

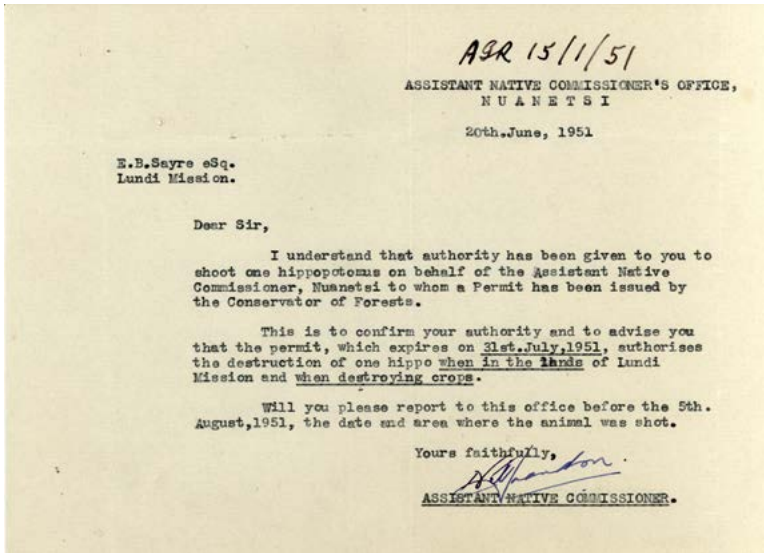
*From the Archives: Tillman Houser: Missionary Educator  
in Zimbabwe*

When someone explores the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, often they come across a collection of official looking documents that doesn't always reveal the human story beneath it. Not every collection is full of photographs and graphically appealing art. (Special thanks go to the Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free Methodist Archive for providing the photographs that help illustrate this article.) It often takes research and additional digging to make official reports come to life. This is the case with the collection of Tillman Houser (April 30, 1922 – July 24, 2014), a Free Methodist missionary to Rhodesia, currently known as Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> This collection contains a wide array of conference and district reports, often in indigenous languages, along with missionary newsletters and official correspondence, but one clue to the potentially interesting human story of this missionary came from his obituary this past year on the Free Methodist World Missions website, which includes a photo of Tillman and his wife Gwen in front of the Volkswagen van they lived in and used to travel into remote parts of Africa during some of their 35 years working in the southern areas of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) along the border with Mozambique and South Africa.<sup>2</sup>



**Tillman and Gwen Houser with their modified Volkswagen van used for taking the Gospel into rural areas of Zimbabwe. (1966) (Photo courtesy of Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free Methodist Archive)**

Tillman and Gwen Houser left for Africa in 1948, with their two small sons on a rusty cargo ship.<sup>3</sup> Initially the family spent two years at the Lundi Mission learning the language and culture, before they moved on to work with the Hlengwe people at the Dumisa Mission in 1951. It was here that besides doing mission work, Houser realized he was also expected to supervise a dozen primary schools (including hiring teachers and overseeing their pay from the government), even though he was not trained in education. Tillman Houser would go on to serve as the Superintendent of the Free Methodist Churches in Zimbabwe, the principal of the Lundi Bible School, and Director of New Life For All (an evangelistic program to teach others about the Gospel).



### A Special Hunting Permit Given to Tillman Houser in 1951 to Shoot a Hippopotamus that was Destroying Local Crops

In 1955 Rev. Houser wrote for a windmill part for the Dumisa Mission, and the Baker Manufacturing Company in Evansville, Wisconsin responded to the request with a part shipped to Southern Rhodesia with the note, "As you are representing a worthy cause, we are glad to send the windmill part ordered 'No Charge,' and are returning your check dated October 17, 1955, amount \$3.00." In response, Rev. Houser drafted this letter detailing some of his daily life in Rhodesia,

Dear Sirs,

It was with real thankfulness that we received part NC-18 so promptly. The thunderstorm season is on and we hated to trust the improvised piece I had made when the correct part was missing. Needless to say, the part is now on and the windmill working efficiently. Natives from miles away sometimes stop to get their water here...

In South Africa missions have been prevalent since the 1800's. Our particular area seemed to be overlooked because it is in the low veldt, meaning generally unhealthful for human occupation, because of malaria and other diseases. Also the usual heat ranges from 90° to 105° everyday for about seven to eight months a year. Then, too, it gets very dry here, some years only 5 to 10 inches of rainfall.

My wife and I came to Rhodesia in 1948 and studied at our first mission station to be started in Rhodesia in 1939. In 1950 we moved down to Dumisa to open up schools and churches in this area, which is in the southeast corner of Southern Rhodesia. Our nearest source of supplies is Fort Victoria 210 miles away...

The men do quite a bit of hunting and fishing. Also they grow enough millet for their family needs along with squash and watermelons... We have to do our share of hunting since it is too far to go to the corner meat market for hamburger. The government has been very kind in allowing us to shoot game for our consumption. The license allows me to get one impala, one kudu or one zebra out of season, bushbuck, wildebeest, buffalo in the regular hunting season. These permits cost about \$20.00 a year. It is very rarely that I shoot my limit because we have a kerosene frig in which we can freeze meat to last two or three weeks. A few months ago, I was able to get a buffalo, which gave us plenty of meat. It was about the size of a big ox.

