the window so it would wave with the wind, with the lift that you could develop by the curvature of your hand, etc. That's why I wanted to go in the air force, the same thing-it was all there. Later on, after I came out of the army, I had another airplane. I bought an Aerocoupe. That was sort of a sensational plane in those days because it was designed basically for people who were not pilots. You would drive it just like you would a car. It had no rudder pedals on it. The elevators and rudders were coordinated, tied together, and it had a wheel instead of a stick. It was a two-passenger plane, side by side, low wing, tri-gear. It was nonretractable, aluminum fuselage, fabric wings. It had 185-, 170-, 165- or 175-horsepower motor in the original ones and then 185 later. It held nine gallons of gas, right up in front of you. I used to fly that from Los Angeles to San Francisco. One time we were coming back from Oakland, a friend of mine, Billy Faulkner and I- I was trying to fly from San Francisco to Los Angeles to Hawthorne Airport, where I kept it, without refueling. You could

only do that by getting favorable winds, gaining altitude, thinning out, really stretching it. It caused me to have a forced landing at Santa Ynez Airport. I was trying to go through Gaviota Pass in a rainstorm to get to Santa Barbara because I just felt I had to have some gas. Usually, after Santa Barbara you would cut across the bay right for Santa Monica and then right on up to Hawthorne and go in, rather than go all the way around the shoreline. I didn't want to get out over that water with no gas, so I was trying to get there. The range there was 4,700 feet. That was just about the service ceiling of my plane, because I had a fellow with us and all our luggage and everything else. It was a tough job getting over that mountain range, so I decided to [go] through the pass. That's where I got caught. I came out of it real fast, set down in Santa Ynez, and that's another story, the people that I met and what happened there. So that was the second plane that I had. I took the wings off of it once and towed it home, backwards, and worked on it at home, changed the interior, had it all polished and cleaned and everything.

Hopkins

The trade you had with the car and the airplane, was that a fair trade price-wise?

Hill

I thought it was.

Hopkins

He must have too.

Hill

I think he did. Well, of course, I didn't pay anything for the automobile, so it was very- [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

What was the name of the gentleman, again, who gave you flying lessons?

Hill

Johnny Hanson.

Hopkins

Johnny Hanson. He was interested in you learning to fly.

Hill

Oh, he was, yes, we were- When I soloed, I soloed in a Porterfield. In those days, they required that you do stalls and spins to get your license, get your private. Johnny weighed close to three hundred pounds, and this was a plane that had tandem seating, one behind the other. He sat up forward and, as the student, I sat aft. And the side of the plane opened up. The top would raise and the bottom would drop, and that's the way you got in and out, on the right side. The controls were on the left side. And there was a stick and rudder pedals. It had about a 185-horsepower engine, maybe 190, I'm not sure. The Porterfield was a relatively new plane on the market, but the specs were good and it had a lot of lifting power, obviously, to have Johnny and me both. I said, "Johnny, when am I going to get my license?" He said, "As soon as you do stalls and spins, I'll let you solo." I said, "Well, when am I going to do that?" He said, "Today." I said, "Well, where are the parachutes? You have to have those." He said, "We won't use any parachutes." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I'm too big. I couldn't get out of the plane anyway!" Well, I was behind him. He had to get out for me to get out, you see. That worried me. We took off. It was kind of windy that day. We were gaining altitude, and you could just feel those wings flex with the weight that he had in it, that we had in it, when it was rough and it hit a pocket. We got up and we started. You would start gaining altitude and then start to back off on your throttle and lift your nose. You could feel the plane climb and not climb and barely climb on up there. Then it would reach a point where it would shudder, just shudder like that. You were going into a stall at that time. Then the nose would drop, and then from then on your life was in the hands of the Almighty. But I enjoyed it. You have to do two and a half turns to start to come out of it. We did those. Then the stalls are just falling leaves, just like that, so you could realize that the plane would recoup itself if you didn't do anything. It's the person that crashes, not the plane. So when we landed, it was kind of windy. We landed on the runway, and he got out of the plane and bent over into the plane. Up under the seats, we had the stabilizer rod, crank, that you could turn that would change the rudder, the elevator rudder, so that the plane would automatically climb or descend. It was a trim tab is what he was doing, actually with it. He started winding that thing down and then he said, "Okay,

take it up and take it around and come back down."Well, what he was doing was being sure I got off the ground, that was his main concern. But he misguessed it. Because with his weight being absent, I would have gone up like a helicopter to begin with, and when he did that I just went like this [gestures] coming off. So I spent the whole time going around the pattern trying to get the trim tab back down. I was frightened, very much so. It was the first time I was alone up there by myself. It was quite windy that day. We wanted the wind to keep me up so I could get off, but the plane was not trimmed properly. Finally, when I finally came around the first time, why I was high. And I slipped the plane. That's just a procedure you normally don't do as a novice. Then when I came out of the slip, I was still too high, and I slipped it the second time. I thought he was going to have a hemorrhage, and I wasn't sure I wouldn't, you know. So when I got down- I came in finally, and he waved me through. Then I just continued to shoot the pattern that afternoon. From then on I just felt very comfortable about flying. Then I had yet to make a cross-country flight, which wasn't cross-country. They gave you three points. I had to fly down to Carpinteria, down near Santa Barbara, and over to Whitman Airfield, somewhere out here between East Los Angeles and that area over there, and Hawthorne. And you had to get your book signed by an instructor over at those fields. So he plotted it out, and then you took off. You had to fly to them and come back in with them. I went to Whitman first, and then I went to Carpinteria. When I got there, the fog was rolling in and I could see it. I came down and jumped out of that plane and ran inside and told them that I was a student and that I was on my cross-country and asked him if he'd sign the book. He was real nice. I think that Johnny had already called all these guys, told them that I was on the way, to look out for me. I jumped in that plane and got out of there as fast as I could because of the fog rolling in and just got out of there in time. When I finished that, I took the exam and got my license. I was sixteen, I think. That was the year that I went to Honolulu, the same year.

Hopkins

I see.

Hill

That car had to be sold because the school would not allow cars. I ran across the brochure of that school, Iolani, the other day.

### **1.7. Tape Number: IV, Side One (July 19, 1984)**

Hopkins

We'd like to begin by a couple of follow-up questions from session three. Can you tell me something about the kind of work you did at Lockheed [Corporation]?

Hill

I went to work at Lockheed. Lockheed was before I went in the army, if I'm not mistaken. And I got a job further, working eventually on the hydropress. I was young, quite young. They would press various forms out of metal, out of aluminum, different stresses. They would use a material called duckbutter, which they would put on, paint it on with a brush, and then it would help bend it, and it would press. There were two men on it, and when I went on, why, the senior was there. The senior was involved with the union and was priming me to join the union, without applying pressure, but constantly reminding me it would be a nice thing. You couldn't smoke, and I didn't smoke in those days. I didn't learn to smoke till I was in the army. But they would chew Copenhagen [chewing tobacco]. One day he got me to put some in my mouth, and I almost fell in the press I was so sick. But before I got that far-I was a de-burrer. When you drill a hole in a piece of soft aluminum or any metal almost, it's possible to have a raised surface on the opposite side if the drilling is too fast. Then you would have to go and remove that surplus metal. It was done with a chisel type of thing, where you just cut it off. That was all you did. Sometimes I think that there was more damage done to the metal in de-burring it than there was in drilling it. The metal came in large aluminum sheets, and the fellows had built a little house out of it right there in the factory. They had a mattress they put in there, and they would take turns in going in and sleeping. Remember, it was cost plus. They didn't make any money if they got it done too fast. I was invited to go in there and go to sleep. Then somebody'd come along and tap you on the shoulder, maybe forty-five minutes, an hour later, so another man could put in some time. This was going on right in the factory. But that was probably the most difficult time I've ever had working for people. I used to kill

time. It was a fascinating factory, an aircraft factory. I think I told you some time ago I always wanted to be an aeronautical engineer, and the opportunity to work in one and to see planes that I had seen pictures of, to see the actual plane, was interesting.

Hopkins

How did you get the job?

Hill

I went down and applied for it. I needed a job. I had come out of the army, no, I hadn't gone in the army. I was in [McDonnell] Douglas [Aircraft Corporation]- when I worked there, I had come out of the army. I needed a job but couldn't get a job down at the mortuary. I needed money to fix my house I was working on. I felt it paid pretty good. Of course, I got the graveyard shift, no pun intended. But it was something to do, an experience.

Hopkins

There's directions to these questions, and it will become obvious in a minute. Now we jump to Douglas. This is post-World War II, and you started working for Douglas. Tell me, how did you get the job at Douglas and what did you do?

Hill

I went down and applied for a job. They were hiring. I was living in Santa Monica at the time. You recall, I told you that when I got of the military, the house that I had was rented out. We couldn't get the people out of the house. It rented out for \$35 a month, the house I was born in, and they were making a \$180 a month by subletting the rooms! So we had to pay \$35 a month for a one-bedroom place in a motel on Lincoln Boulevard in Santa Monica. I had my wife [Athenaise Houston Hill] and one child, Jan [Marie Hill], living in this room much, much smaller than this. The whole business was half the size of this office, which included a living room/bedroom, where the bed came down, and a little kitchenette and then a bathroom. And that was it. You open the door, you're out on the street. There was nothing else. [laughter].

Hopkins

Did you have any problems renting that place at all?

Hill

Well, I don't know that we did. We looked an awful lot. The reason we chose that place was that my wife's mother and father lived down in Santa Monica, and it was accessible to them, and they helped with the babies. When I was out working, they would help us take care of it. They were nice people.

Hopkins

What did you do at Douglas, what kind of work?

Hill

I was just trying to think of what I did when I sat here. I don't know. Douglas did not make as great an impression on me as did Lockheed. I wasn't at Douglas, I don't think, as long as I was at Lockheed. Now you're going to ask me how long was I at Lockheed, and I can't tell you.

Hopkins

Why do you suppose Lockheed made a better impression?

Hill

I think because I enjoyed my work, the hydropress, I enjoyed that. I remember we were making one time just seat buckets, seat pans for the P-38, which were depressed so that they would hold a parachute which was strapped to you at that time. It helped that you understood what you were trying to make. But so many parts you made you never knew what it was going to be used for. That's good enough there.

Hopkins

Were there other blacks working with you at Lockheed?

Hill

There were blacks working there, and some were working in fairly good positions. They were lead men, etc. But I never had personal contact with any particular- It was a job where you went to work, you did your job, and when the payday came, you got your payday, you went home and spent it for groceries or whatever you had, and tried to get a raise if you could. That sort of thing.

Hopkins

As you know, tens and tens of thousands of blacks came to Los Angeles during the forties in order to work in aircraft and military defense and so on.

Apparently, President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, on June 25, 1941, passed Executive Order 8802, which mandated that there should be no racial discrimination in hiring for federal jobs, etc. Did you know of or were you privy to an increase in black employment in the aircraft industry around this time?

Hill

Well, no. Because, you see, in 1941 I was in Hawaii at that time, and I had not been employed in the aircraft industry. By the time I got into the industry, or got a job there, apparently the law had been implemented, the practice had begun, and they were hiring blacks and there was no- They didn't hire blacks, they hired Negroes in those days. You've got to remember, blacks are a recent vintage in this county. I didn't notice that, and I didn't experience any discrimination in it. Because I felt that I was too new there, I wasn't entitled to become president of the company yet, you know.

Hopkins

But you talked about or implied that there was a difference in employment in terms of the kind of work that was done. I mean, certainly there was a hierarchy.

Hill

Oh, yes.

Hopkins

Did you feel that you had a good job at the time, given your experience?

Hill

Well, I felt, first of all, I was lucky to have a job. Secondly, I knew I was a novice in an aircraft factory. I'd never worked in one before and the mere opportunity to be there! I was willing to accept, push a broom even, to get in there to find out what it was like. They gave me a very simple task at the outset. I know, I was a patternmaker at Douglas. That doesn't mean I had the

ability to make patterns for aircraft, but I worked in the department that did make them. You used templates to make patterns.

Hopkins

Well, from talking to you, Mr. Hill, earlier and then today, we know you have an interest in engineering, and also, if I may infer, you had an interest in electronics as well. Or do you have an interest in electronics?

