

# EARLY BLACK A.A.

## ALONG THE CHICAGO--GARY--SOUTH BEND AXIS

### *The Stories and Memories of Early Black Leaders Told in Their Own Words*

**Editor's introduction:** Some of the earliest black A.A. groups in the United States were formed c. 1945-48 along an axis running from Chicago eastward through Gary to South Bend, Indiana. These three cities were linked by an interurban rail line called the South Shore Railroad which made it easy for people to travel back and forth. We know much more at present about early black A.A. in this area than we do about any other part of the United States.

**Source:** Materials gathered for the *Northern Indiana Archival Bulletin*, published by the Archives Committee of Northern Indiana Area 22 of Alcoholics Anonymous, and printed in South Bend (contact the Michiana A.A. Central Service Office, 814 E. Jefferson Ave., South Bend, IN 46617).

**For further background information:** Detailed material about four of the early black A.A. leaders who played a role in this story (Bill Hoover, Jimmy Miller, Brownie and Goshen Bill) can be found in the two-volume series on *Lives and Teachings of the A.A. Old Timers* in the St. Joseph valley region (northwestern Indiana and southwestern Michigan) put together by Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana) in 1993-96. This work is due to come out in a second edition at the beginning of 2005, with the two volumes entitled *The Factory Owner & the Convict* and *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man*. Check the <http://hindsfoot.org> website in January or February 2005 (or the online bookstores) for further information.

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## INTERVIEW WITH BILL WILLIAMS

### EVANS AVENUE A.A. GROUP IN CHICAGO

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On Saturday, July 17, 1999, three people came from Chicago -- Evans Avenue Bill W. (recently turned ninety-six years old), Jimmy H., and a younger man -- and met at the lakeside home of Frank N. a few miles south of Syracuse, Indiana, a little before lunch time, along with two people from South Bend: Glenn C. and Raymond I., who had arrived a little earlier and had been sitting outside enjoying the serenity of the lake, and watching a family of Canadian geese paddling around the edges. This is the story of early black A.A. Frank and Glenn were the only two white people there, present simply to tape record the conversations.

**Bill Williams ('Evans Avenue Bill W.," Chicago)** was born in 1904 and spent his early years in East Texas. He eventually ended up in Chicago, where he came into A.A. in 1945, when he was around forty-one years old. At the time of this recording (transcribed below), he had just turned ninety-six. Fifty years earlier, in 1948 and 1949, he had helped the two earliest black members of A.A. in South Bend, Bill Hoover and a woman named Jimmy Miller, at the time when the A.A. program was just getting established in that town.

**Jimmy H. (Chicago)** is well-known as a dynamic and colorful speaker, who frequently travels to various parts of northern Indiana to give leads. Two weeks earlier he had been one of the featured speakers at the Fourth of July hog roast at Chic L.'s farm along the Elkhart River outside of Goshen, Indiana -- a major annual event which often draws almost a thousand people, traveling from as far away as Ohio to eat, chat, play horseshoes, go on hayrides, and so on.

**Raymond I. (South Bend, Indiana)** had also come. He first began attending A.A. meetings in 1974 and had been extremely close with the first two black people to enter the A.A. fellowship in South Bend, Bill Hoover and his wife Jimmy Miller. Bill Hoover became his sponsor in 1975. Most people in South Bend A.A. know Raymond, who is the "elder statesman" at Brownie's at 616 Pierce Street, just off Portage Avenue near downtown South Bend. Brownie's (named after one of the other major black leaders in early South Bend A.A.) is the basement meeting room below a children's daycare center, where numerous A.A. meetings are held every week.

**Frank N. (Syracuse, Indiana)** came up with the idea of this get together after talking with Jimmy at Chic's hog roast. Frank had come to the event to socialize and enjoy, along with three other members of the Indiana Area 22 Archives Committee -- Floyd P. (Frankton), Klaus K. (Fort Wayne), and Glenn C. (South Bend) -- when he suddenly realized that the elderly Bill W. whom Jimmy was talking about was the same man who had come to South Bend to speak fifty years ago to help get the first black A.A. members in South Bend fully accepted.

**Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana)** came along to help Frank tape record and edit the information which Bill Williams and Jimmy H. were going to provide.

When the group was all assembled, everyone sat down in a room with large glass windows looking out over the lake. Frank had trays of cheese and cold cuts and vegetables out on his dining room table, and asked who wanted coffee or a soft drink or something else. Jimmy H., who is a vegetarian and studiously avoids being around cigarette smoke, said he would just fix himself some hot water, while Bill W. asked if Frank could give him a cup of hot tea.

When the tape recorders were turned on, Glenn C., to start things going, read from a transcript of Jimmy Miller's story, and then asked Bill Williams what he himself remembered about those events. Now some background needs to be given here: the first A.A. group in north central Indiana was founded in South Bend on February 22, 1943, by

Ken Merrill and Joseph Soulard "Soo" Cates, and quickly began spreading into the surrounding parts of Indiana and Michigan, but it remained a totally white organization until 1948, when two black people in South Bend, Bill Hoover (who died in 1986) and Jimmy Miller (an erect, impressive black woman who was still living at the time of this meeting) asked for help.

