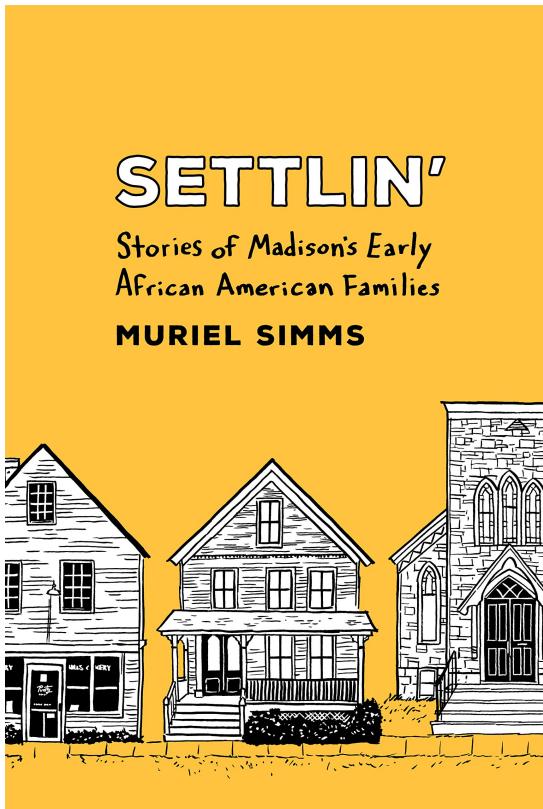




## SETTLIN': STORIES OF MADISON'S EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES DISCUSSION GUIDE



***Stories are bridges. They connect us – one life with another and another.***

Oral history is a type of story. It's true, not made up; recorded verbatim without dramatic flourish or artistic prose yet rich in detail. The plot is one of ordinary life -- ordinary people doing, for the most part, ordinary things. It's these ordinary people who are the storytellers. You might say that oral history is the plain side of the history coin, the side without a famous face. Yet it's this plain side that holds more reality about living in a particular time and place than any history book or bio.

Which is why our Big Read for January is oral histories of early African American families in Madison, passed down to their descendants. Titled **SETTLIN': STORIES OF MADISON'S EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES**, author Muriel Simms fills cavernous gaps in the local historical record.

Simms writes in the Introduction,

*"Only a fraction of what is known about Madison's earliest African American settlers and the vibrant and cohesive communities they formed is preserved in archives and libraries. The rest is contained in the hearts and minds of successive generations."*

Simms is not the author of these stories but the recorder of them. The 30 storytellers whose lives she lifts up reveal a Madison from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onward where African Americans worked persistently for the education, jobs and housing they could get here.

It wasn't easy. In the early 1950s, one could graduate from the UW with a degree in teaching, like storyteller Dolores Simms Greene, only to be told by Philip Falk that he wouldn't hire any Negro as long as he was superintendent in Madison, which he was until 1963. (By 1963 there were four full-time African American teachers in Madison Public Schools.) One couldn't drive a city bus in the 1940s unless they were white or passed as white, as Charles Waldon did. Black women couldn't try on clothes in some downtown stores like Manchester's, Baron's and Yost's,



## A Call to Justice and Mercy

---

until women like Muriel and Dolores Simms' mother respectfully demanded change. White landlords wouldn't rent to Blacks. White bankers wouldn't make loans.

SETTLIN' is filled with these un-settling stories told by the people on the receiving end of institutional and individual animosity and discrimination toward Black people.

### **HOW TO READ SETTLIN' AS ORAL HISTORY: LOOK FOR COMMON THREADS**

Oral history is not read like fiction or biography. In a collection like SETTLIN', the reward is a richly detailed tapestry of lives. Our job as readers is take in the whole tapestry and see the common threads woven through each life. These common threads reveal the truth of what it was like to be an African American living in Madison.

Here are some common threads to look for:

- Belonging to a community
- Education as a priority
- Neighborhoods – The Bush, East Dayton St., Southside
- Hospitality to students, newcomers, and others passing through
- Discrimination in school, work and housing
- Importance of church
- Menial jobs in spite of education, skill and work ethic
- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Activism for equal rights and opportunity
- Participation in civic/fraternal organizations and extra-curricular activities

### **HOW TO READ SETTLIN' AS ORAL HISTORY: LOOK FOR CONNECTIONS**

Anyone from Madison who reads SETTLIN' can expect to find connections to the storytellers and their stories.