Hill

I have an interest, but I have had no formal training in electronics. I wish I had. Maybe someday I will do what a lot of veterans did after World War II. They went into various schools to become electronic engineers and other things. To seek a job for themselves, to prepare themselves for it. I think that I would like very much to learn a lot of things that I don't know. Someone said that their father told them that they didn't have any, I told you that before, sense until they were thirty-five. And when they got to be thirty-five, they realized that they didn't have any brains! He didn't know what he was supposed to know. So as you get older, I think you thirst for knowledge. But I think that my interests fall more in the mechanical field. As I told you, I have a machine shop at home, and I used to rebuild projectors. I acquired a used lathe that was made in England, a Harrison lathe, and I rebuilt it. I enjoyed that very much. Before I knew it, I had developed a pretty nice little machine shop using three-phase current with a roto phase, which created a false third phase. Now, the equipment in three-phase current is normally very inexpensive because the motors are obsolete. They're not obsolete, you're not able to use them in a residential area. Three-phase power is supplied usually in factories. And with this machine you could generate a false third phase, which meant that your current was really only about 75 percent efficient, because the third phase not being true lowered the ability of the motor to perform. But you could buy very inexpensive equipment that had three-phase motors on them that way. So I was buying used equipment and painted it all gray with a little red trim on it. I enjoyed it. Then I got involved with repairing projectors. I enjoyed taking them completely apart, chroming some of the parts, stripping all the paint off of them, painting them again, gray and chrome, gray and chrome and red, and reassembling them and getting them to run properly. It was a lot of fun.

Hopkins

What kind of projectors are these? Are these the home version or are you talking about-

Hill

I bought a couple from the junkyard down in San Pedro that were, I think, from the navy. They had been discarded, and the man wanted \$600 for two projectors and a whole lot of parts that went with them, wheels and everything. They were just dirty and filthy, were black and needed some parts replaced in them. You know, the navy, the military- With the government, they're not going to waste a lot of time repairing something when they can just replace it. So it was stored on a pallet, piled way up high. The fellow told me about them, and my heart just started pumping in my chest that would I get them in time at that price. I drove down there. It had a fence around this place. As we approached it, you could see the pallets up there, and there the projectors were. So he told me, "You still want us to hold those projectors?" And the man said, "Yes." He said, "Well, this fellow's interested." I didn't even try to get his price down. [laughter] But it took a couple of years to go through that stage. Being a Gemini, you go through things like that. I find that with my son [John Lamar Hill III].

Hopkins

Well, that concludes the follow-up questions. We'd like to move on to some new material today, specifically to discuss the founding and development and growth of Angelus Funeral Home. [tape recorder off] Well, Mr. Hill, can you tell me how Angelus came into existence?

Hill

Angelus Funeral Home came into existence prior to 1925 and was owned by a man by the name of Fred Shaw, I believe. I never met Mr. Shaw, but I am told that he was from one of the islands, spoke with a little dialect. He had acquired the property at Jefferson [Boulevard] and, I think, Austin Street, which later became Thirty-fifth Street, on a "V," Jefferson just before you reach Central Avenue. Unfortunately, business didn't go well for him, and he decided to sell out. L. G. [Louis G.] Robinson, who was involved with real estate at the time, thought it was a good opportunity, and he got several people to join him in acquiring the business. I think it was April 15, it was in April of

1925, that they incorporated. I was about a year and a half, a little over a year and a half old at the time. My dad was one of the investors. He was running on the road at the time. L. G. Robinson was the first president and remained president until I purchased him out later. There were a number of people who had invested small amounts. There was a man by the name of E. G. Hill, from Texas, a very wonderful man, who was treasurer of the company. He was a retired rubbish dealer. So the firm had two Hills in it, but they were not related. Everybody thought that E. G. Hill was my father's father. And Lorenzo Bowdin was one who was one of the investors. He became the secretary of the firm. E. G. Hill was the treasurer. My dad became vice president. The business rocked along for a while until finally in 19-They had a fellow by the name of Fisher that worked for us, W. D. [Wilbur D.] Fisher, who in later years founded the W. D. Fisher and Sons Company and Mortuary [Wilbur D. Fisher and Sons Mortuary Company], in competition with Angelus, after my father died. Fisher was a licensed embalmer, and he was running the business and the embalming. The company had, I believe at that time, only one limousine and they had one hearse. That hearse was an old Nash with disk wheels. They had some problems. I think they used more red ink than they did black in those days. Some of the other investors just decided they wanted to get out, and so they just sold their stock to the company and just retired. After E. G. Hill passed away, prior to that time, the company stock came down to three people, L. G. Robinson, Lorenzo Bowdin, and my father. And when my father died, it came down- It stayed at three people, but the company had quite a change. I would talk with my dad about various people in the company, and he would give me, I think, an honest opinion of them. But I didn't tell you that in 1930, '29, '30, I think it was '29 or '30, my father left the Pullman [Palace Car] Company and became manager at the mortuary. He was vice president and manager, then general manager. The reason for that was that it was decided that the only way they were going to make money was to have somebody who had their money involved, invested there, to be on the premises to see that it was taken care of. L. G. Robinson, who was the superintendent of elevator operators and custodians for the county of Los Angeles, probably felt that he had too good a job to risk it on something that *might* turn into a better job. And Lorenzo Bowdin-part of the family is "Bow-din," the other part's "Boe-din"-was in the post office, and that was a good job in those days. So I don't know what his thinking was, but it was

probably that it was more secure just remaining where he was. My dad thought that it was a step up for him to be able to stay home and be with his family. The type of business he was in-or the type of job he had-wasn't a business. He was involved in giving service, and that's what was needed in the funeral business, I should imagine. Anyway, it wasn't long before he was apparently doing the right thing. They started writing in black ink instead of red ink. Then in nineteen hundred and the early part of the thirties, I think about 1932, '31, they decided to build a new building from the old frame building that existed. They acquired another mortuary down the street that had been in operation and was no longer used and refurbished it somewhat and moved into that building for a year, while they tore down the frame building at 1030 East Jefferson. And a new building was built. They were very fortunate. They got the services of Paul Williams, Paul R. Williams, and it was at a period where they could- Prices were right, labor was right, and materials were certainly superior to what we're getting today. So they spent an enormous amount to build that building, all of \$44,000. The building was a beautiful, beautiful building, the architecture, it was- The timing was good. And Angelus began to thrive as a result of it. My dad remained the managing director, general manager, from that time until he died. When he died, his two remaining partners, Robinson and Bowdin, retired from their jobs and came to run the mortuary.

Hopkins

Did your father receive a salary in addition to his income from profits?

Hill

Well, yes.

Hopkins

Such as they were.

Hill

Yes, such as they were. Yes, he received a salary in those days. When my father died, the partners came out to the house and told my mother, "Hill died on June 22, but to show you our heart's in the right place, we're going to give

you his salary for the full month!" And they also said, "We are also going to give you a discount on his funeral!" [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

Okay, we were talking about the cost of the funeral. Initially, you said that Mr. Bowdin and Mr. Robinson were going to give the funeral at a discount, and in fact-

Hill

Well, I said that they came to the home, the family home on West Thirty-sixth Street, and told my mother that they would first of all give her his salary for the full month, for the remaining eight days in the month, and secondly that they would give her a discount on the funeral. They further told her that if she stayed home, they would give her \$200 a month. And if she came down to the funeral home, she wouldn't have a job.

Hopkins

Can you explain that? I mean, why didn't they want her to come to the funeral home?

Hill

Well, they wanted to run the business themselves. There's no law that says that because you are an investor in a business that you're entitled to a salary, and they had two-thirds of the vote. My mother received \$200 a month from them, and occasionally they wrote bonuses out. They gave dividends each year, and she received a dividend equal to theirs because she had the same amount of stock. But she did not receive *bonuses* equal to theirs. Well, technically a bonus is done for work, so since she didn't do any work, they didn't give her any, [or] very small bonuses. I was in the army, understand, and then my mother was there alone. They came out to the house and asked that- I'm pretty sure I was in the army. They said they wanted to change the structure of the company from a corporation to a partnership, and my mother refused to, on advice of counsel. There was a young attorney from Georgia [David W. Williams], a young man from Georgia who came here and became an attorney. My father helped him when he could, if somebody needed a lawyer or something of that nature. When my father died, he was helpful to

my family, very helpful, and helped my mother when I was away. When they told her that they wanted to change the structure of the company, she asked him his opinion. He advised against it. Had he not done that, I wouldn't have been here and neither would my mother. I have those minutes under that pad there in the writing of Mr. Bowdin's hand. Would you like to see it?

Hopkins

Yes, very much.

Hill

I think I have it there.

### **1.8. Tape Number: V, Side One (July 26, 1984)**

Hopkins

How did your father [John Lamar Hill, Sr.] meet Mr. [Lorenzo] Bowdin?

Hill

I don't know. I don't know because at that time I was a very young fellow, I guess. I don't know whether he met Bowdin or L. G. [Louis G.] Robinson first. My mother [Elizabeth Reid Hill] and dad lived at the Bowdins' house shortly after they came to Los Angeles. This was for a brief period of time. Bowdin was from Georgia and so was L. G. Robinson and so was my dad. L. G. was from Barnesville, Georgia, I believe.

Hopkins

Do you think that your father knew either one of these men in Georgia?

Hill

No, I don't think so.

Hopkins

All right, fine. You talked about the changes, or some changes, that your father made once he assumed management of Angelus. Have you heard of any specific changes that he made that come to mind?

Hill

How did I say-?

Hopkins

In reference to doing the right thing in order to make the company, put it in the black.

Hill

Well, what I said was that it was decided among the shareholders that it was necessary for one of them to be on the premises all the time in order to protect the investment of all of them. L. G. Robinson had probably the most prestigious job at the time; he was in charge of the elevator operators and custodians for the county of Los Angeles. It was quite a powerful job. Because jobs were hard to come by, and to get a county job was a very good thing to have. By the same token, Bowdin was working in the post office, and that was one that was inside, where he was a clerk or something in the post office. It kept you warm and gave you money. That was a good job also.

Hopkins

So then, principally, the fact that your father was on the job, so to speak, full time helped to enhance the operation.

Hill

Well, yes. My father felt that leaving the Pullman service for a job with a company that he had invested his money in was in his best interest. So he was willing to leave the Pullman service and come in there, and he did. And I don't say that any of the other two couldn't have done it and caused the same thing to happen. It was necessary that someone who had an investment there would be present, and that's why.

Hopkins

Okay. Mr. Hill, last time we left off with the discussion of your mother's attorney and talking about the attorney. Can we get his name?

Hill

Well, my mother's attorney was David W. Williams.

Hopkins

Would you care to discuss with us your mother's relationship with Mr. Williams?

Hill

Well, it was really my father's relationship. Mr. Williams was a- Incidentally, I just saw him yesterday at a service here. He was an aggressive young man with a thirst for an education and a desire to accomplish something in life. I can remember as a youngster that he had a Model A Ford and used to go down the street with the Ford with a mop- It was a vehicle that had a rumble seat. You don't know about a rumble seat, but that's where you have a coupe, and then they have a little- You pull up the back seat, and people could sit down. They're a very dangerous thing to ride in. But he had a bucket with a mop sticking out of it, coming out of that rumble seat, because he was mopping floors to get through college. But David Williams was bent upon accomplishing something in life. He became an attorney, he became a lawyer, and my dad, who was in the position, when asked, to recommend him for legal matters the family might need- I don't mean it was something that occurred every day, but whenever he had an opportunity he could recommend David with very good conscience about it, because he was capable. My mother, after my dad died- Of course, my mother knew him too, quite well, and knew his mother. David Williams was like a son to her then, because of looking after her, especially after I was in the army and overseas, and was responsible for my mother not allowing the corporation to be dissolved.

Hopkins

Have you maintained a relationship with Mr. Williams over the years?

Hill

Oh, yes, yes. He's a great friend and someone I consider to be very honest and very loyal.

Hopkins

I'd like to turn now then- We talked last time about your father's role in the development of the company. At some point, of course, you came into play

with the company. Can we discuss your involvement, how you came to be associated with Angelus Funeral Home?