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## JIMMY MILLER'S STORY

### *THE FIRST LADY OF BLACK A.A. IN THE ST. JOSEPH RIVER VALLEY*

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Jimmy Miller (South Bend, Indiana) was born in Wayne, Arkansas, in 1920, but her family moved to South Bend when she was only three months old, so she is essentially a South Bend person. In March of 1993, Raymond I. arranged for Glenn C. to go over to Jimmy Miller's house and tape record some of her reminiscences for the A.A. archives, including the story of how she and Bill Hoover (South Bend, Indiana) became the first two black A.A. members in that part of Indiana. After they came into the fellowship, Bill and Jimmy eventually got married, so Jimmy was able to talk at length about Bill's A.A. career as well as hers. She died around two or three years ago, so we can give her full name now. (This entire conversation is transcribed in Glenn C., *The Factory Owner & the Convict*, which is due to come out in a second edition in early 2005, see <http://hindsfoot.org>)

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JIMMY MILLER: I was a periodic drinker. Very much so. When I went out, I stuck to my 7-Up, my Coke. I drank at home. I was a loner. If I had a week's vacation from a job, I stayed drunk that whole week. I mean drunk! -- go into D.T's, had to go to the doctor. We had an alcoholic doctor .... I found out about this doctor, and I'd go get a shot, and I'm all right. But I ... that was my pattern.

Maybe I would go a year without a drink, because I knew better, because then I would be drunk anywhere from one week to two weeks. But I would make sure it was during my vacation -- never lost a job, never got into financial trouble, no kind of way. But then I knew I had this time to stay drunk.

RAYMOND: It's cunning, it's baffling, and it's powerful.

JIMMY MILLER: But I knew I'd get drunk, because I know there was something wrong. The reason I didn't drink when I'd get out, go out: *I knew better*. I was going to get drunk! I knew that I would be clear drunk for at least a week, so I had to *plan* these things.

And I used to tell my mother, that I knew better. She said, "Oh honey, you don't need no help. You just drink sometimes." So she would go and get, like, get the neighbor to go get me two or three pints of whiskey, and I'm quite young, maybe seventeen, sixteen, and when I started drinking she would hand me a pint. I'd go on up to my room. She'd check on me, or she'd bring me soup to eat. And I said, "Mama, I've *got* to be an alcoholic." And she said, "Naw, my baby gone stop one day." But she was ....

RAYMOND: ... Enabling.

JIMMY MILLER: She never .... No, I think she did the best thing she could do.

When I drank the whole fifth of vodka, that was my last drink. I decided to go to drink me a fifth of vodka, it was just coming out [on the American market]. So I drunk this fifth, I was working at the cleaners.

I blundered at work that morning, the temperature was about 115 [degrees Fahrenheit] in there. I worked for a solid week, without anything on my stomach but a drink of water. I'd get off from work, I'd make it as far as getting on the floor and I would stretch out. It almost killed me.

I didn't have no more afterwards. But like Ray Moore say [he was an Irishman, who became Jimmy and Bill's sponsor when they came into A.A.], he was surprised by me being a *periodic* drinker. To *know* that I was an alcoholic.

And you know, then I went to send and get all this literature. I was ecstatic at something.

Then I couldn't get into A.A.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jimmy made a phone call to the A.A. number in South Bend, but this was 1948, and she was told bluntly over the telephone that Alcoholics Anonymous was for white people only. However, unknown to her, Bill Hoover (who was also black) had also called the South Bend A.A. number about the same time, so a certain amount of soul searching had begun among a few of the A.A. leaders. Jimmy did not know that Bill had also phoned the A.A. number, but she did know who Bill was.

JIMMY MILLER: I had known Bill since '36 or '37. He and one of my brothers was strong alcoholics, so they was running buddies. They used to just say, "Mama, I'm going to sleep on the porch" (in them days you slept on the porch) and him and Bill would drink all night long. You know, I had known Bill for years, never thinking that we would ever marry.

RAYMOND: Talking about [your brother] Luxedie?

JIMMY MILLER: No, my brother Jesse. He was a "sophisticated drunk."

JIMMY MILLER: Bill and I had called in three days apart .... they didn't have any set up for colored people (that's what we were called) .... [first Bill phoned them for help, and then] I called in, and they also told *me* they didn't have any setup for "colored people."

And at the time that Bill called in, Ray Moore was there, and he heard this remark -- they didn't have *anything* for colored people -- so he said, "That's all right, I'll take it." So they tried to discourage him, but anyway, he made the call on Bill.

Three days later I called in, so he brought Bill over to my house, and he said, well he would sponsor us. Only they told him -- they didn't have any set up for colored whatsoever -- we couldn't come to the open meetings or the closed meetings, so Ray had brought two of his friends with him.

GLENN C.: He was an Irishman?

JIMMY MILLER: Uh-huh. Dunbar [came with him], and the other one was Ken Merrill. So in the meantime, they decided we could meet from house to house, so we met at my house, Bill's house, [and at the homes of] Ken Merrill and Dunbar.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Bill Hoover, and Raymond I. (whom he later sponsored), were convinced that it was not simply coincidence, but the power of God at work, that made these two particular people -- Jimmy and Bill -- call into A.A. at the same time. And Bill Hoover was convinced that it was the power of God at work that made Ray Moore, an otherwise perfectly ordinary Irishman who had a job at the Bendix plant, insist on making the twelfth step call on these two black people in spite of the stiff opposition from within the A.A. group itself.

### Early Black AA -- Part 2 of 5

JIMMY MILLER: When Ray Moore called on me, he was really surprised that I [already] had the ... Alcoholic Anonymous book. I was determined. He say two or more, but it's just a coincidence the way Bill and I called in.

My husband [Bill Hoover] used to tell me, used to tell me that he had a slip. I said, not really. 'Cause after Ray Moore called on him that evening, he drank the next day, and never had a drink since. So you really -- I couldn't even *call* that a slip, could you? He called on him that day, he didn't know enough about the program -- bad handled -- so he drank that *night*, never no more!

