

Harriet Wood Hill

Born: April 5, 1922

Death: September 22, 2006

Father:

Mother:

Harriet Wood Hill spent 26 years as an officer of the Grand Rapids Police Department, the force's first African American policewoman and its first female detective.

An only child, she was born in Boyce City, MI, in 1922. She lived in Grand Haven as a child, where she was a member of the Methodist Church. In tenth grade her family moved to Grand Rapids, where she attended South High School and joined St. Phillips Episcopal Church in the southeast part of the city.

Hill considered herself a product of both her parents' personalities: Her mother, the first African American to graduate from high school in Mecosta, MI, was strong-willed and progressive. It was through her mother's resourcefulness that Hill remembers never going hungry while growing up during the Depression. Hill described her father, who had a fourth-grade education, as a hard worker. He worked in tanneries until the onset of rheumatism prevented him from doing such labor.

When her father became disabled, Hill's mother supported the family by taking on day work. They also had a rooming house that lodged chauffeurs and maids who served Grand Haven's summer arrivals.

After graduating from high school, Hill worked for a year and then went to Grand Rapids Junior College with a plan of becoming a nurse. She got married soon after, however, and did not complete her schooling.

In 1951, the Grand Rapids Police Department hired Hill as a clerk typist in its Records and Identification Bureau. She faced blatant racism from her fellow employees. When a secretary and a sergeant invited her to join their coffee klatch, some of the members decided to leave. One co-worker, a woman, stated outright that she refused to work alongside African Americans. The co-worker treated Hill so poorly that the co-worker's manager denied her a raise as a penalty for such poor behavior.

Because she was a minority, Hill didn't want to draw attention to herself or "rock the boat." She resolved to do her job no matter what — even if it meant escaping occasionally to the restroom to cry. The experience, she said, made her a stronger person.

During her time as a clerk typist, Hill found herself admiring the work female police officers performed with abused and neglected children. Because their efforts inspired her so much, she

applied to become a police officer as well. In 1955, she joined the ranks of the Grand Rapids Police Department as its first African American female police officer.

She asked not be assigned to the special investigation squad, which was supervised by black officers who handled any cases involving African Americans. Hill worried that working exclusively on such cases would eventually make her feel unqualified to handle cases involving white people. So the chief placed her in the juvenile division.

Staffed by four policewomen, the juvenile division handled any matters involving children, which encompassed everything from delinquency to sex cases, abuse to murder. To avoid drawing attention to themselves while doing this sort of work, they typically wore plainclothes — though they still toted their guns in their purses — and drove unmarked cars.

In 1977, GRPD asked Hill to join its detective bureau, making her the department's first woman detective in its 106-year history. At the time, the detective bureau numbered 38 men, including Hill's partner Mike Schuiteman and her sergeant, Sgt. Thornton Oosta.

The next year, 1978, Hill was nominated for Officer of the Year.

As a detective, Hill worked forgery cases, which often involved stolen and fraudulent checks. The primarily white-collar, banking-oriented environment contrasted greatly with what she had experienced in the juvenile division, where she often entered neglected, filthy homes.

Hill retired in 1981. In retrospect, she said in her later years, she didn't recommend a career in criminal justice or police work for young women because of the stress. Instead, she said, she would steer them more toward probation or social work. Nevertheless, she professed great satisfaction in sometimes running into people whom she had helped when they were children and knowing she had made a difference in their lives.

After battling cancer, Hill died in September 22, 2006. Her survivors include her husband of 63 years, Clarence ("Cokie"), two children, five grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren.

Prepared by: Vivi Hoang

Other Resources:

"She's Detective, The Spokesmans Review, June 6, 1977,  
<https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=MvBLAAAIBAJ&sjid=wO0DAAAIBAJ&pg=6882%2C2495164>

<http://www.lifestorynet.com/obituaries/harriet-hill.16338>