

O. P. Williams Oral History Transcript

O. Platt Williams is a distinguished civil and labor rights activist and co-founder of the Sonoma County chapter of the NAACP. He has been honored with the Jack Green Civil Liberties Award and, in cooperation with the Peace and Justice Center on Sebastopol Avenue, a library has been dedicated in his name. Here he recounts the early days of the grass roots effort to fight discrimination and the wonderful support that came from all sectors of Sonoma County, especially the Petaluma Jewish community and folks like Hugh Coddling.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

I went to a meeting in Petaluma, of the Democratic Central Committee, and I met a guy whose name was Williams too; he was a Director for the NAACP on the West Coast. He asked me about getting the organization started up here and I did. So, when I first started, I met with Gilbert Gray, and we had to get fifty members. There weren't fifty black people in Sonoma County then. I went to the Board of Supervisors, and the Chamber of the Board of Supervisors helped me get five members. So, then I went to the City Council, and I did the same thing, I got five members, and so I had enough to send in for it, we had gotten 300 signatures. From that day on, we started working.

When we first got organized, black people weren't allowed to sleep in the hotels or motels and, suddenly, I organized on Sunday and it made the Press Democrat, and on that Monday the doors were opened. From that day on we marched in Santa Rosa and Petaluma. But, at that time, we weren't getting service in cafes and, especially, Woolworth's. It took about five years before we got service at the Silver Dollar Saloon. On a Sunday, I went to church, the First Christian Church, in Santa Rosa, and we all met up at the Silver Dollar and they wouldn't serve us--we had our lawyers there, we had the Press Democrat there. We sued them and we won the case--\$14,000, took them out of business.

We had a lot of friends, white and black, because there weren't too many blacks in Sonoma County then. So, we got organize labor to helps us and we helped them. They were organizing the apple pickers in Sebastopol, we walked picket lines over there and they started working with us all the way through. And that's the way we got started. The Jewish community helped us a lot too. Joe Rappaport was the one who invited me to the meetings. He helped with home loans and a lot of things. We also started meeting at the Board of Education. We demanded that they start putting black teachers in the schools and a human rights person in the office.

I was instrumental in getting Melba Meals here. She was part of the Little Rock Nine students who integrated Central High in Little Rock,

Arkansas. I had contact with a person who worked with the NAACP in Little Rock and he recommended her. Melba came here and lived with Dr. and Mrs. McCabe. She stayed and finished high school at Montgomery High and now lives in Marin County.

When we were doing the local marches in front of Woolworth's and Kress stores, I worked for Sears at the time. My store manager came over and said, "We want you to cut this out". I said, "Nope. When they start serving the blacks, then we'll stop." I was only about twenty-five then, just got married . . . I was with Sears for thirty-seven years, and then Analy High School as the grounds superintendent. When I came to Santa Rosa, I went to Santa Rosa Junior College. I was walking in the rain and the Chief of Police, Dutch Floor, saw me and asked me where I was going to college. He wanted to know my background. He said, "I'll make sure my boys will pick you up every day it's raining and you can walk the rest." I'll never forget it. He was a kind gentleman. It was in print that, during the march in front of Woolworth's, he threatened to put us all in jail, but he was kind, he had a heart. You see, the County, the big aristocrats, put pressure on him. Larry Zuur might have been the mayor at the time, he was a good man.

When we had to go somewhere, we would pass a hat around to put the money in, so I would go this way, and Gilbert Gray would go that way, go to Washington, go here and there. When Dr. Martin Luther King was killed, we got money from the white people; Hugh Coddling helped us, he donated money so me, Gilbert Gray, and Ernest Spague could attend the funeral. Dr. King always use to come to San Francisco and gave a lot of speeches there. We were lucky because we had a lot of white support.

When I first came here, I lived with my aunt on Deturk Street and attended Santa Rosa Junior College, I ran track and held a record in the 440 yard dash for about fifteen years. It was a small town then, maybe just five black families. My family wanted me to go back to Louisiana but I stayed and I'm glad I did. Some of the black families that came here came from Marin County where they worked in the shipyards. When the war was over, then they had to find another place to go and they came up here to pick grapes. That's backbreaking labor. I did it, but I said no more.

After I lost my wife, I knew some kids that needed some help, so I had a lot of foster children, at one time five whites and three blacks. I had to march in marches to fight to get this house right here. My friend wanted to sell it to me and the people in the neighborhood started having meetings against it, and we started marching, it was about 1965. I guess I got some of this spirit from my mother she was always a fighter. I'm glad I'm here.

I have some great memories of seeing the big bands play on the Russian River too. Louis Armstrong played; he'd come up from San

Francisco on a Friday night and leave on Sunday at night. It was a regular thing that he showed up. Jazz brought people together.

With all these accomplishments O. Platt Williams was recognized with the Jack Green Civil Liberties Award, because of his labor organizing work. Jack Green was one of the gentlemen who was tarred and feathered, so it's in memory of his ordeal and accomplishments. With this comment, Mr. Williams reminds us that it was the Jewish Community of Petaluma that gave the NAACP a lot of support. In 2002, in cooperation with the Peace and Justice Center on Sebastopol Avenue, a library was dedicated in his name. Understandably, this is O. Platt Williams proudest moment.