Said he was just determined. We really went through a lot ....

I said, well you couldn't really call that a slip, because the man just come over and talked to you, you didn't know anything about the program.

But I came in thinking I knew quite a bit -- which I did, 'cause I had read the Big Book. I read any and everything! Like my *Grapevines* [the A.A. periodical]. I run through 'em, and then I put 'em right here, and I read 'em over.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Getting someone in the South Bend A.A. group to make a twelfth step call was only the first of many barriers that would have to be surmounted. Ray Moore -- who has been dead for many years now, Jimmy said -- continued to come through for her and Bill, and served as their sponsor during those earliest years, hearing their fifth steps, and advising and counseling and supporting them and fighting for them every step of the way.

But when Jimmy and Bill came into A.A., it was still 1948, and the terms on which help was offered them by the South Bend A.A. group at first was incredibly humiliating and demeaning, in often unbelievably petty ways. The closed meetings were still normally house meetings in those days, and when Jimmy and Bill went to one of the few white homes where they would be admitted at all, they were promptly sent back to the kitchen like household menials, and could hear only as much of the people speaking as would travel back to that distant part of the house.

**JIMMY MILLER:** So when Bill would walk it, they would invite us into the kitchen. The women took time to give us some *broken* cups! And they decided to give us broken cups, so we just took it. Ray told us, no matter what, be calm about it, so we sit in the kitchen, where we could hear from the family room, living room, whatever.

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#### **Side Note:**

### **BROWNIE TOLD THE SAME STORY**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Even in 1950, two years later, when Brownie (Harold Brown) came into the South Bend A.A. program, he said that he, as a black man, was also at first given the broken-cup treatment when he went to A.A. meetings at white people's homes. (This is taken from a tape recording of a lead he gave around 1972.)

**BROWNIE:** When I come on the A.A. program, my people wasn't welcome. They was meeting in the homes at that time. I had to drink coffee out of a broken cup because they refused to give me a decent cup! Yes, I've sat in some of'em's homes, where they put their finger in their nose at me, then they buck at me. In other words, want me to get out of there.

But I wasn't particular about being with them. What I wanted is what you had. I was trying to get sober. All I wanted to do was to learn it. They couldn't run me away. The rest of 'em were behind me pushing, saying "Brown, push on!" and they kept pushing me, and I kept going. It's to say, oh, look it! It wasn't easy for me to make the A.A. program.

But I come here [into this hostile situation], a thought come to me: **if they open the door, I get it myself.** And I begin to study this A.A. program. And when I mean study it, I *know* it. I don't need you to tell me about it. I knows everything, in the steps and everything, what it says.

And they told me that this was a spiritually program. Well now, if this is a spiritually program, ain't got no business being prejudiced. My God tells me, "I have no respect for persons." Alcohol ain't prejudiced. It don't give a damn who it tear down.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: So the tales of black people being given only the chipped and cracked coffee cups to drink from in early South Bend A.A. are amply documented, as embarrassing as this fact is to many present-day white A.A. members in this area.

But to get back to Jimmy Miller and her story: Although Jimmy and Bill Hoover were allowed to attend closed A.A. house meetings as long as they could tolerate this deeply offensive treatment, it was six or seven months before the white members would allow them to go to open meetings at all. Even then, it was not until two black A.A. members from Chicago came over to South Bend to give leads at the South Bend open meeting on several occasions, that the black people in the South Bend A.A. program began to be treated with at least a measure of ordinary social respect.

The two black A.A.'s from Chicago were Earl Redmond and Evans Avenue Bill W. (Bill Williams), so being able to record some of Bill's memories of those long ago events was a special privilege for the two members of the Area 22 Archives Committee.

JIMMY MILLER: So then, we still couldn't go to an open meeting. So we just kept meeting, and then, one or two more blacks called, and we met that way, and then Ray got real worried, and Bill's wife [at that time] called her cousin in Chicago: Earl Redmond. So Ray had a hard time getting permission for him to speak at an open meeting ....

We still wasn't allowed to go to an open meeting, but we went anyway, so when he finished talking -- now this is a good six, seven months later -- they opened up, and said we could come to an open meeting.

We could come to the group, and Ray told us don't be talking, just listen, and learn, and that's the way. And after we got about five more blacks . . . that's the way the group got started.

But we were treated real coldly at the open meetings, and finally -- like several of the speakers, we tried to shake their hands, and they would just turn and walk off -- [but] after Earl Redmond come down about three times, then they started shaking hands.

Hey Raymond, what's the other gentleman, Bill's other cousin in Chicago?

RAYMOND: [Evans Avenue] Bill Williams.

JIMMY MILLER: Bill Williams, he come down, and after he made a talk it really opened up for us.

RAYMOND: Fourth black man to make A.A. in Chicago.

JIMMY MILLER: And I'm telling you! But we held on.

RAYMOND: Do you remember being at the talk, that Earl Redmond made, to help you all get in?

JIMMY MILLER: Yes I do. He said, you know, this was basically formed: no race, creed, religion, or *anything*. And then if you read it out the Big Book, it's all [a matter of] if you had the desire to stop drinking, that's all that's required.