Hill

Well, my father died on June 22 in 1942, and the twenty-first, I believe, was Father's Day. He was sitting on the front porch of our home at 1190 West Thirty-sixth Street, and friends would come up to see him. He wasn't well, he was perspiring very freely. He had said to me at that time that he had decided- He would call me Tramp. He said, "Tramp, I think I'm going to quit. I'm going to get a little orange farm and ranch on it out in Duarte, California." I said I think that's a good idea. He said, "Well, I regret it very much, because I wanted to stay with the company long enough to get you in. I'm afraid if I'm not there, you won't be in." I said, "That's all right. I don't particularly care to be a funeral director anyway." We discussed it, and then some people came up, and the conversation broke off. The next morning, about eleven o'clock, he died while I was in school. When you experience a death like that, you reflect on a lot of things and wonder why you didn't do certain things differently. I often wondered why I didn't go into more detail about the company. I had asked him about his various partners, and he'd given me his opinion of each of them, which was honorable. But he cautioned me that I would have to be careful.

Hopkins

What did he think of the partners? Can you share it with us, please?

Hill

They all got along well. L. G. Robinson and my father got along particularly well. L. G. was the president of the company. He was the president because he was actually the glue that put the package together. The gentleman who previously owned the mortuary wanted to sell it to L. G., and L. G. had to get a group together. He called my father and Lorenzo Bowdin and E. G. Hill, and then they got people to come in with small amounts, mainly for the influence of having people to refer business. If you had a broader base in the forming of the corporation, why, it would mean you'd have access to more business. L. G. was a very strong man, a very funny man, and there were many senses that he- He was a minister. He had this card (I think I told you about this card) that said, "L. G. Robinson, Superintendent of Elevator Operators and Custodians,

County of Los Angeles; Real Estate Broker; Minister; Funeral Director"-all on one card! [laughter] And he was all these things. His claim to fame was that he came to Los Angeles in 1912 with \$12 in his pocket, and he had a job before nightfall, and he never quit working. When he left the firm, I assisted him in paying his taxes. And he had, I believe, 204 pieces of property to pay taxes on. He would sell property on contract. People who couldn't afford to buy a house, and some that when they couldn't afford even to pay for the contract, then he would resell it again. I enjoyed him very much. I was fortunate that I had access to some elders who were willing to talk to me, and I got their advice. L. G. was one of them. Dr. Fred Whiteman was one, and Dr. H. Claude Hudson was one, or is one still.

Hopkins

How did Dr. Whiteman help you? Just by counsel or-?

Hill

By counsel. He was a man that was a friend of my father's. They were very close friends and very loyal, he and his wife, loyal to my mother after my father passed and to me. He was the one that insisted that I go to embalming college and get a license, even though they wouldn't give me a job, because he said that someday the opening will come and you want to be prepared.

Hopkins

Did he think it was in your best interest to go into this business as opposed to something else?

Hill

Well, I think he did in the sense that the family had one-third interest in the business and it was unprotected. My mother was being given \$200 a month if she didn't show up down there. And that was the total income that she had, except for \$581--or something like that--a year dividends on her stock. And that was quite a change from what she'd been accustomed to.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, what was your impression or your feelings about going into the mortuary business? Did you see it as a responsibility or-?

Hill

Well, no. I think what I did was- I first of all didn't want to go into the funeral business. It was not a young man's business, and I was young. But I felt that after my mother was offered the \$200, after they had agreed, came out to the house and told her that they would go- "Hill died on the twenty-second of the month; we're going to give you a salary for the whole month." And after they told her that in order to show that- Well, I don't remember the exact words, but in order to show good faith, that they were going to give her a discount on my father's funeral! And he was the vice president and general manager of the company and the resident stockholder! After that occurred, I was upset. I then decided that I wanted to do something to help my mother and to correct the wrong that had been done in the sense that they charged her for the funeral. They gave her the discount, but they charged her for the funeral and for the vault that the Sissell [Brothers] vault company had sent for my father out of appreciation of his doing business with them.

Hopkins

Did you have any doubts of your ability to run the company? Not to run the company, but to become a member?

Hill

Well, ignorance is bliss. I never thought about that. I had worked for my father here and I was not a total stranger to the funeral business. There were many things I hadn't done. I hadn't ever made arrangements. I was too young. I had never embalmed a remains. But I knew all about the cleaning of the building, and I knew all about the cleaning of the street. I knew all about the caskets, the numbers, etc. And I knew some of my father's friends. There was a war that had just started, and everything was changing. I couldn't understand why my father would die at such a young age. But hindsight's 20/20. I can see very clearly now that it was the time that if I was going to do anything, it had to be done then. When I went into the military, right after that, why, that helped me, helped me greatly, to mature, to season, and to harden a little bit. I was a different person when I came out.

Hopkins

You had studied business, to some degree, at USC [University of Southern California]?

Hill

To some degree, yes.

Hopkins

Right. Did that at all give you confidence?

Hill

No, no, no. That was not a basis for- I think that the basis for that- When I came out of the army and was unable to get a job at the mortuary, I then got a job at [McDonnell] Douglas Aircraft [Corporation] because I had a wife [Athenaise Houston Hill] and young child [Jan Marie Hill]. I remember the first time when I balanced my checkbook and found out I had an overdraft. I just had a very empty feeling. I went out and got a job right away and learned a lot about life. I still wanted to get into the funeral business because I felt that our family should have been in that business. And since my parents only had one child, that had to be me.

Hopkins

You said you didn't conceive of this as being a young man's business. Of course, you're an expert at it now. Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, do you still feel that it's not a young man's business?

Hill

Well, I think you become more proficient as you grow older. I was so young in the business. I remember I had a mustache and a homburg hat-I think at that time I was about twenty-four years old, twenty-three, twenty-four years old- so that I would look older. And I wore my father's suits, cut down in the waist.

Hopkins

Was it unusual for young men to be in business at that time?

Hill

For young men who were in a decision-making position to be in, I think so. I came in contact with a lot of members of the cloth, a lot of clergymen, a lot of

ministers, that didn't have churches, were not pastors, but trying to build them. I learned some of the principles of how to make donations so that they were useful donations. It was after the war; everybody was building. A lot of churches were never built that funds were collected for the building of.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, did you feel that your prospective clients and those that you did business with would find it difficult to deal with a young man? Did you have any feelings of inadequacies, not in your abilities, but in how others would perceive you?

Hill

No, that didn't bother me. First of all, I had been a member of the board of directors, which was a three-man group, which gave me some current information about the business. This was four years after my father had died, so a lot had happened during that period. I had had an opportunity to work with the other two stockholders, and that gave me some insight as to how they operated, what type of people they actually were. They were honorable people. That was valuable. And I had some opinions of how I would do some things different perhaps from the way they did it. I never felt I was at a disadvantage. I felt for one thing that I had an advantage, and that advantage was that I had years ahead of me. They had money, and I was poor, but I had the years to earn it. They had the money, and they didn't have the time to spend it. There was no way in the world that L. G. Robinson was going to spend all of his money. He was a very frugal man with money and a very wise man with the use of money. I was too new. Lorenzo Bowdin- I wasn't privy to his personal handling of funds, although I feel that he was very secure.

Hopkins

You gave a brief character sketch of Mr. Robinson. Can you do the same for Mr. Bowdin?

Hill

Well, Mr. Bowdin was different, as we all are, from Mr. Robinson. Mr. Robinson was a great asset to the business in that he was a minister. He could officiate at funeral services. Since we only had one hearse, sometimes it was

necessary for him to preach longer until the hearse got back from the first funeral. Knowing that he was going to be there all afternoon if necessary, that helped. I'm being facetious about this, but there were a lot of things he could do. He could drive an automobile. He could make arrangements. He had a pretty good knowledge of people, a lot of people had worked for him, that he had married, that he had married the parents of the family he was serving. And he was a man that was active in the local politics, active in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], as was Mr. Bowdin also. Mr. Bowdin was active in the Masonic lodge and active in his church. [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, you prepared yourself then for the business by attending the California-

Hill

-College of Mortuary Science.

Hopkins

Can you tell me about that experience, briefly?

Hill

Yes. It was really an experience. It was located on Figueroa [Street] at Flower [Street], upstairs. It was operated by a gentleman by the name of Melvin Hilgenfeld. It was at a transition point where they were going to relocate out on Marengo [Street], out by the general hospital [Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center], in a new building. Our class was the last class in the old building. We had no props, no training props at all. In anatomy, for instance, the instructor would use his fingers to explain something instead of showing you a chart to do it. It was an interesting year. It was not like it's being taught now. That school has since been put into the city college, Cypress College, and is a part of that now.

Hopkins

So the mortuary school itself is no longer in existence?

Hill

Not the California College of Mortuary Science. It's now the Cypress College of Mortuary Science now.

Hopkins

Was it expensive to go to this school?

Hill

Oh, yes, it was expensive, but I had the GI Bill [of Rights].

Hopkins

How were you treated there? Any problems with discrimination?

Hill

Oh, no. No, no, no. There were a lot of black embalmers because blacks embalmed. Mortuaries were not integrated. Mortuaries aren't integrated yet. You find that Jewish people patronize mainly Jewish mortuaries; blacks, blacks; Hispanics, Spanish; Japanese, Japanese; and now Koreans are going into it. Because of custom, you know, and I don't disagree with that because mortuaries have a religious tone to them. Well, the service itself is that.

Hopkins

So you think if churches become more integrated, then we might see the integration of mortuaries, perhaps?

Hill

I think possibly.

Hopkins

All right. So then after you completed your schooling, then what happened in terms of the company, in terms of your involvement? Following a chronology here.

Hill

Well, when I went to school, I needed to serve my apprenticeship, and so my mother asked the company if I could serve my apprenticeship at Angelus. They hemmed and hawed about it. Dr. Whiteman had invested in another mortuary. These are my father's pallbearers who wanted to buy my mother's

stock in the company. David Williams advised her to keep her stock. So they went out and formed another company called W. D. [Wilbur D.] Fisher and Sons [Mortuary Company]. The mortuary was located at 4700 South Avalon Boulevard. They had about seven or eight doctors in it. I don't have all the names before me at this time. They had one insurance executive and one architect. W. D. Fisher had stock in the company plus promotional stock. [tape recorder off]

Hopkins

Yes, you served your apprenticeship with-

Hill

No. Then when my mother asked if I could serve the apprenticeship at Angelus, they hesitated about it. So here we were. I was going to embalming school, and I needed to serve my apprenticeship, and the company that we owned one-third of wasn't even willing to let me serve my apprenticeship there. So then Dr. Whiteman said that he would arrange for me to serve it at W. D. Fisher and Sons if Angelus wouldn't take me. That put them on the defensive and they took me. Barrington Tate, who is now my vice president and manager, was going to embalming school at the same time I was. We were good friends, and he needed to serve his apprenticeship. He applied to Angelus to serve his apprenticeship, and they took him also. Barry had an uncle [James Tate] that was a funeral director down in San Diego. [tape recorder off] He had an uncle that was in the Tates' funeral home in San Diego, but he worked here. Then the state board [California State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers] changed the regulations, requiring that you put in forty hours a week in order to serve your apprenticeship. Because what they were doing was going down to San Diego on the weekend from school and constituting their apprenticeship at that time. The whole time they were sleeping, everything was applied towards the apprenticeship. The board didn't feel that that was reasonable enough. So he finally was able to work it out so that he could serve his apprenticeship up here.

Hopkins

Why San Diego?

Hill

Well, San Diego was his uncle's place. He could serve his apprenticeship there with him.

Hopkins

Right, but you were saying some people were going down there-

Hill

Well, they had funeral mortuaries, people that had mortuaries down there, good body and a group of the people, that they would all get in the car and ride down together. And go down for the weekend and charge that off to their apprenticeship.

Hopkins

Why was Angelus against you serving your apprenticeship with them?

Hill

Well, I wasn't working at Angelus then. They wouldn't give me a job here.

Hopkins

All right. So you served your apprenticeship at W. D. Fisher?

Hill

No, no. Angelus gave in.

Hopkins

Oh, that's right.

Hill

That was the alternative: to look that bad. So then I served my apprenticeship. When I graduated and took the state board and passed that, then I was given a license. The minutes of the company reflect that at that time I had informed them that I would receive my license shortly.

Hopkins

Then what happened?

Hill

Then they decided to give me a job. But they were prompted by someone on the street also, at the time, about giving me a job. They called me down to the office on December 23 in 1946, I think it was, and offered me a job for \$90 a month working seventeen hours one day and ten hours the next day, alternately. They said that I could begin on the first of January, and I said, no, I would begin that day. So I called home and told my wife that I had gotten a job down at Angelus, and I started off then.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, who prompted Angelus, Mr. Robinson and Mr. Bowdin, to allow you to join the company?