Our two boys, Terry, 12 years old, and Melden, 8 years old, are both 400 miles away in a home for missionary children. They go to school in the public schools in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia's capital. Mrs. Houser taught them the first few years, but they needed the competition of larger classes and they seem to be getting along very well. While at home they could speak the native language much better than we who spent years studying out of books. They just picked it up by listening.

Thank you again for your generous assistance in sending the windmill part so quickly and with no charge. It was very kind of you. May you have all the joys of a Merry Christmas and a very happy prosperous New Year.

Yours Sincerely, Tillman Houser

**BAKER MANUFACTURING COMPANY**

EVANSVILLE, WISCONSIN

MONITOR  
WATER SYSTEMS  
PUMP JACKS  
WINDMILLS  
JOBBER'S OF  
PLUMBING AND  
HEATING EQUIPMENT

SHIPPED TO

SOLD TO: Tillman Houser  
Dumisa Mission  
P. B. 104  
Port Victorias,  
Southern Rhodesia, Africa

YOUR ORDER NO. 10-17-55 ltr

DATE RECD. 11-1-55 REG. NO. 5560 BAKERMAN Retail APP. SHIP. DATE DATE SHIP. 11-1-55 INV. NO. 5404

ROUTING Air Mail TERMS No charge

ORDERED	DESCRIPTION	SHIPPED	LIST		EXTENSION	DISCOUNT	NET TOTAL
			PRICE	UNIT			
1	WC-18	1			No charge		

As you are representing a worthy cause, we are glad to send the windmill part ordered 'No Charge,' and are returning your check dated October 17, 1955, amount \$3.00.

BAKER MANUFACTURING CO.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE MERCHANDISE LISTED IN THIS INVOICE HAS BEEN PRODUCED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT OF 1938.

DO NOT RETURN ANY GOODS WITHOUT OUR PERMISSION

B. O. - BACK ORDERED  
C. - CANCELLED

FORM NO. B-108

**A Receipt for a Windmill Part Sent “No Charge” in 1955,  
Which resulted in an Informative Thank You Letter**

In a letter from July 1960, Houser notes some of the rising nationalistic tendencies in Africa. He writes to his contact at the General Missionary Board, "... if the missionaries must evacuate Rwanda-Urundi at any time we will have places for some to work here as teachers, nurses, and doctors, etc. until things calm down. We only pray it will not be necessary. As yet we have had no extremist nationalistic feelings here, but it may come. We are far from the centers of population where most of the trouble is. If there is trouble, I'm sure the white people here will do all they can to prevent it. In the event of trouble here, would you wish us to leave or is it best to try to stay on as long as possible?" Houser and his wife remained in Rhodesia through difficult political transitions. They were there in 1970, when a white minority group led by Ian Smith declared Rhodesia an unofficial republic, and in 1980 when officially Zimbabwe gained independence under Robert Mugabe. In 1981 the Housers left Zimbabwe and retired from the mission field after thirty-three years service in the Free Methodist Church.




**Tillman Houser teaching an accelerated school for potential elders at the  
Lundi mission (1967).**

**(Photo courtesy of Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free  
Methodist Archive)**

L 7290 FORM LPP 8

The Occupier, African Administration Department,  
Remembrance Drive,  
P.O. Box 1976,  
SALISBURY

  
CITY OF SALISBURY

Dear Sir/Madam, 14/1/75

**THE HOUSING OF AFRICANS ON YOUR PROPERTY.**

Complaints have been received by this Administration from residents in the various suburbs of Salisbury concerning the numbers of African women and children loitering in their particular area or zone. Reports submitted by the inspectors of this Administration indicate that many householders appear to be unaware of their responsibilities in terms of the provisions of the Africans (Urban Areas) Accommodation and Registration Act and because of this I am addressing you with a two-fold purpose of -

- (1) informing you of your legal responsibilities vis-a-vis the legislation, and
- (2) seeking your co-operation in ameliorating what is rapidly becoming a very real problem.

Within the framework of the legislation provision exists, for the convenience of the employer, for the licensing of what is commonly known as the 'kiss' as licensed private premises in which African employees may be housed on the site upon which they are employed, subject to the compliance with regulations which enable the premises to be so licensed. This, however, also means that should an employer desire to make use of this licensing facility he in turn accepts the responsibility for ensuring that only Africans who are in his bona fide employ reside therein.

There have been cases reported of Africans demanding quarters for their families in licensed private premises in the European area. Legal married accommodation for African families can only be obtained in an African Township if the applicant can meet certain requirements, i.e. the production of a marriage certificate, that he is employed within the Municipal area, and then only if accommodation is available for him and his family in an African Township. Therefore, any request from your employee for his wife and children to be allowed to live with him in his quarters should be refused.