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## **RACE RELATIONS IN THE NORTHERN UNITED STATES**

### *During the 1930's and 40's and afterwards*

Any black person in South Bend old enough to remember the world before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. will tell you that the humiliating treatment given to Jimmy and Bill at first was simply typical of the period, and that such treatment was a daily part of every black person's life. Many white people in the United States to this day believe that racial discrimination against black people only happens in the southern states, but every black person I have ever talked to who has lived in both parts of the country, has told me that racial discrimination is equally bad in both north and south. All of my own observation of life in the north (Chicago, the upper Midwest, Massachusetts, New York City, and so on) shows that they are totally correct. Black people who began leaving the south to live in northern cities around the mid twentieth century moved because that is where the jobs were, in the factories and foundries, not because there was less prejudice there, or any less likelihood of being beaten or killed by white people.

### **King's Problems in Chicago**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did not begin his work until several years after the first black men and women came into A.A. in Chicago and South Bend (which was around 1945-48). Dr. King's first major protest was the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955. This took place in the south, in Alabama, as did the major integration campaign he carried out later on in Birmingham, in 1963. It was only after this that Dr. King went north to work in Chicago, where his marchers were met by white mobs led by uniformed Neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen, in an even more violent and vicious opposition than he had encountered in the south. When King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, it could be argued that Chicago still stood as a partial failure for him: that city had proven to be far



more resistant than the cities of the American south to truly basic change in racial attitudes at the public and political level.

### **A.A. in Chicago and South Bend**

So the world inside A.A. circles in Chicago and South Bend was in fact twenty years ahead of the world outside of them on racial issues: getting black people into some of the closed meetings (on any terms) was a miracle for the 1940's, and getting them into the open meetings was a further miracle, and putting an end to at least some of the discriminatory treatment was yet another miracle. Young people today often do not realize (until they look back at how bad things were in the 1930's and early 40's) how much was actually accomplished in eliminating the worst kinds of racism in A.A. in the years which followed, and how difficult it was to bring this about. It was done by attacking the issues at the fundamental spiritual level, and by insisting that the spiritual principles of the program had to take precedence over personalities, and personal likes and dislikes, and politics, and blind cultural taboos. It also took a handful of people, both black and white, who had an astonishing courage, and a willingness to speak lovingly, but boldly and honestly, when basic spiritual principles were at stake.

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## **BACK TO JIMMY MILLER'S STORY**

**EDITOR:** But to return to Jimmy's story. At one point, Raymond asked her what she remembered of some of the details of that open meeting where Earl Redmond, the first black speaker the South Bend A.A. group had ever had, came over from Chicago.

**RAYMOND:** Well 'd Ken Merrill play the piano or something -- didn't he play the piano for you all?

**JIMMY MILLER:** Yeah.

**RAYMOND:** And ... I mean when Earl Redmond and them came in?

**JIMMY MILLER:** Yes. But Ken ....

**RAYMOND:** And I think Earl Redmond made a statement like Bill [Hoover] used to tell me, said when Earl came down he made such a powerful talk. He said the same whiskey that'll make a white man drunk, will make a black man drunk.

**JIMMY MILLER:** That's right, he explained all of that. It was a talk you just -- it kept everybody spellbound. And it opened the doors for us.

**Early Black AA -- Part 3 of 5**

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# **KEN MERRILL PLAYS THE PIANO**

## *Celebrating a victory over racism*

Ken Merrill (the founder of A.A. in South Bend) opened the meeting in a way that had never been done before, by sitting down and playing the piano for all the people who were assembled. This was one of Ken's more unexpected talents: he had been a professional church organist for part of his life, and (on a piano) could play everything from the latest jazz to truly difficult classical pieces, almost totally by ear. Raymond commented later on in this recording that this symbolic gesture was a way for some of the white people in South Bend A.A. to begin making amends for the wrong they had done to the black members, and to extend the olive branch of peace by turning this first visit by a black speaker into a day of jubilee, if you wish. It was something special offered by the white people who were leading that meeting, to show that they too now realized that this was a very special welcoming, where they wanted to pull out all the stops and do something far beyond the ordinary for this meeting.

Earl Redmond did his job too. Soon everyone in the room found themselves swept into the power and sincerity of his lead. And the white people discovered that, once you stopped making external comparisons and started listening to the message of the heart, black alcoholics suffered and felt exactly the same things as white alcoholics, but could also use the twelve steps to live in and through God's power to arrive at the same sobriety and serenity that some of the white people were beginning to achieve.

When Bill Williams subsequently came over from Chicago to give his lead at the South Bend open meeting, the effect (as Jimmy Miller remembered it) was even more powerful. So being able to actually listen to Bill himself talking about his memories of his part in those same events is a special treat, because (although he was now 96 years old) he still remembered clearly his trips to South Bend some fifty years earlier.

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## **BILL WILLIAMS' STORY**

### *COMING FROM CHICAGO TO SPEAK TO WHITE A.A.'s IN SOUTH BEND*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Glenn C. read aloud from the preceding transcript of Jimmy Miller's story, and then asked Evans Avenue Bill W. (Bill Williams) if he could tell all of us some of his own memories of those events.

**GLENN:** Now Bill, that's where your name came into this thing. Do you remember anything about that at all?

**BILL WILLIAMS:** Uh huh. I remember it all. Most of that. Not all of it, but most of that. See, that was the problem, that's the reason I came over here, at the time. See, happened my wife was related to Bill [Hoover]'s, some of Bill's family, and they had told her about

it, told them about it. So I came over here. I came over here, I brought four other members from my group, over here from Chicago. Myself -- see, this all happened before some of that, what you was reading, was happening. See, at the time, Bill couldn't go to the meetings. He could go to some of the meetings, but especially he couldn't go to the open meetings. And I came.