Hill

Well, there were people that- I was born here and our family lived here a long time. The people were aware of what had transpired. The mother of the late Judge David Cunningham spoke to L. G. Robinson about it, and after that conversation, why, I think the door started to open. Along with the fact that my license was forthcoming and everything, I got the job.

Hopkins

I was reading through your scrapbook that you graciously showed me. Mr. Robinson made a statement that many black businesses, talking of the forties, had failed largely because the lack of what he called "young blood." How do you react to this statement?

Hill

I said that L. G. Robinson was a great preacher, and I think his statement was timely. What did Bowdin say?

Hopkins

No comment here. [tape recorder off] Mr. Hill, who do you think owned the most successful mortuary outside of Angelus during the time you became a part of the company, the mid-forties or so?

Hill

Oh, I think Conner-Johnson [Company, Inc.] was larger, or doing more business than we were at the time that I came there, and they were an older

mortuary. There was another mortuary that in fact we are just handling at this time, handling the funeral of Mrs. Roberts, whose husband was A. J. Roberts and Son.

Hopkins

You mean Pearl Roberts died? When?

Hill

Yes. Oh, in the last- Over the weekend, I believe. I was up north at the time. In fact, her daughter's here. I saw her yesterday. The service is tomorrow, I believe. I'll check that out.

Hopkins

What was your relationship with other mortuaries, with your competitors?

Hill

Oh, it was friendly, favorable. We formed a little organization and, I don't know, for some reason I got the idea I wanted to get on the state board. I remember telling the funeral directors that I had an opportunity to be put into the state board. I was quite young, but if I were president of the association, and that was true- James Tate, in San Diego, told them- And he had a chance to get on the state board, too, if he was president of it. He was competing for the presidency. He had been told he *would* be put on the state board. I said, well, I hadn't been told that I would be, but I had the chance. And he became president of the organization.

Hopkins

What was the name of the organization?

Hill

I think it was the California Morticians Association [California Negro Funeral Directors and Morticians Association]. I think that's what it was called.

Hopkins

Who was the membership of this-?

Hill

Black funeral directors, morticians. They used the word morticians instead of funeral directors.

Hopkins

Was James Tate any relation to Barrington Tate?

Hill

His uncle. He was made president, but he didn't get on the state board.

Hopkins

When was this, about?

Hill

Oh, gosh, getting back to when I had that mustache and homburg hat.

Hopkins

So would you say it was before 1950?

Hill

Oh, yes.

Hopkins

How long after you became associated-?

Hill

Well, it was around '50, because I got on the board in '54.

Hopkins

How long did one serve as president of this association?

Hill

A year.

Hopkins

Eventually did you become the president of the association?

Hill

Yes.

Hopkins

Do you recall about what time that was?

Hill

About '53, '54.

### **1.9. Tape Number: VI, Side One (October 1, 1984)**

Hopkins

Okay, Mr. Hill, it's nice to have an opportunity to continue our interview after the interlude with the Olympics and some other things along the way. We'd like to pick up where we left off, essentially. You've accounted for us in fine fashion the evolution of the origins of Angelus Funeral Home. This time I'd like to shift gears and ask you, at the time the funeral home was founded, or at the time you took over Angelus Funeral Home, who did you feel was the most successful black mortuary service in Los Angeles around that time?

Hill

I think Conner and Johnson [Conner-Johnson Company, Inc.].

Hopkins

Can you tell me something about Conner and Johnson's at the time?

Hill

Well, it was an old firm, and it had two principals in it, Charlie [Charles] Conner and S. P. [Simon Peter] Johnson. Charlie Conner passed away prior to my coming into the funeral business, and S. P. Johnson was active only two or three years before I became active in this business with Angelus. I think both firms were in the process of going through a transition of new blood into the organizations. My partners [Louis G. Robinson and Lorenzo Bowdin] were in their seventies, and I was in my early twenties. Conner and Johnson was also about to go through a relocation problem due to the freeway, a ganglia that was projected right over the top of their building. So they had to work out both of those problems.

Hopkins

For the record, can you explain what freeway we're talking about and what area are we talking about?

Hill

Yes, it was the Santa Monica Freeway, I guess it's south, I guess it's called. That area that went over Naomi [Street], Twentieth [Street] and Naomi, Twenty-second [Street] and Naomi, and that area in there, where the ganglia is today. There was a building there, an old mortuary there by the name of Conner and Johnson's building. Also Hamilton Methodist Church was there, right across the street. Hamilton has since relocated on Figueroa [Street] out somewhere around [the] Florence-National area, and Conner-Johnson is now located on Avalon Boulevard around the 4700 block. I sold that building to Conner and Johnson at that time. I owned a substantial part of Conner and Johnson. I was on the board of directors. But I ended up by selling my stock out and making it possible for them to acquire that building.

Hopkins

You anticipated one of my questions down the line. I'd like to ask you if you could share with us, if you wouldn't mind, your involvement with Conner and Johnson. When was it that you became an owner?

Hill

Well, I purchased the stock of S. P. Johnson, little S. P. Johnson, the son of the gentleman that I said was only three years or so active in Conner and Johnson, the time I came on, and then he became ill and passed away. I'm guessing the three years now. In acquiring his stock, he sold his stock to me, and then he worked for us for a while. That left basically three stockholders. There was a fourth who had a minority stock in it. By the time I had acquired this interest in Conner-Johnson, they had already been approached by the state and the state had acquired their property. They were staying on as tenants there, and they were aware of that. They had to move one of those days, and when the move came they didn't have a place to go. It just happened that I happened to have a mortuary that I had acquired and had operated. I had come to the conclusion that I didn't want to operate multiple [branches]. I had four mortuaries, and that was one of them. The fact of the matter is, when I took

over that mortuary at 4700 Avalon Boulevard, Leon Harrison and Mary Ross were working there. They had worked previously with a firm called W. D. [Wilbur D.] Fisher and Sons [Mortuary Company], who started that mortuary. It ended up that I had more stock in W. D. Fisher than any of the three major stockholders, and they had had enough of the funeral business. They were investors. They were doctors and insurance people and architects. Several doctors.

Hopkins

Let me just interrupt you for a minute. This is really fascinating, because all of the funeral homes that you have mentioned, of course, are familiar to anybody who has lived in Los Angeles. Is it possible for you, would it be too taxing, to give me a chronology of your involvement in each of these funeral homes? Of course, you had your stake in Angelus, and then from Angelus, how did you have relationships with these other mortuaries?

Hill

W. D. Fisher and Sons was named after W. D. Fisher, a man who had once worked for Angelus as an embalmer. When my father passed, there were a group of people who asked my mother to sell her shares to them in order that they might go into the funeral business, but she refused to do it on advice of counsel. They then decided to go into the funeral business themselves, because what had happened was that Conner-Johnson was not as active as it had been in the past. The war was on. Most mortuaries were using more and more lady attendants or lady directors, female personnel, I should put it that way. There was a shortage of manpower; there was a shortage of equipment; there was an overabundance of money. I suppose they felt that it was possibly a lucrative venture to go into the funeral business. So they listened to W. D. Fisher, who talked them into going into the mortuary business and naming the firm after him. Again, I think this was a mistake, because quite often when the person dies the business dies eventually as a result of it. W. D. Fisher didn't die for many years after that. In fact, we buried him here. He had a son, W. D. Fisher [Jr.], who was a fine young man, fine man. He was a colonel in the army, as I remember. It was either the army or the air force. I went through embalming college with him, and I was very impressed with him, a very brilliant fellow. He was able to go to embalming college and hardly studied

and he could get A's. His only problem was he didn't even come to class. He could pass the test without it. I'm just the opposite. But he later, after he had come out of the military, became an officer of high rank for the Security Pacific Bank and stayed with them for a number of years and has just recently retired from there. He's in another fine position, a very good man. So W. D. had this fine son to come along with him, but the company over there didn't do that well. When W. D. tired of the company, or whatever happened there, he sold his stock to me. Wilbur D. Fisher, Sr., was an eloquent man to hear speak. I remember he came to me and explained to me that he had "hypothecated" his stock. And when I finally found out what hypothecated meant, I realized it was in hock, and that he really didn't have it to sell, but he was able to work it so that it could be purchased. It was through that- And much of his stock was promotion stock. So I ended up with more shares in that company than any of three major stockholders had.

Hopkins

When was this about? Roughly the time period?

Hill

Well, it was after I had gotten out of the army. Afterward, I became active in the mortuary. I would say it was about 1948, '49, something like that.

Hopkins

So would you say at that time, around '48, '49, the three largest funeral homes, mortuary services, were Conner-Johnson, Angelus, and W. D. Fisher?

Hill

I would think so. Then W. D. Fisher reorganized under the name of the Avalon Mortuary when Fisher left. Leon Harrison had worked for W. D. Fisher, was a protégé of W. D. Fisher's-and Mary Ross also-and then when I took over the operation there, I inherited Leon Harrison to run it. I had an option on another mortuary out on Firestone [Boulevard]. It was Bernie Randolph's mortuary. He, Bernie Randolph, contracted a terminal illness, and he was not able to speak well even, his throat. I had an option to purchase his mortuary, but having purchased Avalon Mortuary, the business, and having taken a lease with option to buy on the property, and having gotten involved also, if I'm not

mistaken, with 718 East Anaheim in Long Beach, having built one there- That may have been a little bit later than that. No, I think I had gotten into that. And then also 103d [Street] and Success [Avenue], which was a former Hispanic mortuary. I had four at that time. Then, I felt that the Randolph mortuary was not that important, and not only that, but the man was dying. Although my option ran for some time, I felt the decent thing to do was to let him know I wasn't going to take it. When I didn't take it, then Leon Harrison did take it. That's where Harrison's first main mortuary is today [Harrison-Ross Funeral Homes, Inc.]. They moved out to Compton, out there, and operated out of there, and it was a virgin field for them, because there wasn't too much competition in that area. But Leon worked for me for about a week, two weeks, and then he left.

Hopkins

You mentioned the name, of course, S. P. Johnson, of Conner and Johnson. Was he also associated with Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Company]?

Hill

At one time I think he was. Now, I'm not so sure that he- I think he was. But H. H. Tolls was a doctor with Golden State. I think S. P. may have at one time sat on the board. He was also superintendent of the Sunday school at Second Baptist Church, and he was a person to be reckoned with in the funeral business. He was a hod carrier, a plasterer, and he had a lot of influence among the people who were in the plastering business. He used to live over, I think, on Twenty-eighth Street, East Twenty-eighth between Stanford [Avenue] and San Pedro [Street]. And he became elderly and ill and passed away.

Hopkins

What do you suppose was the main problem with Conner and Johnson? I mean, you come along and Angelus is successful. What was wrong with Conner-Johnson?

Hill

Well, I don't think there was anything wrong with Conner-Johnson that hasn't happened to many, many mortuaries, and that is their time just comes. Unless

you're in a position to perpetuate a mortuary, unless you bring up new stock- You can't come up to intersection B and proceed unless you have gas in your vehicle. And that's what happened to them, and it's happened to a lot of mortuaries. So many mortuaries bear the name of a person who's not living and who is not related to the present owner. Because what they're trying to do is purchase a doing company, organization. And the principal will not bear the same name as the name of the firm. Then that person has to establish themselves. Whereas, you take a company like Pierce Brothers [Mortuaries] or Forest Lawn [Memorial-Parks and Mortuaries], the name Pierce Brothers alone denotes a mortuary to the people of Los Angeles. And it's been sold several times. Well, it's been sold twice, and it's a fine mortuary. Forest Lawn is a fine organization. They are basically a cemetery, basically in the real estate business, but the people that are involved in that organization are people of principle. It's a pleasure to have them in an industry that I'm in.

Hopkins

I have a question about Pierce Brothers and Forest Lawn down the road a piece, but for now I wanted to ask if your relationship with the larger black mortuary services is different today than it was in the forties or so? To rephrase the question, during the forties there were a number of mortuaries that you've already talked about, and there must have been a lot of competition among them. Was it cutthroat competition? Amiable competition?