- You may know or know of people whose stories are told in the book. That was the experience of Jeff Bittner, Bethel's Coordinator of Hospitality. When told that SETTLIN' was the Big Read for January, he replied: "I know that book. My father-in-law is in it." Indeed, Francis McMann, a friend of story-teller Edwin Hill Jr., shows up on page 113.
- You may know someone who had a similar experience (but not necessarily the same outcome) as a storyteller. That was the connection for Bethel member Ann Leon when she read the stories of Dolores Simms Greene and Edwin Hill, Jr. Unlike Greene, who

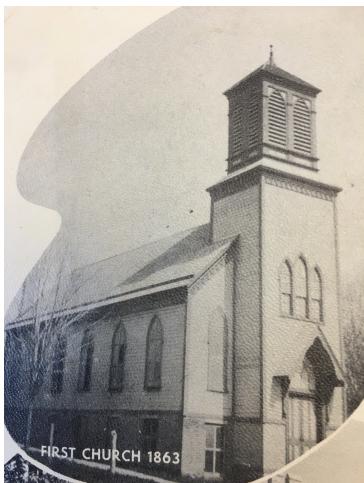


## A Call to Justice and Mercy

was denied a teaching position because she was Black, Ann's mother, Dorothy, was recruited by superintendent Philip Falk to teach at Lincoln School. There, she taught two of Edwin's sisters, Freddie Mae and Evelyn. Edwin tells "...I went to Lincoln School, and all of my sisters went to Lincoln School, we were the only Black kids there...." Dorothy saved notes written to her from both Freddie Mae and Evelyn.

- You and a storyteller may share the same fondness for a particular place.

This is certainly the case with Bethel's first church building, which became the church for the first Black congregation in Madison, St. Paul's AME. Many families whose stories are told in SETTLIN' belonged to St. Paul's. This is the church pictured on the cover of SETTLIN', in the Introduction and below on the right.



The church on the left is the original Bethel Lutheran Church built in 1863 at the corner of Hamilton, Butler and Johnson Streets.

The congregation of St. Paul's AME purchased the building in 1902 for \$150 and moved it to East Dayton Street where it remained for 63 years.

*St. Paul's AME image: Wisconsin Historical Society*



The stories in SETTLIN' are filled with potential points of connection where you or your family share something in common with the storytellers.

- Knew the same people
- Lived in the same neighborhoods
- Shopped in the same stores
- Played in the same parks
- Worked at the same places
- Belonged to the same organizations
- Attended the same schools

Values are deep connection points. In SETTLIN', the values of the storytellers come through loud and clear in the choices they made that prioritize love for God, family, all people, and all of God's creation. These are the common threads that connect all of us.



# A Call to Justice and Mercy

---

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stories were the most memorable for you?
2. How did the stories fill gaps in your understanding of life in Madison for African Americans? What did you learn? What surprised you?
3. What are the emotions you felt as you read these stories? What was unsettling?
4. How does the storytellers' experience of life in Madison compare with your experience or that of your family? With your understanding of life in Madison today for Blacks?
5. What common threads in the stories stood out for you?
6. What connection points did you find with the storytellers and their stories?
7. How do you feel about the importance of oral storytelling and oral history?

## MORE STORIES AND INFORMATION

Interviews with Muriel Simms. (Both segments are approx. 7 minutes

<https://www.wortfm.org/radio-chipstone-madisons-early-african-american-families-part-1/>  
<https://www.wortfm.org/radio-chipstone-madisons-early-african-american-families-part-2/>

Isthmus article about SETTLIN' with a few excerpts from the book

<https://isthmus.com/news/cover-story/oral-history-collection-by-muriel-simms/>

Geraldine Bernard interview (Each part approx. 4 ½ minutes)

Geraldine Bernard was one of the first full-time African American teachers in the Madison School District, hired in the fall of 1962. (Others say that Helen McLean was the first.) In the second of this 3-part interview, she describes her experience getting a teaching job as "the first." <https://www.wortfm.org/madisons-first-african-american-teacher/>

Hill Grocery Store article

<https://madison365.com/hill-grocery-store-the-first-black-owned-business-in-madison-ran-for-70-years/>

Madison 365 History of Black Madison

<https://madison365.com/history-black-madison/>

Carson Gulley's story (Video – 8 minutes)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SvsFtoild0&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SvsFtoild0&feature=emb_logo)