So fortunately, my wife was a distant relative to him, and so that's the way I met Bill. I didn't know him before. So with about five of the members of my group, we came over here one Sunday, and talked at Bill [Hoover]'s house [at 1242 Howard St. in South Bend].

And after we met, that's [when] they told him it's all right, but you can't go to the big meeting, on a Sunday. So then I asked why. Then they begin telling, "Well you see, our wives wouldn't like that."

And I listened to them talking. When they got through, I says, "Listen," I said, "if I had to go to Chicago from here in the morning -- I lived here, I got to go to Chicago. Wasn't but one train go, *one bus* go to Chicago, and I had to be there. And if I was on the train, and you got on ... because I was on there, and I was black, you wouldn't get off! Because you had to go to Chicago too." I said, "By the same token, if I go to the meeting, your wife cares less than a damn about me. She's there interested in you. So she's not gone go leave the meeting because *I come*. Because I'm going there for a purpose, and she's there to help you."

So one of the fellows said it, he laughed, he said, "Well that's true."

I said .... "By the same token, if I go to this meeting, your wife isn't going to leave -- it's an open meeting -- because she cares less than a darn about me. She's there for interested in *you*. And she's not gone leave because I get here. So if Bill [Hoover] goes to that meeting, it's not gonna affect your meeting at all. Cause all of you are going there -- all the alcoholics -- are going there for one particular purpose, and the non-alcoholic -- her husband, his wife -- is going there on account of *you* ...."

"My wife would be the same thing about you. She wouldn't care anything about [you]. She would only be there because she's interested in me, and she want to find out what makes me tick.

So when I got through -- see, before -- before that, they didn't want Bill [Hoover] to come to the open meeting. Well, I *knew* the reason. I'm from Texas, and I *know* the reason.

GLENN: O.K., so am I, yeah, so am I.

BILL WILLIAMS: I know the reason that they didn't want Bill [Hoover] to come to the meeting. Say, all right, say right now [pointing to the only empty chair in Frank's lakeside room]: it's only one chair sit here now. If I'm sitting right there, and this man is sitting here -- black -- your wife come in, that's the only seat. She's gone sit down there. She

ain't gone leave because she just got her one seat, cause she's interested in *you*. She cares less than a doggoned about me. It was only *him*."

I said, "Now it's only *you guys* that don't [want] your wife to sit in a chair close to me .... I can understand that. I know that .... But that isn't the point .... The point is that we're all here for one particular purpose. The alcoholics are here to mend their alcoholism. Your wife is here to learn what makes me tick."

"See, the non-alcoholic -- the husband or wife -- don't know why we drank. They don't know that alcohol makes us THIRSTY. [*Laughter*] Now this tea -- see, this tea -- it quenches my thirst. See, I drank this, and this'll be about all I want. I might would like another cup an hour or so from now .... but you see, it quenches my thirst. But if this was alcohol -- and I am an alcoholic -- it makes me *thirsty*."

GLENN: For more.

BILL WILLIAMS: .... See, when Hoover came in, the fellows would go over to his house and talk, but they didn't want him, or none of us, to come to the open meeting .... They said, "We'll come to your house to the meeting, but you can't come to .... they was meeting in the church. Raymond, are they still meeting in that church? And anyways, they were meeting in the church -- that was an open meeting, where the husbands and wives were there. They didn't want them to come there, and they come and talking about, "Well, you see our wives gone to complain." I listened, to a while, until they begin to do things to me inside. I said, "Listen, let me tell you something, you *further something* ...."

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## SOUTH BEND A.A. IN THE 1940's AND THE OPEN MEETING AT ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Let us interrupt Bill Williams at this point to talk about South Bend A.A. (which was started on February 22, 1943) and the big weekly open meeting they were holding in St. James Cathedral by 1948. It will also be wise, for the sake of younger people, to describe some of the primitive racial taboos in the United States in the 1940's.

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An article in the *South Bend Tribune* in 1964 (marking the twenty-first anniversary of the A.A. movement in that city) explains how the site of the big weekly open meeting was moved around during that twenty-one years. Beginning in October 1943, they held them for a while as occasional breakfast sessions at the LaSalle Hotel, which was at that point one of the city's two major hotels, located on Michigan Street in downtown South Bend. Late in 1944 however, they turned it into a regular Sunday afternoon meeting held at the former South Bend Civic Planning Association building on East Madison Street. Late in

1945, they set up the first Alano Club in the basement of that building. People were already coming from all over the surrounding areas of northern Indiana and southern Michigan -- places like Mishawaka, Elkhart, Goshen, Plymouth, LaPorte, Niles, Dowagiac, Benton Harbor, and St. Joseph -- learning how to set up an A.A. program from the people in South Bend, and then going back and setting up similar groups in their own home towns. So South Bend's example in dealing with problems like this one had an impact that extended far beyond its own city limits, up and down the St. Joseph river valley and around the southeastern coast of Lake Michigan (one of the five Great Lakes which divide the United States from Canada).

At some point -- it is difficult to reconstruct the exact date, but probably sometime between 1946 and 1948 -- they moved the big weekly open meetings from the Madison Street building to St. James Episcopal Cathedral on Main Street in downtown South Bend, where they used the meeting room in the church basement for their weekly get together. Ken Merrill, the factory owner who was the founder of A.A. in South Bend, was a member of that church, and presumably used his influence to help secure this site.