Hill

Well, I think that there were fewer mortuaries then than there are now, by far. Probably one-fourth as many mortuaries as there are now. I think at one time there were about five mortuaries, but then the population was much smaller. Right after World War II, of course, the population exploded. During World War II, we had a great influx of people coming in to work. Shipyards and aircraft factories, etc. I think that sometimes when people go into any business and they have passed the honeymoon period and they have to get down to cold facts, they realize that their projections were not quite accurate, that they're falling short of their goal, and their funds begin to become short. There may be a tendency to take the shorter route to a given point. There have been mortuaries that have taken the shorter path. Many of them aren't in business

today. It depends quite a bit on the number of people that are involved in the mortuary. Each has invested in there to get a return, and a return out of a mortuary starting from scratch is an unknown factor. First of all, you don't know what other competition may appear on the horizon after you acquire the mortuary. You can see those who were already in business. You're now becoming additional competition to them. You have hopes and projections and a budget to operate on and everything, but it just doesn't quite materialize after you have the opening and a few notices in the paper and a little attention. You can't put a sale on in the funeral business like you can at the May Company. All of your advertising has to be basically institution advertising, advertise the name and then try to establish goodwill. But your business is based upon the death rate, the death rate in your community or to your particular clientele, whatever that might be, Catholic, Jewish, Masonic, black, Chinese, whatever it is. And you're restricted to that. So when the funds get tight, probably businesses-and I say businesses meaning all businesses-begin to figure out how they can get more business some way. It doesn't have to be dishonest, but a different path. Should I become better familiar with the clergy of the churches and, if so, what denominations? How should I advertise to do a good job? Should I become active in the Masons or the Elks or the Rotary or whatever it is? What will I get from that? But whatever it's going to be, you have no control over the amount of business available. That's done by the Almighty. The death rate fluctuates, but your bills remain static. So you have to have a sufficient reserve in order to sustain the lean periods, keep your bills up, keep your credit up. If you have a lot of investors in your business, then you chance not doing as well. Now, you have one good thing with the investors, that they are out pulling for you too, and all their relatives are out pulling for you. But you don't make money by burying your relatives. A person, a husband and wife, who goes into the funeral business in a mom-and-pop operation, where they purchase an established business in a small town or in a small community and they live on the premises and they have a few employees, maybe two, three, four, five maximum, and they operate, they could make money. Because they have their lodging, they spend most of their time working so they can't spend very much, and they work towards paying off their obligation till one day they emerge to where they are debt free and they have, in the meantime, built up some clientele. It's a way of life. It's not a glamorous life at all, and you have to like it. But at first if you start at

the top, you've only got one way to go, and you know which way that is. If you start at the bottom, you've only got one way to go. Right?

Hopkins

Right.

Hill

If you start in the middle, you've got two ways to go, you take your choice.

Hopkins

Well, on that note, what factors over the last thirty or forty years have made Angelus successful? What kinds of things have you done?

Hill

I think that [the key was] service to the public. I think, in my own case, being a sole owner allowed me to put more money back into my operation, to give the public more than I would have been able to have given had I had a number of investors, because I would have had to be paying them some dividend on their investment. You have to learn to live off what you earn, be relatively frugal about it, and be willing to bank your income into your business to get more business to make more, to go around in a circle. If you're willing to do that and you don't have any other obligation, any other stockholders breathing down your neck, you can make it. But is that really worth it? Because the funeral business isn't really that good a business today.

Hopkins

To start in?

Hill

A very poor business to start in. The overhead is too high, the tax structure in the funeral business is not conducive to making a great profit, net profit, after taxes. There's no capital gains involved. The more you make, the more you pay. The more you make, the more it costs. And unless you have a sizable case count and a low overhead, you're working for nothing.

Hopkins

So you would say it was a more profitable business to get in maybe forty years ago in the thirties?

Hill

Yes. The thirties were the years of- The growth pattern of the mortuary business was established then. Forest Lawn came into existence during those years. Dr. Hubert L. Eaton, who was one of the founders of Forest Lawn, had a lot of foresight. I'm told that he had gone to England and had taken some of the architecture from there and brought it over to Glendale and started developing that area based along English architecture and grounds and everything. It took a lot of years. He's passed on now. His relatives own the facility. They're patient people, and they do a fine job. The same is true with Rose Hills [Memorial Park]. Rose Hills was owned by a fellow by the name of John D. Gregg, whose father was owner of that cemetery before it was the way it is. It was an Indian burial ground. John Gregg was a hydraulic engineer, and he trained great forces of water on the side of the hill and was able to produce 1,400 graves to the acre. I think it's 25,000-I may be off now-25,000 acres in cemetery potential. There's the largest cemetery in the world in one piece. On the other hand, Forest Lawn has diversified its cemeteries, and there's much to be said for that too.

Hopkins

Do you own or have you owned cemeteries?

Hill

No. I once managed Lincoln cemetery many, many, many years ago, out in the Compton area.

Hopkins

Well, let me ask you, along that line, it seems to me one of the reasons that insurance companies and funeral homes have been successful among blacks is, in part, because of the difficulty blacks had in acquiring those services from the majority group. I've always understood that in many cases that blacks haven't been welcomed at cemeteries years ago. Would that not have been a lucrative business to have gone into at the time?

Hill

Well, there was a fellow by the name of Fred Roberts who was, to my knowledge, the first black assemblyman in the state of California and who got involved with a cemetery, Paradise [Memorial Park], which was a nonendowment-care cemetery. I think it was in 1939 that the law was passed that required cemeteries to set aside X amount of dollars per square foot to be placed in a fund, and the yield from that fund was to be used to maintain the cemetery, to keep it in a reasonably good condition, acceptable condition. Those cemeteries that were in existence prior to that time, particularly the old cemeteries, had quite a burden because they had a lot of property that had been sold long before that and they were just keeping it out of their fund. If they grew any, the new property would yield some endowment-care income to help, but then they still had to maintain the old, and that became a problem. I think that Paradise has now become an endowment-care cemetery. I think it's voluntary on their part. But that was the first cemetery owned by a black.

Hopkins

Who owns Paradise now?

Hill

Mrs. [Alma] Fraction, a very nice person, very nice lady. She and her husband [Herman M. Fraction] owned it. I don't know who else was involved.

Hopkins

Okay. Mr. Hill, we talked a bit about the success of Angelus. It sounded to me, in sum, that it was good management on your part that helped to make it successful.

Hill

Well, it was a lot of luck. Someone once told me, a funeral director, "The harder you work, the luckier you get." And that all seems logical. It was just like if you work long hours, you acquire more money. For two reasons. One is you earn more money, and, secondly, you don't have time to spend it.

Hopkins

Okay. Are there any other reasons that you can think of for the success, maybe some examples? If someone is listening to this tape and they're

wondering, "How was Mr. Hill so successful at Angelus Funeral Home?" He made the right moves, had some luck, managed the place well, but are there some concrete turning points that you can think about over the last forty years that you've done that seem to have really helped you?

Hill

Well, I would have to say, unquestionably, I did not do it by myself. I was fortunate to have some very fine, loyal people working with me. I can't say they were employees; I'd say they're coworkers. Because this is a corporation, and I am an employee of the corporation myself. The fact that I own the stock doesn't mean that I get any money, except the dividend. And you don't get that unless it makes profit. But being an employee of this company, I had people and still have people that have been with me for many, many years. One of the men who's on the premises here, I don't know how long he's been here. He came to work, as I can understand it, about 1938. How many years would that be?

Hopkins

Well, let's see, we have, what are we now? That would be, what, forty-seven, forty-six years.

Hill

That's about right. He's as fine a man as you'd ever want to meet.

Hopkins

What's his name?

Hill

His name is Ralph Turner, and he was treasurer of the company. He didn't own a dime in it, but he became the treasurer. Unfortunately, Ralph fell ill to a heart attack and had to quit work. We kept him on just the same, and he's now back at work, whatever time he feels he's able to put in. A very fine man. Gertrude Orticke is a person that has worked for me for about thirty-five years. She has never had a job with anybody else. Totally dedicated, absolutely dedicated. She is now the treasurer of the company. And Barrington Tate is a person that is an unusual individual. He's a man that is a company man and that gives his best. He's a man that I have known, well, we went to

embalming college together. And I introduced him to his wife. I sometimes kid him and say that he's never forgiven me for it. His wife [Nita Hippard Tate] is a lovely person. We went from kindergarten to college together. She always sat right in front of me in school because her name was Hippard and mine was Hill. The beginning of every semester they called the roll, and you had to give either your telephone number or your address out. I heard it so many times, I memorized both her telephone number and-But we were privileged to have introduced Barry to Nita. They have two children, and I am godfather of his son. I just have known them a long time. I've known his family in Washington, a fine family, nice people, his mother and father. I think his mother was like an angel, she was very nice. His father was all man. Those relationships are valuable. You know, it's a way of life for us here. I'm sure that we could all be doing something else that we'd rather do maybe, but since we've done it this long, why, it's no time to quit now.

Hopkins

Where do you see Angelus going from here?

Hill

Well, we have some plans which we're not ready to talk about. We're giving some things some thought.

Hopkins

On a different note, is it true that Forest Lawn and Pierce Brothers sought to break up Angelus Funeral Home at one point?

Hill

Not to my knowledge.

Hopkins

I don't know. I saw a newspaper clipping where it had something to do with your appointment to the state insurance commission and that-

Hill

No, that was the [California] State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, wasn't it?

Hopkins

Okay. Yes. The understanding, or at least the understanding I gained from the paper, was that there were some in these two mortuary businesses that sought to keep you out.

Hill

Well, I've never seen that. I replaced a man from Forest Lawn who had served, and that happens. You have to understand that when a governor comes into office, he has his own team that he'd like to put aboard. It's all politics. Let's not kid ourselves. I don't think that being a member of the State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers makes a person a genius. I was just lucky again in one of those positions, and I was lucky to have served several governors.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, we want to talk about your relationship in politics, perhaps, in our next section. But to end this discussion on Angelus, you've already alluded to this to some extent, but for continuity on the tape, can you tell me or talk about your clientele in general? Has it changed over the years, the kinds of people that patronize your business?

Hill

Well, we're grateful for our clientele. I think that everything changes, nothing stays the same. But, substantially, our clientele is pretty much what it was thirty years ago, forty years ago, but thirty years certainly. We've been privileged to serve people from all walks of life. We have often made the statement in print that no family would be turned away for lack of funds. Now, there's a difference from some people who have funds and choose not to use them. That's different. That's their prerogative, and they're certainly entitled to practice what they feel. That's different. But if a family has no funds, and they come to Angelus, and we can establish that they have none, this is where a priest or someone has to- I say a priest because the Catholic church calls on us rather frequently to provide the services for someone. We feel that that has done a lot of the legwork for us as to ascertaining whether or not this is a qualified person for that type of service. And it's always come back to us. The difference between the funeral director and the cemeterian is that the funeral

director must be a pillar of the community, and few people know who the owner of the cemetery is. Not to say that they aren't good people, but they are privileged to enjoy their privacy and they don't have to be a resident of the area. It could be a corporation, a large corporation, whatever. That is happening now in the funeral business, too, here. There are conglomerates who are involved in acquiring many mortuaries under different names now. It's not like Pierce Brothers, where you had twenty or twenty-two branches under the same name. There are firms that are acquiring and successfully operating various mortuaries in different areas in California and across the country.

#### **1.10. Tape Number: VI, Side Two (October 1, 1984)**

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, you, of course, moved your business to Crenshaw Boulevard following when it was on the east side of town. Why did you move to Crenshaw?

Hill

Well, first of all, I was born here. That was quite an advantage to have witnessed the migration of black people-colored people, in those days-from basically the east side- I say basically- There were always, as long as I can remember, blacks living on the west side of town. And the street was- This area was divided by Main Street. Anything east of Main was considered east side, and anything west was the west side, of course. We noticed that our case count was beginning to sag, because we had a lot of loyal people living in the Baldwin Hills, coming to the east side to be buried. And that's about the only time they came over there. It was time for us to locate a facility on the west side of town. But it had to be- A lot of thought had to be given to its location. We were lucky again. We had a very fine architect, Mr. Paul Williams, Paul R. Williams. He agreed to do it for us, do this building.

Hopkins

Oh, he did this building?