However, you as a licensee of Private Premises may authorize your servant's wife and children to visit him for a maximum period of 7 days. If you wish to take advantage of this provision you are required by law to write to this Administration, quoting the names of those concerned and giving the dates of the visit. This must be done within 24 hours of the family's arrival and a copy of the letter should be handed to your servant. This Department is empowered to revoke your authority but would normally do so only if overcrowding occurred or the authority was abused.

The intention of this legislation is to ensure that householders are not obliged to either turn their servant's dependents away, or house them illegally in the event of their sudden arrival in Salisbury. Please, therefore enforce the 7 day period strictly and avoid embarrassment to all concerned.

There are procedures laid down whereby a temporary permit may be issued to enable an African woman and/or child needing medical treatment to stay with her husband for a period longer than 7 days. If such treatment is certified by the relevant District Medical Officer as being unavailable in the Tribal Trust Lands, permits may be granted upon application to this office but will be issued only for such period as may be deemed necessary.

When one considers the large number of unemployed Africans, men, women and children, who are now being illegally housed in the European areas, with or without the householder's permission, and that some of these Africans may well have criminal records, I feel you will agree that the relevant legislative provisions, as employed above, are necessary. The legislation has placed a duty on this Administration to see that the various provisions of the Act are carried out. To do so it employs inspectors who have authority in terms of Section 21 of the Act to enter, examine and inspect private premises. One of these inspectors may, from time to time, either during the day or at night, or in the early hours of the morning, inspect your African Quarters. Should anyone other than your own bona fide servant/s be found occupying your licensed quarters you may risk prosecution, as do they. You should therefore inform your employees that under no circumstances are they to harbour other Africans in their quarters. Your servant has been given a circular letter, written in the vernacular, clearly explaining his responsibilities in this regard.

Please do not hesitate to contact this Administration if you require clarification on any point and should you personally wish to read the Act, it is obtainable at the Government Publications Office and is known as the Africans (Urban Areas) Accommodation and Registration Act (Chap. 110), and Sections 14 - 25 and 32 are of particular interest to householders.

Yours faithfully,  
*[Signature]*

Presented by *[Signature]* *[Signature]*

## A Notification of Rules and Inspections in 1975 About Black Africans Living in White Residential Areas for the City of Salisbury

While his initial interaction with the church in Rhodesia seemed to be fairly positive, Houser was not completely content with the slow growth of the church as he saw it. In 1962 and 1963, he and his wife went to study during their missionary furlough at the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon, which was then led by Dr. Donald McGavran. This seems to have sparked a long interest in the issues of church growth. Houser writes in a letter to Byron Lamson of the Free Methodist General Missionary Board in June of 1963 about his return to Rhodesia,

The study at the Institute of Church Growth has convinced us more than ever that someone should be touring completely among the churches in Southern Rhodesia. As we left Rhodesia, the mission concurred in our desire to more freely circulate in our area. To make this possible they signed a letter written by me October 2, 1961, which I am sure must be in your files. May we have permission to raise the amounts listed while we are on deputation this summer? I am not certain about the present cost of a Kombi Volkswagen.

We plan to build cupboards, beds, table, frig and stove right into the Kombi and then live in it as our home. In Eugene emphasis has been strongly placed on lay leadership training; getting the members of the church to win their own friends and relatives for Christ. It is our firm conviction that this training should begin very soon. They cannot come to us, we must go to them. Even though it may be necessary for me to do the school inspecting, I believe a good deal of time can be devoted to this training.

This passion for Church growth led Houser to complete a Master's degree at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1976 with Charles Kraft entitled *Missing the Mark: An Analysis of Church Growth and Decline in the Free Methodist Church of Natal-Pondoland, 1903-1963 with an Appendix on Southern Rhodesia*. Along with a memoir in his life, Tillman Houser also published *Free Methodist and other Missions in Zimbabwe* (2009), which helps bring his depth of knowledge and experience together for future scholars.





**The Houser's van equipped with Bibles, books, and tracts for discipleship  
in remote Southern Rhodesia (1966).**

**(Photo courtesy of Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free  
Methodist Archive)**



Pamphlet on Tithing in the Ndebele Language

An archival box of conference reports, district minutes, and official correspondence may not look like much at first glance, but such collections contain human stories of people who dedicated their lives to answering the call of God on their lives. People like Tillman Houser, whose passing last year only serves to remind us that we are constantly surrounded by unknown heroes of the faith working in the harvest and building the kingdom of God, both here at home and in the farthest corners of the globe.



**Tillman Houser giving communion at a new church plant under a tree at Chengwe Maranda reserve (1966).**

**(Photo courtesy of Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free Methodist Archive)**

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at [archives@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:archives@asburyseminary.edu).

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Most images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images, unless otherwise indicated. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images. Again, a special thanks to the Marston Memorial Historical Center and Free Methodist Archive for the use of photographs to illustrate the ministry of Tillman Houser in Zimbabwe.

<sup>2</sup> <http://fmcusa.org/fmwm/2014/08/12/tillman-houser-pioneer-missionary-passes-away/>

<sup>3</sup> "Let Me Tell You..." *A Memoir*. Tillman Houser, 2007, pp. 57.