(Although Ken Merrill, when he was a teenager, had been kicked out of high school in Chicago for fighting, he educated himself past that point, and not only rose to become the president and co-owner of a very successful factory operation in South Bend, but also was a highly talented musician, and wrote short stories which appeared in the major national magazines of the period. His factory produced industrial pipe fittings which were sold all over the world, including the British Isles and France. He was a church goer, but he was typical of that branch of early A.A. which emphasized the psychological aspects of the program. For more about his life and his interpretation of the program -- people came from cities and towns many miles away to hear his beginners lessons on the steps -- see *The Factory Owner & the Convict.*)

The dispute over whether black members would be allowed to attend the open meeting dates from this point when it started being held in the basement of St. James Cathedral. This is where the Anglican (Episcopalian) bishop for that part of Indiana presides. It is a small but quite beautiful Gothic style church where you can easily imagine you are back in a rather high church setting in old England: in the main sanctuary, which has a quiet, medieval Catholic feeling, the bishop dons his miter and ceremonial robes to preside over mass, while the choir chants the ritual and clouds of incense billows from burning censers. They have the Stations of the Cross on the walls, and people cross themselves with holy water on entering the sanctuary and genuflect before taking their seat in one of the pews.

The meeting room in the church basement is underneath the sanctuary: although the ceiling is fairly low, the room is quite large and can hold a large number of people on folding chairs, arranged around long tables or however one wishes. This basement room was the site of the weekly open meeting which was now the point of controversy: some of the white A.A.'s did not want Bill Hoover, Jimmy M., or any other black people coming to that gathering.

Now Bill Williams was aware that the real issues here were arising from a set of strange taboos that still dominated racial relations in the United States back in the 1940's, a set of deeply felt but primitive and irrational superstitions which operated somewhat like the rules of the caste system in ancient India. In the north, it was not formalized in the way of the American south, with signs posted indicating separate drinking fountains for black and white people, separate waiting rooms in train and bus stations, and so on, but many white people still felt this to a degree down at a visceral level. This taboo applied both to eating and drinking from the same cups and plates and glasses, and sitting in chairs right next to one another. Bill was also aware of the bizarre myth, believed by many whites in both north and south, that all black men continually lust in their hearts after white women. This sexual myth was embarrassing to talk about openly, but it was not only nonsense, it was dangerous nonsense -- the fuel that had fed more than one anti-black lynch mob.

Evans Avenue Bill had decided that spiritual principles required that the black and white A.A.'s gathered in Bill Hoover's house bring these taboos and myths out into the open, and discuss them in the light of the spirit, and in terms of the basic principles of the program. They could not "talk around" the real issues forever, and ever hope to heal any of the wrongs that were being done.

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## **BILL WILLIAMS CONTINUES HIS STORY**

BILL WILLIAMS: I said, "The thing of it is, and I know -- I ain't dumb, I ain't stupid -- I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid. The point is, if there's only one seat here -- that's just this one seat that's open -- your wife come to this meeting, you don't want her sitting there close to me." I said, "That's it." The guy looked at me! And .... I said, "She's not thinking about me, and I'm not thinking about her. *I got my wife at home.* I'm not thinking about [your wife]."

So further come to further. Look at me, and they smile. They say, "Yeah," said, "that's it, Bill."

I said, "I know it is ...."

JIMMY H.: And that made it better there in South Bend when you guys got together.

GLENN: Do you remember? -- does anybody know? -- were they having the open meetings at St. James church at that point, or was it at the Hotel LaSalle?

RAYMOND: Bill [Hoover] said it was at St. James Cathedral.

JIMMY H.: Yeah, I think he told me that -- that was later on. When did he die? Bill, Bill -- cause I met Bill Hoover.

RAYMOND: He just die about '85, '86.

JIMMY H.: Yeah, cause I was up there before he died. And he came to that meeting -- that was Brownie -- but didn't they have a meeting named after him there, didn't they have a . . . ?

BILL WILLIAMS: Bill Hoover?

JIMMY H.: Bill Hoover.

BILL WILLIAMS: Yes, there's a group named after Bill Hoover.

RAYMOND: "Interracial Group."

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## **THE INTERRACIAL GROUP & BROWNIE'S**

### *Two early South Bend answers to racism*

The two most influential black leaders in South Bend A.A. during the early period were Bill Hoover, who died in 1986, and Brownie (Harold Brown), who came into A.A. around 1950, shortly after these events, and died in 1983.

### **Brownie**

Brownie was a quite flamboyant speaker who did powerful leads, spent more time doing things with the white A.A. members, and was perhaps better known by them. There was a weekly group meeting in South Bend which was known even after his death simply as "Brownie's meeting." Bill Williams and Jimmy H. were partially confusing Brownie and Bill Hoover. But Brownie was also extremely important. The large basement meeting room at 616 Pierce Street, just off Portage Avenue near downtown South Bend, is currently referred to as "Brownie's," because of its linkage with Harold Brown's heritage. One can see the old barber's chair (no one remembers where it originally came from) in which Brownie would sit during meetings. There are a number of A.A. meetings held there every week, attended by a relatively equal mix of white and black people.

There are also A.A. groups still making month-long pilgrimages to Brownie's every year from many miles away, to do honor to him and Nick Kowalski (a Polish brick layer and ex-con who had found A.A. while imprisoned in the Indiana state penitentiary at Michigan City for murder). These are white A.A.'s, who received the message either from Red K., who had had Brownie and Nick as his sponsors, or from some of the people whom Red in turn had sponsored. The spiritual message which one heard from Brownie (who was black) and his friend Nick (who was white) was so powerful that it could bring alcoholics from drunkenness and anger to sobriety and serenity of life even at second and third hand. There is a group from Ann Arbor, Michigan, making this pilgrimage every

year, as well as several groups from Chicago and its suburbs. There is also a group in Lansing, Michigan, which sometimes comes to South Bend, and another group in Bloomington in southern Indiana, which invites people from Brownie's like Raymond to speak to them. There are also supposed to be groups as far away as Florida and the New York City area composed of people who continue to honor Brownie's and Nick's memories.