Hill

Yes. This was a Safeway market building, and it was vacant. I saw it one day when I was out visiting my mother right down Thirty-ninth Street here. I drove westward to Crenshaw, and then I would go north, up to where I lived. I saw this, and I just thought, "What a wonderful place for a mortuary." I started to work on it, and I found that nobody would talk to me about it. They were not interested in selling it to me. So then I got ahold of a friend of mine, Goodwin [J.] Knight, who I asked, "Would you be willing to-?" I asked if he knew anybody at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. He said, yes, he knew the president. And he said, "Why?" I said, "Because they own a piece of property on Thirty-ninth and Crenshaw that's for sale, and I'd like to buy it, but the brokers won't talk to me." So I asked him, where was he? He said, "He's in New York." And I said, "Would you be willing to intercede for me to purchase that property?" He said, "Well, if you will supply my transportation and lodging for me and for my wife, then I will be glad to go and talk to him." And he did. After three days of conference back there- He called me every day about it. The third day he called and he said, "Well, champ, we've got it." They instructed the W. Ross Campbell Company here in Los Angeles to sell the property to me. The moment we did that, the price doubled, the value doubled on the property, because everybody- That's the way with most things. Until somebody buys something, it has little value, then everybody thinks it's worth a lot of money. But it started us on this new location. And we ran into problems with the people in the area who opposed it. That's normal, but this was a very tenacious opposition that came upon us. We had about three hundred people and eight lawyers opposing us, and we spent three years and four months in the courts.

Hopkins

Before you could-

Hill

Before we finally won. When we finished it, many of those who were in opposition to the mortuary were present at the opening. One of the gentlemen who is behind me here, an Armenian gentleman, sent me some roses for the opening. And he had opposed it. He had a right to, because he was abutting the property. But the true fact was, it's a very quiet place, normally. And it being a market, they had over a thousand cars a day coming

and going at random. A lot of people. Whereas with a mortuary, you have a cortege that goes and comes. And many of them don't even have corteges. They just have services at churches and dismissals here and shippers and that sort of thing.

Hopkins

So part of the opposition was because of fear of loss of business. Were there other reasons for opposition to your-?

Hill

No, this opposition came from the residents here feeling that we would devalue their property. But we won the Los Angeles Beautiful Award in 1970, I think. Nineteen seventy, I believe it was. And the people said- When they built this, they had big barriers all around so you couldn't see it. The morning that they knocked down the barriers and all of this marble started to glitter in the sunlight, and then when the gold went up and glittered in the sunlight, they said, "Why didn't you tell us it was going to be like that?" And we said, "We tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. We tried to show you, but you wouldn't look." After having won the war, finally we had to try to win the peace. And I think we certainly have coexisted with the people around here. They're nice people. We've never solicited any business from the Oriental sector out of respect for them. If they want to come, they are welcome. But we are not here to try to take their business from someone else. We are just blessed with a clientele of our own-people that we already had before we got here.

Hopkins

Were any of the merchants in this area concerned about your clients? That is, that maybe there would be too many people tramping in and out?

Hill

No. No, nothing like that.

Hopkins

What about May Company and, I think, at that time the Broadway was here and stores. What were their reactions to you?

Hill

Well, May Company was an organization that did not oppose us. I had a friend who was a neighbor, in fact, who had worked for the May family for many years. He spoke to them about it, and they took I would say a neutral position. Not only that, but I think they went out of their way to be sure that I didn't have any opposition from anybody on their staff. I cannot say anything bad about the May Company because they-

Hopkins

Well, who were the most influential opposers to you?

Hill

The local merchants and the chamber of commerce, the Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce, were the biggest opposition. You must understand, the Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce then was not this chamber of commerce we have now. And the real estate brokers in the area.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, do you anticipate another move?

Hill

We're already past that point. I said we're contemplating something.

Hopkins

Okay. Yeah, I wasn't sure if that was one you were at liberty to speak about at this time. Well, very good. We certainly appreciate your being as candid as you've been with us to this point.

### **1.11. Tape Number: VII, Side One (February 14, 1985)**

Hopkins

I'm curious about an invention that you had, regarding some correspondence I saw of yours, dated March 2, 1971. You sent a letter to a Mr. Robert Wells, who's the defense commissioner for the Federal Communications Commission [FCC] in Washington, D.C. In that letter you described a new two-tone attention-signal system for civil alert. Can you give me some background on

that system? First of all, can you explain to me what a two-tone attention signal is?

Hill

Well, I think I told you before that I'm a Gemini. When I had the radio station, we were required to periodically respond to emergency broadcast alerts, and they never worked very well. Until they gave a surprise EBS [emergency broadcast system] test, and it was a fiasco. It was evident then that something had to be done to use the broadcast facilities of the country to alert the population as to the fact that we did have an emergency and you make the best use of it for the safety of the citizens. The government addressed itself to this, and very little was said out in public about it. What had occurred, I found that the reaction of the engineer on duty on that date, which I believe was a Sunday, was the same as at other stations. All were concerned that it was another false alarm, and they all waited to see and listen to see what other stations were doing before they made a decision as to what they were going to do. It required a decision on the part of the engineer as to whether or not he was going to follow the prepared instructions, which included removing an envelope on the wall of the studio marked "Emergency Broadcast Information" or words to that effect, opening the envelope, and following the code words and instructions as to what to do. And this is like Pearl Harbor. It was on a lazy Sunday morning, as I recall, and he was reluctant to follow what was set forth in the plan, as were most of the people in the broadcast business. Well, I got to thinking about it. I had a couple of engineers at that time in the station. One of them was a fellow by the name of Earl Hoskinson, who was primarily responsible for the building of KJLH as to the electronic equipment, assembling it and tuning it. He kept us on the air. A very nice fellow, we're still good friends, a very knowledgeable man. Another fellow there was Herb Gleed, who was an enthusiast in ham radio and was at the time, I believe, or had been, an employee at TRW [Inc.] in the electronics division of some kind and was temporarily on staff with us there to assist us in the move for the test from the Dominguez Hills to the Baldwin Hills, to gain approval from the Federal Communications to allow us to move our transmitter to the Baldwin Hills, which would better improve our signal to the black community. So we were discussing one evening about that EBS and what could be done, and after the discussion, why, we came up with a plan that

would probably work. I became involved in it because as a youngster I was a model airplane enthusiast. They had what they called CW's [carrier waves], very much like dot-dash-dot, the thing that you get today. Any interruption in the signal, long or short, goes a dot or a dash, you see. And any interference by accident that you got could be a dot or a dash; it didn't matter. These model airplanes were flown by these early receivers and transmitters. Their transmitters were extremely large in size, and the receivers were quite large. Most of them were suspended originally on rubber bands to keep- There were tubes in them and everything. So it was rather crude in the old days, and there were crashes of your planes because of spurious signals coming in that were interpreted as a signal that was transmitted by your transmitter but they were all over. The planes would crash, until finally they came out with a carrier-type transmission and a tone coming over the carrier. Later they came out with several tones. Each tone would cause a different impulse to be energized in, and it would cause something to happen. Elevator, rudder, brakes, throttle control, all offer different tones that were coming through. Originally, the tones were interpreted by reeds. When the harmonics hit the coils, they would cause the reeds to vibrate until they finally touched a little thing and it caused an electrical connection to occur. Later on, they had filters and things that caused it, but the concept there, the first one, was one tone only, however. But the tone had to come over a carrier, so the chance of getting that particular tone over a carrier that was coming from a spurious source was just about nil. So you had pretty good safety, right? Okay. The objective in this plan for a new EBS system was to prevent any spurious signals from coming in and setting off an alert that was a false alarm because of these spurious signals. Being a Republican and being a Gemini, I felt that if one tone was good, then two tones would be better. So the Gemini said, a two-tone system for it. That was the reason for the basic design of the two-tone EBS system that I presented to Commissioner Wells there. Earl Hoskinson drew a sketch of the plan for it, which is the one you have a copy of here, and I sent it forth to him. The Federal Communication resource was slow to react, although Commissioner Wells did reply to this rather hastily. I think he said in his letter something to the effect that he was going to present it at an upcoming, I believe-that's been years-hearing on this. It says here, "Thank you for your telephone conversation and also the time and trouble you took to put your thoughts in writing. I'll see that the proper people look at them and give them

every consideration. Your interest is appreciated. Cordially, Bob Wells."Well, he was the commissioner of broadcast, as you said, commissioner of EBS test. Nothing transpired after that for a long time, and then there was a series of things that transpired. One of the things that transpired was that the commission responded, saying, "Mr. Hill could not have designed the EBS system because the EBS system was presented to us on such and such a date." That date was well after this letter, which they didn't know I had, the document. In the letter, in the last paragraph-and this is the thing-at the time I thought of it, I said, "They're not going to like this," but I thought that-

Hopkins

I do remember seeing it myself.

Hill

It was right here.

Hopkins

Oh. Okay.

Hill

I said, "The proposed plan is offered as a replacement for our present system, which is obviously inadequate. It is not for sale but tendered for the benefit of our great country." That meant I wasn't asking for any money. There was a major company that had, I was told, received a grant to develop a new EBS system, and it had been some time since they had received this grant, this authorization, and nothing had been reported, to the public at least. There was time between this date and the date that that EBS system was published. And it was very, very coincidental that the plan that they published at that time was extremely similar to the one that I had proposed. Not being an electrical engineer, I was not as sophisticated in my offering as they. For instance, once again believing in twos as a Gemini, I proposed that the signal be transmitted through two different sources at the same time, one, an AM frequency and, two, an FM frequency, meaning that it would require a special receiver to be made that was receiving AM and FM at the same time. But the origination of the signal sources were not necessarily- In my mind, I had envisioned one station similar to our KFI that we used to have years ago. That

was a clear-channel station, an AM signal. The other would be transmitted from a major FM station in some other part of the country. But there are clear-channel stations that cover various regions, you see. When the radio station received a transmission simultaneously composed of AM and FM signals and it went through that receiver, unlocking the gates-and the tones were correct, the tones were correct on the carrier-then we had reduced greatly, tremendously, the chance of there being a false signal sent. Once again, my crude approach to it was that this receiver would have a buzzer and a light on it. That purpose was to get the attention of the operator immediately. The light would be flashing and the buzzer would be going off. What it was really saying, and what it was understood that it would be saying, was, "This is not a mistake. You don't have to do anything. Just sit back, we're going to take over your station." Then the federal government or the EBS department could, from an area remote from here, like Colorado or someplace like that, in a matter of ten seconds take over every radio and television station in the United States and have the president speaking over it. Because what they would do is to transmit another signal, which would cause the switching device in the studios to switch from the studio program to the network, the EBS network program, which would bring their voice right in through your transmitter. If your station is to be turned off the air, it would turn your station off. So you didn't have anything to do as an operator. You didn't have to worry. You didn't have to fail not to act. The only thing you had to be assured of was that something was going to happen. You don't worry about it. You do nothing. And that was the whole idea in it. Now, that's very crude compared to what they were able to do. There are frequencies that they had access to that certainly I didn't. That's why in the letter I'd said that it was crude and that if they wanted any further explanation we'd be glad to come and discuss it with them. It wasn't for us to build. It was just the idea that we were presenting to them, or I was presenting to them. In fact, at the time I did present it, why, I'd hadn't said anything to Earl Hoskinson or Herb Gleed about it. In fact, it hadn't been formulated that far at that discussion that we'd had that time. But as I thought about it, I began to put more into it. Perhaps if I'd discussed it more with either Herb Gleed or Earl Hoskinson, they could have suggested some frequencies that might be available other than using AM and FM to do it. But the principle is basically the same.

Hopkins

So we can see the intrinsic value of that system. Did they ever acknowledge that you had input into this at all?

Hill

There was some acknowledgement someplace where they said, "We agree that he had-" Something on it, I don't know what that was.

Hopkins

I remember seeing that actually in the letter.

Hill

Was it there? The person who contacted the Federal Communications Commission about it pressed it. But in order to resolve it, they said that Mr. Hill is not seeking-Well, I'll tell you what I think happened on that. I believe that one of the congressmen contacted the Federal Communications Commission and told them that he understood that I had proposed this plan for the EBS system and that he was going to offer it into Congress as a commendation to him. That's when they first started to file, because they had not filed anything at that time, any offering at all. They had spent money for it, and here's somebody going to give it to them for nothing. You understand? They said- Why, I don't know what they said to them, but real fast a major electronics firm got busy and came up with something which was almost exactly the same thing. Now, I'm not psychic, and I had no contact with them, and I read nothing, if anything was written, and I received no funds for it. So it was just a gift. At that time, I had enjoyed working with KJLH. Again, not having an electronics background, why, it was more mechanical than electrical with me, even many things. But we enjoyed working on the booster. I remember when the booster was being made, I had a conversation with an engineer in Washington who was the engineer for KJLH, and he had suggested that we might try a corner reflector, which we would get the maximum gain out of. I contacted a company, and they gave me a price of about \$3,000 for a corner reflector antenna. I got the dimensions of it, and then I went down to the Washington [Boulevard] hardware store down there, which was a war surplus store really. For a little less than \$50, I made the antenna. It was used up there for almost four years. It looked like a couple of bed backs at right angles up there.