### **Bill Hoover and the Interracial Group**

The meeting with which Bill Hoover was most closely associated was officially called the "Interracial Group," to signal clearly, to anyone reading through the list of A.A. meetings, that there would be numerous black people present at that meeting. When there were enough black members in South Bend, they rented a building on Ardmore Trail and set up what they called an Interracial Club House, to continue the work that had been begun in the house meetings in Bill Hoover's home.

A later version of the Interracial Group was revived around 1975, when some of the black A.A.'s in South Bend again were feeling unwanted and out of place in many of the white groups. Some blacks felt that they could not talk openly in white meetings about many of their deepest resentments and fears: as this faction among the black A.A.'s perceived it, the white dominated meetings allowed white alcoholics, especially if they were newcomers, to be angry and obnoxious on occasion (at least up to a point), whereas black members were expected to be genial, smiling Uncle Toms at all times. This revived Interracial Group continued on for a few years after Bill Hoover's death in 1986, but the last mention of it in the meeting list put out by the South Bend-Mishawaka A.A. Central Service Office was in 1990 -- it seems to have died off at the end, because certainly by the 1990's there were many A.A. groups in the area which had both black and white members and where everyone present felt comfortable talking about anything they wanted. Some had just a few black members, but there were other groups where some of the black members played the major leadership role and at least 40% of the people present would be black. A group which was specially labeled the "Interracial Group" seemed like an anachronism by then.

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## **SOUTH BEND IN 1948 AND 1949**

### *Raymond and Jimmy H.'s Summary*

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Raymond I. and Jimmy H. then summarized what they felt was the real significance of what happened in South Bend back in 1948 and 1949, based upon what they already knew, and what Bill Williams had talked about so movingly today.

**RAYMOND:** Tell me, here's something I never got straight. Bill say it was either you or Earl Redmond, one of you all made the statement, "Same whiskey as get a white man drunk, 'll get a black man drunk."



BILL WILLIAMS: Earl made that one.

RAYMOND: That was Earl ....

JIMMY H.: Yeah, one of the main reasons, I believe, after they came -- I'm just carrying around, cause he told the story already. But I'm just saying, after he came -- after they came -- and then they got in harmony, and they said "You're right," and so they got together, and I think they open up the doors. Everybody got in the spirit, and ... that's the main thing ....

RAYMOND: After he left, after he came and talked, Ken Merrill, he played piano, and in playing the piano, this was the way of accepting blacks into the program -- Ken Merrill. I wasn't there now.

BILL WILLIAMS: I was there.

RAYMOND: But you said, after they played the piano, this was making the amends.

JIMMY H.: And I hear what was said, and so I know now how it got started, how that integration came about -- spiritually -- not officially through politics. Because I found out something here today, and I've heard it leaped through, but I heard it talked though and lived through here.

**EDITOR'S NOTE: The small black (or actually interracial) A.A. group in Chicago was for two or three years an absolutely vital support to Bill Hoover and Jimmy Miller in South Bend, and the small group of black A.A.'s that started to form around them there in north central Indiana beginning in 1948, 1949, and 1950. Bill W. made a few more comments about that period, and how he and the Chicago people had helped.**

BILL WILLIAMS: Oh, about three years one of us came -- one, two, or three of us -- came over here every Sunday afternoon ... whatever time it was.

GLENN: To support the people in South Bend. To support those people in South Bend.

BILL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Cause, see at points it was just Bill and some woman -- I forget her name -- black woman.

RAYMOND and GLENN: Jimmy.

BILL WILLIAMS: That was the only two it was.

### **The first black people to join A.A.**

**EDITOR'S NOTE: Then Glenn C. asked Bill Williams to talk about something that happened a few years earlier: how the first black people came into the A.A. program in Chicago in 1945.**

GLENN: Now just to make sure I got it all straightened out, you were born in nineteen oh ...

BILL WILLIAMS: Four.

GLENN: 1904. Now what year did you come into A.A. in Chicago?

BILL WILLIAMS: I think it 'uz, umn ....

JIMMY H.: Forty-five .... It was December '45. Cause Redmond came in in March, you told me ....

BILL WILLIAMS: But anyway, I know Redmond came in in March, and I came in that following December.

GLENN: So when you came to South Bend, then, you had about four or five years sobriety behind you? You had a good program by then.

BILL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, I was pretty solid. I knew by that time that it was going to work. Cause the first -- see, when I first came in, it was my intention to only stay three years. *[Laughter]* And I knew that I would get it, and I would know anything to do in three years.

Because I'm a tailor by trade, and I went to school, and they wanted me three years to finish tailoring. I finished it in one year. I said, if I can finish tailoring in one year, and I can make anything now to be made out of cloth -- and I still do a little of it -- well, I could get this in three years. So I figured in three years, I'd have this -- and I planned to stop going to the meetings! *[Laughter]* . . . .

GLENN: And you're twenty-nine years old now *[Bill had joked earlier that he told people he was twenty-nine]*, and you're still working at it!

JIMMY H.: I'm still working on it!

BILL WILLIAMS: See, this is -- see, Alcoholics Anonymous isn't something that you *get*.

GLENN: Yeah.

BILL WILLIAMS: It's a principle that we *practice*. I been in church since 1911. I been a member of a Baptist church since 1911. I *still* go to Sunday School and church every Sunday. I haven't finished it!

GLENN: Yeah.

BILL WILLIAMS: You can't complete that .... A.A. isn't something that you will *get*. It's a principle that we *practice*. And the word practice is we haven't completed it. You never heard a doctor yet -- how long he's been in business -- there's a sign up there, he's "practicing medicine." He's practicing.

What Alcoholics Anonymous .... It's something said, and I hear people say, and you probably have heard it in your group, that they've been around a few years, and they're "cured." Ain't no such a thing as an alcoholic being cured! There is two incurable diseases, two known incurable diseases. There's alcoholism and ... diabetes .... They are *arrested*. If I was "cured," I could drink this alcohol now and go on and do all right. But see, alcoholism is one of the progressive, incurable diseases. The disease progress even though you don't drink. You don't have to drink to make it get worse! All we have to do is to stay alive [*laughter*] and it will get worse. Two diseases like that, alcoholism and diabetes. Nobody -- doctors are smart, but they've never found a cure for diabetes .... It's something with our system .... I can drink anything [else] I want to, but I can't drink alcohol ....

GLENN: Now when you came into A.A. in Chicago, in 1945, did you hit trouble there too? Was there a color bar .... there in Chicago in 1945? I don't know anything about Chicago.

BILL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah! Yeah, it was the same thing. It's still prejudiced, even now.

GLENN: How did you deal with that? In Chicago, in 1945?

BILL WILLIAMS: Well, I was born in Texas.

RAYMOND: He's a cowboy! [*Laughter*]

JIMMY H.: You all got into A.A., and you had to go out to Evanston, and Joe Diggles and all of 'em, and the guy said, Earl Treat, said and all, "Give us ninety days." Tell us about that ....

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## CONCLUDING EDITORIAL NOTE

### *Preserving the History of Early Black A.A. in Chicago and Gary, Indiana*

There is more discussion on this tape which has still not been transcribed. The Evans Avenue Group in Chicago, the first A.A. group in that city, is still in existence. Evans Avenue, where it was originally located, is near the lake, running north and south between 69th Street and the southern edge of the University of Chicago campus. Raymond I. took Frank N. and me to visit their present building -- they still call it the Evans Avenue Group, but it is now in a slightly different location -- and they have a lot

of memorabilia from the days of early black A.A. in Chicago, which would be helpful in writing a fuller history.

We have on tape Bill Williams' lead which he gave at the Kentucky State A.A. Convention (which Frank N. located for us), and also a tape recording of some of the profound things Bill said on spirituality at a regional conference held in South Bend, Indiana, several years ago. It would be extremely useful if someone in Chicago A.A. would write up an account of his life, and combine it with material about one of the great white A.A. figures from early Chicago A.A., Tex Brown.

In Tex Brown's case, we not only have tape recordings of leads which he gave, and a good deal of information which his widow knows about his life, but also many of his writings, including one of the best descriptions I have ever read of how to engage in the kind of meditation where the mind is emptied (as far as possible) of all images, concepts, and words. This would be an extremely important and enormously valuable historical project.

Jimmy H. in Chicago, who was one of the people at the meeting at Frank N.'s lake house, is still active -- he is going to be the main speaker at the New Year's Eve Dance in South Bend at the end of 2004 -- and Jimmy knows a good deal about early black A.A. in Chicago which needs to be tape recorded and/or put down in writing.

The Northern Indiana Area 22 Archives Committee (and its *Northern Indiana Archival Bulletin*) have a tape recording of a lead given by John Shaifer, one of the great black old timers from Gary, Indiana. This was obtained by Beth M., a member of the Archives Committee, who also interviewed John and got that interview down on tape. He died not long after that, so we are very fortunate to have that material at all.

Past Delegate Ben W., and Mozell (who runs a very successful A.A. meeting place in downtown Gary), have between the two of them a lot of information about early black A.A. in Gary which has never been recorded or transcribed. In the heyday of the great steel mills in Gary, airline pilots would find their way to Chicago's two airports and other places in the area by looking for the huge plume of smoke rising up into the air from the smelters, which could be seen from an enormous distance away. It was a very important industrial city.

Jimmy Miller and Bill Williams have both died within the past three years. Raymond I., Frank N., Brooklyn Bob Firth (also now dead, a good Irish Catholic, see some of his sayings in *The Higher Power of the Twelve Step Program: For Believers & Non-Believers*), and Glenn C. represented A.A. at Jimmy's funeral. She left the special request that someone sing at her service, "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." This was Jimmy's great spirit expressed perfectly.

And we've lost that marvelous man Bill Williams now too. Raymond I., a younger man he sponsors named Charles, Frank N., and Glenn C. drove to Chicago to represent South Bend A.A. at Bill's funeral.

So we are losing these people rapidly. Tape cassettes and pieces of paper get lost or damaged. One can only hope that one or two A.A. folks in Chicago and Gary will begin collecting and writing up this material while the people, the tape recordings, and the documents are still around. Otherwise the rest of this inspiring story will be lost forever.

There are things that A.A. people all around the world can learn from the courage and dedication of Bill Williams, Bill Hoover, Jimmy Miller, Brownie, Goshen Bill, and their friends. It does not matter how badly you believe the cards are stacked against you when you come into A.A. You can get sober and your spirit can learn to soar to the heights. They showed us how to do it. Their lives were God's message to all of us.