Hopkins

But it worked?

Hill

Yes, it worked. It would work very much, and once in a while it would go off. The rain or something would hit the wiring. We were using an exciter as the transmitter for the booster. The federal government had stated that they would allow translators or boosters to be used, and that they could be no stronger than ten watts. They also required that the transmitters for the boosters had to be approved by the Federal Communications Commission. And yet they had never approved a transmitter for it. So how were you going to do it? So we asked them to allow us to try to develop a booster. Ours was number two. Number one was one up in Walnut Creek, which they had fired up, but they went on to a total move of their transmitter and didn't have to go through that. So that left ours to be the only one. We stayed up longer than anybody they had, of course, and it was the first successful booster for any prolonged period of time. But the working on that was a delight. It was the fun of the station. We were losing money like everything, but it was a lot of fun working with those things. And then when we proposed the new EBS system, that was interesting, and it was good. It was because, at that time, I was already in a hearing in Washington, D.C., when there was opposition to KJLH moving its transmitter into the Baldwin Hills, that opposition coming from stations adjacent to us.

Hopkins

For example?

Hill

KIIS was opposing us. It's on the record. And KIIS dropped out of the hearing. When the hearing started-I remember rather well that morning-the hearing officer was a lady. I've forgotten her name. She was a nice person. They introduced each person present. I had two attorneys there, a trial attorney and my regular attorney, Bob [Robert] Cahill. There was a man there, an attorney from KIIS, or a couple of attorneys from KIIS. There was another fellow, a very sober man, who was introduced as an observer from the Federal Communications Commission. During the course of that day, I believe it was

that day, it may have been the second day or so, my attorney attempted to offer as evidence twenty-six thousand petitions signed by the people of this community. These petitions were promoted mainly by the churches, and twenty-six thousand petitions were developed within less than a week. They were in a black case that I had [which] a slide projector normally was fitting in, and I took the projector out and put those in and took it to Washington. When he placed that up on the table before him and said that he had here these twenty-six thousand petitions, the representative from the Federal Communications Commission, who was an observer, said, "I am going to object." I immediately wondered, "How can he object? He's just an observer." But the hearing officer, who was a member of the Federal Communications Commission, allowed the objection and would not accept the petitions as evidence. I guess that was an indication there that it was going to be a difficult fight. But after KIIS withdrew from the case and walked out, you would think that that was the end of the case. There was no opposition, right? No. Then the representative from the Federal Communications Commission, who had been sitting in that court all that time without saying anything, who was sitting supposedly as an observer but had objected to something and it had been upheld, became the aggressor. Here the Federal Communications Commission itself was opposing my being up there. They had issued the permits for us to test. They issued those for the first test, which was the booster, which had been issued. We had opposition from KUSC, the radio station. Reverend [Thomas] Kilgore, [Jr.], Dr. Kilgore of the Second Baptist Church, was on the staff of USC, reportable only to the president. He was head of community affairs. He brought to the attention of the president that KJLH was a black station, was the first black station west of Kansas City, and that it was attempting to test something, to learn something, and that USC, the University of Southern California, was opposing their chance to learn something by saying that we were interfering with them. We weren't interfering with them. We had been on the air for almost four years, and they hadn't said a word. Dr. Kilgore was responsible for the president of USC to cause a meeting to be held, and after, as a result of that meeting, KUSC withdrew its objection. Since that time, KUSC has moved way out of the area. The proximity of the two stations had to be at least ten miles away according to the rules or you'd paralyze all the receivers, which wasn't true at all. Maybe when we had crystal sets that was true, but not with the sophisticated

equipment in those days that we had, not to say what there is today. We were four and a half miles or something like that from USC. There was no interference. The whole purpose of the test that had to be made on the Baldwin Hills at full power at my own expense- And it was repeatedly stated in the letter of 1975, when they wrote it, that the funds that I spent on that test would not be a consideration of whether or not I got a permanent license. The question would be solely dependent upon the report of the field engineers of the Federal Communications Commission. The chief engineer was a man by the name of Ralph Heller, who I must say was a very fair man, very fair man. There were two field engineers, Ralph Heller and another fellow with him, a Japanese fellow, I believe. We proceeded to make the test. We purchased two brand-new transmitters, a new antenna tower, everything. It was a pole that we used. We were not too far from the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] when we turned the transmitter on. People from the FAA came over and said, "You fellows turn a transmitter on?" We said, "Yes." He says, "Well, you're swamping us. You're interfering with our-" So Ralph Heller and his assistant went over to the FAA enclosure and impound there and started working on their equipment with filters and things in order to see if he could filter out, or trap, the signal that we were putting in to them. Well, it turned out that the signal we were interfering with was not an FAA signal. It was a military signal that the FAA had allowed the military to put- They had agreed to put crystals in their equipment that was on the frequency of the military in order to accommodate them. That same frequency was heard up and down the coast. So that any craft that was coming in could pick up some signal from some place to get in, and then it went by telephone line from there to the telephone company. They shouldn't have been there to begin with; that was civilian. So there was a big problem with that, many telephone calls back to Washington, many things. Finally, we went back to Washington, and the FCC decided that the FAA was in error having that frequency in operation on their premises. They then made an agreement that they would allocate another frequency, which was a trailer-camp frequency or something of that nature, that was allowable. So they had to change the crystals in every receiving point up and down the coast, you see, to conform to that, or skip this place here. Well, the only reason that it caused the problem was that we were so close to them and with a frequency so close to them. It was bothering the fifth harmonic in the signal. But while this was happening, I remember Ralph Heller working over

that transmitter. I said it reminded me of a doctor working over a dying man, trying to get it to work. He did all he could to do it. When we finally were able to get that frequency resolved, we then went back to the test. We successfully passed the test in that while he did say that the signal to Compton was a rather weak signal-it was there-there was no objectional interference caused by our broadcasting. That meant that KIIS really had no reason to do it. Now, the Federal Communications Commission said that they believed that if there were no objectional interference that waiver of the rules would be warranted. There were only two rules. One was the ten-mile radius required. This spacing distance would be waived. And two, that the signal strength over Compton would be reduced. Three point one six, I believe, was the amount of signal-millivolts-over Compton, the city of license. They agreed to accept two, which is a very good signal-two is a tremendous signal-and told us to go ahead and do the test under those conditions. As of this date, KJLH has never gotten its permanent license on Baldwin Hills to my knowledge. They are going to get it, though. They are building a tower now. It was after I had sold the station, and the new owners were aware of that issue. It was after that that they were able to work out with the Federal Communications Commission a way of getting a permanent license, and that was to relocate on some spot other than the spot that they were on. That was because it was felt that if the Federal Communications Commission gave the new owner a license to broadcast, a permanent license to broadcast from that site, and they had denied me that before, then they might be on the hook for all the funds that I had spent. Remember, they had said, "The funds you spend are not to be considered in whether you come on or go off." But if they denied me and then gave it to them with the same transmitter, equipment, tower, everything, same conditions, four years later, then maybe John Hill would like to have his money back from the Federal Communications for all that. Maybe John Hill may have been entitled to more funds for having sold the station at the figure he did because of the condition of that. So they said, "If you relocate your transmitter site, and you can still get a signal comparable to what you have now, then we see no reason why it shouldn't be approved." But that's what they said to me, too. What they did was they moved about three-quarters of a mile or less on the Baldwin Hills, back to where- It's towards the intersection of La Brea [Avenue] and Stocker [Street], up there at that point right there. They are putting up a new tower there now. They should have a license for it.

That meant that the question about me is moot because they're not there anymore. They will not be there as soon as they switch over and go back to the other one, and then the license can be granted. Now, I don't have any intention of suing the government, you know. It's cost an awful lot of money. It would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to fight that case. And the equipment and everything that was in it. I sold the station for less money than I probably could have if it had been a clear license on it. But the owner understood, and he was willing to do what was necessary. He's been in court many, many years. You see, one of the problems that the Federal Communications Commission had then, the problem that I had, and any other person who was a licensee of the commission, was that with such a procedure where the hearing officer is a lawyer from the Federal Communications Commission- And the attorney for the broadcast bureau that sat in there, Dahlquist, was sitting in there as an observer, and he was actually an opponent of mine. He was in opposition to the whole thing.

Hopkins

Why was that do you think?

Hill

Well, there was a letter written that said that John Hill had filed an application for a station on the Baldwin Hills, don't you want to comment on it? And this letter was sent to each station on each side of me. Now, KIIS was not a station that was really opposing KJLH at that time, but KGFJ was, and KGFJ, which was Tracey Broadcasting, owned KUTE, which was next to me. KIIS emerged as the person filing the opposition, not Tracey Broadcasting. Tracey Broadcasting had already attempted to purchase KJLH from me, and I refused to sell to them. I have the documentation on that. There's a fellow by the name of Stevens who came here and tried to buy it from me.

Hopkins

Representing Tracey.

Hill

He was over Tracey. He's a lawyer from Philadelphia. And while he was here, my lawyer was sitting right here in the room at that time when he came in.

We weren't expecting him at all. We were just talking about things and he showed up. But not only had he been here, but somebody else had been here. So I'd refused to sell to them. They were the black-oriented station, and when they bought KUTE, they then went to black-oriented broadcasting. KJLH's being in existence was the first opposition they'd had where a black station, a black-owned station, was on the air, as against black-oriented stations from various people from time to time. KDAY many years ago. I remember when the John Pool Broadcasting Company, I believe it was, Joe [Joseph] Adams, was on the air. Fine jock [disc jockey]. He was one of the first, probably the first, black jock that had reached the audience that he, Joe, had developed. He was a real professional. Joe presently has been for years and years the manager for Ray Charles. Joe's brother, Arthur Adams, was a manager for me here at KJLH. I saw Arthur the other day. But I think it gave the community a bit of pride to have a black radio station. One of the things that we did that was different, we had a black format that was programmed to the adult, responsible black community. We didn't go for the kids. There were enough people out selling Coca-Cola and bubble gum and things of that nature. We went more for the adult, responsible black citizen. We also had a format of that nature six days a week, and on Sunday we went to religion and we just stopped broadcasting it. We had twenty-three churches on Sunday. It was across the board as far as denomination was concerned. We had offered air time to the Catholic church, but they didn't accept it. They didn't accept it hardly on any stations. It's very difficult to narrate a Catholic service because it's ritual, while some of the more demonstrative means of worshiping were more audible and better suited for radio broadcasting. Had we had video in those days, I think that that would have- Well, I guess we did have video, but it was in its infancy then. That would have been more suitable for Catholicism or the Episcopal church or any of the churches of that type. But the station had a cross section. It gave news, sports, adult programming. The adult programming- It took some time, because we didn't know what we were doing. When we got it together, we had quite an audience, and it was a lot of fun. It became not so much fun when it started to make money.

Hopkins

When it started to make money?

Hill

Yes.

**1.12. Tape Number: VII, Side Two (February 14, 1985)**

Hopkins

Do you remember where you left off?

Hill

I think I said that we lost the great interest in the station when it started to make money. Then I realized that it was capable of producing more money than my funeral business. But I also knew that there were some differences in your life-style if you became affiliated with a station, and I chose to divest of the station. I had to make a decision whether to go out and buy more, because there were stations to be had at that time, or whether I should get out of the business. It was a hobby to me. I had it fourteen and a half years, and I lost money for eleven, almost twelve years of it. I think I'm correct. Put that in. Then it started to break even and make money. It was turning a good return when I sold it. I sold it to a man that I felt would be appreciated by the community, and I must say that he has been a tremendous asset to the community. He has given much of his time and his money to the community. I received some calls during the time of the sale, when it was announced, commending me on having selected him as the buyer. I had an opportunity to sell it many, many times to other people outside the community, and I refused to do it.

Hopkins

Who did you sell it to?

Hill

Oh, well, it's a matter of record. I sold it to Stevie Wonder.

Hopkins

Okay, for the record. Is the station successful today?

Hill

Oh, yes, yes, I think it is. It's a class-A station. That's a low-power station. But it's located in an area where it is reaching its sought-after audience, which is

the black community. It's not attempting to serve all of Los Angeles, you see. And from that station, other black owners developed.

Hopkins

For example?

Hill

Let's see. There was Clarence Avant, who owned KAGB. And then Schlitz Beer, or Willie Davis, purchased the KAGB and fixed the call letters of KIIS, which is a station that had been out near Riverside. They had dropped those call letters, and he picked that up. If I'm not mistaken, I think that Willie has several stations now. He's gotten a lot of them that he's involved in.

Hopkins

Well, the KUTE station now, is that still the old KUTE station that was-?

Hill

No, that has been purchased by a syndicate that is headed, or a person who has quite a bit of influence in it, by the name of Percy Sutton, who is a pro at black broadcasting and who is from New York. They have a number of stations. I don't know how many they have, but I'm guessing they have eight of them maybe throughout the country. And at the time that there was a forming of an organization called NABOB, the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters, or something like that. It was going to be formed in Washington, D.C. I had a call from a secretary there asking if I was going to attend. I made the inquiry of how many black stations do you feel that there are. She said about fifty-five. At that time, I felt there were five at best. I asked what determines a black station. They said when the station ownership is represented by 51 percent of black investors. But from that, as far as the West is concerned- Now, the East had more stations, and they were way ahead of the West in broadcasting and know-how and everything else. Percy Sutton had done a tremendous job in New York with his AM and FM that he had. One was in New Jersey, and I don't know where the other one was. But it's changed, and, of course, there are blacks in television and everything else now. It's a big business for them. But it was fun out here in California. The big headache was to get through the separation that we were getting from

competitors for the same group. Now, I don't mean children. I mean the same black community. Since that time, Tracey Broadcasting has disposed of his interest in KGFJ and KUTE and Percy Sutton's group has acquired-

Hopkins

So KGFJ is no longer white-owned?

Hill

No, that's of record, black-owned.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, I know when I was growing up as a teenager, KGFJ played a lot of black music. I remember there was a discussion, an argument, going on that because it was white-owned, they didn't want to play any of the white music because then they'd feel they'd be in competition with some of the other white stations. Do you know anything about that at all?

Hill

No.

Hopkins

Okay, all right, just a thought. One thing you mentioned a little earlier too was that you felt that you should divest yourself of the radio business because you felt a compulsion to go out and buy other stations.

Hill

No, I had to make a decision as to whether to do that. It was a hobby; it was fun. But at that same time, in December of 1968, I opened this mortuary here, this building. I had purchased that building next door the day before the opening of it. The man made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I was successful shortly after that in getting the Federal Communications Commission to allow me to put a remote studio next door here. I remember at nights, two o'clock in the morning or better, that after this place had been open, I found myself walking between the two buildings. All of a sudden I realized that with all the work and energy that had been put into it it had all culminated in the fact that I owned two buildings on Crenshaw [Boulevard]. There were really three. I owned two businesses, and they were mine. I'd never thought about it that

way before. It was just a job. It was something I liked to do and I wanted to do. Working with KJLH, in the main, was fun. Working with Angelus [Funeral Home] is work; it's not fun. But I felt that I should give up KJLH.

Hopkins

Didn't you want to have fun and make money at the same time?

Hill

Well, I don't know. I think that I did the right thing.

Hopkins

And you didn't feel that it was possible to have them both?

Hill

Well, possible, yes. But whether I was capable of having them both was something. You demand certain things that may be acceptable in a mortuary that would not be acceptable in a radio station. For instance, I had a rule over there they had to wear a tie when they were on the air. The fine was \$5 if they didn't have it. Many nights I would go over and tap on the window and give them five fingers-that they knew they were fined \$5-because they didn't think I would be around that time of the morning. Now, there was reason for it. The reason was that they had to abide by the rule. Whether or not the rules seemed to be logical or not was immaterial-that was the rule. I had a nice staff over there, the people. Some of them got out of line. Some of them weren't with us any longer when that happened. I had a little lady over there as manager, Delores Gardner, who was a mother superior to them. She was every bit a lady, every bit. They respected her. When they got out of line, she could just speak to them like a lady, and they would apologize and straighten up. That made it compatible with Angelus when that happened, you see. I'm sure the station, all stations, do the best to have an excellent staff. And they operate properly, but you've got to-To get a good jock [disc jockey], he's got to be a little bit crazy. I say that facetiously, but it might be true. Some of the more demonstrative types- One of them was Levi Booker. Levi Booker was a tremendous jock. I still see him occasionally; he comes in here to talk about something. Several of the fellows were just good jocks. Once in a while you got a group together that would just work together; they could build your

programs. I didn't know anything about programming, but I knew if I got somebody that played the music I liked, they'd have one loyal listener. So the secret was to hire jocks that played the music that I liked. We didn't have any playlist; we had a library there. They could play anything they wanted to play. But I put them on the air at different times of the day or night according to their natural format. And Ollie Harris was one of them. Ollie was my oldest jock. He's the oldest employee by tenure over at the station now. Gosh, Ollie and I go way back. We were up on the hill, up on the Dominguez Hills. We were broadcasting out of that place. My son [John Lamar Hill III] used to work there. He would send me little paper cups with spiders in them to let me know that that's what they were with up there in this one building up on top of a hill all night long, playing! I made an automation machine. We had a Shaffer automation machine down here, but we didn't have one up there. I got to thinking about it. I had a machine shop at home, which I still have. Again, I didn't know anything about electronics, but the machine just seemed feasible. So I ordered some cabinets and I purchased some reel-to-reel tape machines, Japanese machines. I was trying to think up the name of it. And I got a lot of lights, because I thought it should look like it was doing something, even if it wasn't. I finally, after I got it all fixed, I got Earl Hoskinson to look at it. He became intrigued with it. He didn't believe it could be done. He then did some things to make it perform better, like muting switches when it was changing from one tape to the other to cut the sound out, mute out, things like that, rather than getting a pop when it was doing it. But that machine went to the Dominguez Hills, and it stayed up there a long time. That's what ran KJLH, because we were automated. Then I let Ollie go live for an hour or so, and he just loved that. Then we went live completely later, when we moved down here and started to change that building so it could be used as a studio. And they're still there.

Hopkins

Mr. Hill, you anticipated my question long ago and have done a brilliant job of giving me an orientation to kind of the middle years to the ending years of your participation in KJLH. I'm wondering, if it wouldn't be too taxing at this time, if you would just give me an overview of how you became owner of KJLH. There was a fellow by the name of Johnson (I think his name was Johnson, I don't remember his first name at this time I'm embarrassed to say)

who called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to buy a radio station. I said, "What kind of station?" He told me it was an FM station. I asked what station it was, and he told me it was KFOX-FM. I said, "Well, why is it for sale?" He said, "Because they have purchased another station more powerful than that. Their hearing is coming up very shortly, and they have to get rid of this weaker station, the class-A, because they purchased class-B. They have to get rid of that, divest of that, before the hearing, or they won't even entertain the hearing. They can't have two stations; you can't have an overlapping signal." So I called up a friend of mine, a lawyer friend, and I asked him, "How much do you think an FM radio station would be worth?" He was a very good friend of mine, and I'd known him before he was a lawyer. He was very frank with me and I with him. He says, "How do I know? Why do you ask me a question like that?" And I said, "Okay, good-bye." I went on and bought the station. Right after I bought the station, he called me, and he said, "Do you want to sell half of that station?" We jokingly talk about that. But I purchased it. When I purchased it, it was a simulcast station. You know what that is? Well, I know what simulcast is, but I'm not sure what that station-

Hill

Well, it was a country music station. They had an AM station and an FM station. They had one console, one studio, and they broadcast their program over AM and FM both at the same time. You understand?

Hopkins

Yes.

Hill

They did have an overlapping signal, but it was on different frequencies. So when we cleared the FCC and everything, why, they just took a pair of snips and cut the wire on the FM line and gave me a pile of records on the floor that was so obsolete it was ridiculous. The equipment was, everything was. And there I sat. We went around the corner, and we got a little studio and started trying to sell time. I didn't know anything about the station at all. I realized that its broadcast radius was extremely small, and that you couldn't sell any time because nobody could hear you. So I started then trying to figure out how to expand the audience and effort. It all boiled down to the fact that when

I moved to- They had a mayor in Compton by the name of Lionel Cade, a very nice fellow. I went to see him one day, and I said, "The Federal Communications Commission has put out a bulletin saying that if a city, an incorporated city, has more than one broadcast facility and there is another city that is within a radius of ten miles, I believe it is, which is void of broadcast facilities, then one of the licensees can file an application to change the city license." I think at that time Long Beach had about five various types of broadcast facilities, and I filed an application to become a Compton station. I'd asked how would he like to have a black radio station. It seemed to me that the first black city and the first black radio station ought to be married. He thought it was a good idea, and he took it up with the council and they agreed. So I didn't have to move the transmitter, because we had moved the transmitter from being down on Anaheim [Street] to putting it up on the Dominguez Hills. Before, I had all fish just about for listeners because it was dumping the signal out in the Pacific Ocean, you see. This expanded it a little, but it also spilled it over into this area here. We became a Compton station, and we became also a black station at that time. Because we were programming mainly for the people in Long Beach while it was down there in Long Beach, and it wasn't until we became black oriented-I remember that when we were down here in Los Angeles, I had a manager by the name of Rod McGrew. Rod was a talented person, but I think his greatest contribution to the station was- Rod was from Texas, as I recall, and he had a little accent. He doesn't think he has an accent, but he has one. He would get on the air and say, "This is your brother, Rod McGrew." That just tied it together right there, because they didn't have any brothers before that. In other words, they didn't have a black station before that, and they had it then. Then I remember, on one occasion, I had a lady that was on the air, and I was standing in studio B by the automation equipment listening to her, her name was Jeanne McWells- When I purchased the station, the sellers kept the call letters KFOX and affixed it to the new station that they had acquired, which had been KMLA. They had to come up with a new call letter for me. Without asking me, the attorney in Washington asked for KILB. It came down. I said, "Well, by gosh, who came up with that? What does it mean?" He says, "Well, you have to have K on everything. So it says `K in Long Beach.'" I said, "Well, I'd never have figured that one out." "What do you want to do with it?" I said, "Well, I think I would

like to put my initials on it."I'd known of a couple of people that had put their initials on it. KLAC was Cord automobile. And there were several stations-

Hopkins

Is that the Cord that Paul [R.] Williams built the house for?

Hill

It was the family, yes. I believe it was the family. There were some other stations that had it. So I said I would rather make it KJLH. Well, that was very difficult; it was interesting. The black community had been so attuned to KGFJ, they could not say "KJLH." They would say, "KGLH." That G had to come after K, and it could not be done. Finally, when we drew our logo, we had a K and then the J-a big J, to get them to say it-and then LH. Phonetically, it didn't come out right. That caused a big problem. So I was thinking about it, while in that studio B. Just off the top of my head, I came up and walked in to Jeanne McWells, who was on the air. And I said to her, while her record was playing, of course, "Jeannie, why don't you tell them that KJLH stands for kindness, joy, love and happiness." So she said, "Let me write that down," and she wrote it down. But she could not say, "Kindness, joy, love and happiness," because there was no A for "and." So she kept saying, "Kindness, joy, love, happiness." Then Ollie refined the thing down later on when he said one night that "This is KJLH, kindness, joy, love and happiness, all the good things." He tied it together. There were moments when you were a little bit proud of KJLH, and, believe me, there were some moments when you didn't want anybody to know you had anything to do with it! [laughter]

Hopkins

I remember the station when they used to say, "This is KJLH." Mr. Hill, I want to go back just a second for a question I had in the earlier discussion of the civil alert system. Again, regarding KJLH, what year did you buy the station?

Hill

I owned it fourteen and a half years, and I sold it in '79. Nineteen sixty-five, wouldn't it be? 'Sixty-four or five.

Hopkins

Then you sold it, didn't you say, roughly around 1979 or so? Very good. Okay, Mr. Hill, that's about all the questions I have regarding KJLH, and it's about all the questions we have to ask you over the last six or eight months. We certainly have enjoyed the opportunity to interview you. I know when I listen to all these tapes again, there will be another question I want to ask you, but that could go on for years. Unless there's something really pertinent, then I think we're going to set you free. But thank you very much for your support of the UCLA oral history project on the black community.

Hill

Well, it's been nice having you around. You're a gentleman.

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