

## **ORAL HISTORY OF THOMAS WILLIAMSON, JR.**

First Interview  
September 18, 2013

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewee is Tom Williamson, and the interviewer is Precious Boone. The interview is taking place in Tom's office in Washington, DC on September 18, 2013. This is the first interview.

Ms. Boone: Good afternoon.

Mr. Williamson: Good afternoon. Nice to see you, Precious.

Ms. Boone: Nice to see you, too, Tom. So we should start by getting a little bit of your background and some of your foundation. So I wanted to know how far back in your family's history can you go? Did you know your grandparents? Your great-grandparents?

Mr. Williamson: I know a little bit about my grandparents even though I only met my grandmother on the paternal side twice and I never met my maternal grandparents, in part because of my maternal grandmother died of—I think it was tuberculosis—when my mother was only three years old. So she never really got to know her mother. And my maternal grandfather—I don't think it mattered if I did. I was just an infant and I didn't remember that at all.

Ms. Boone: Do you have any stories or anything that your parents told you about them that you found interesting?

Mr. Williamson: Well, yeah. On the, as I say, it would be mostly on the paternal side. My father grew up on a farm in North Carolina, near Evergreen, North Carolina. There were thirteen kids in the family, I think twelve of them were biological children and one was adopted. My grandfather

was named George Williamson, owned his own land. My dad told me that made a significant difference in how you were treated as a black person in North Carolina during that time. Also, he, my grandfather, had strong views about what the girls in the family would do. I forget whether it was eight girls and five brothers, or I think that's what it was, or whether it was the other way around. But, my dad, my father told me that my grandfather forbid any of the Williamson girls from working in the houses of white people.

Ms. Boone: Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: He did not want them to be employed as domestics growing up. Now, I think some later ended up working as domestics as adults, but as the Williamson girls, he did not want them working in the house of any white person.

Ms. Boone: Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: Now, my father said that his father was a fairly, sort of tough guy who mainly wanted the boys to help on the farm, and that created a conflict with my dad, because he wanted, my dad wanted to get an education. And, in this county, when you got to junior high school, apparently you had to take a test to qualify for junior high school. And the place where you took the test was about twenty miles from where my dad lived. And my grandfather had a car or truck and he could have driven him, but since he wasn't interested in encouraging an education, he didn't do that. So, my father got up very, very early in the morning,

and really in the middle of the night, and walked the twenty miles so that he could take the test.

Ms. Boone: Impressive.

Mr. Williamson: Amen. He kind of, I don't know if it would be fair to say that he ran away from home, but he left North Carolina after junior high school, I think, so he could come North to go to high school and later to college in Baltimore, Maryland. One of his, maybe one or a couple of his older brothers had already relocated to Baltimore. And his favorite older brother, Roosevelt, was both a dock worker and an entrepreneur. And so my dad came and stayed with him.

Ms. Boone. And so after that, I understand that your dad also joined the military, correct?

Mr. Williamson: Well, he went to Morgan. It took him seven years to get through Morgan, because he didn't have enough money to pay his fees. And just before they would allow students to take exams, they would bring up a list of students who hadn't paid their fees and he would get kicked out of the exam class and go and appeal to the Dean. So he would find jobs. He did all kinds of jobs. This was probably the worst time in modern American history to be going to college. This was between 1930 and 1937, so this was the Depression. As you know, often conditions in the black community are Depression-like when they are normal in the white community, but you can imagine how much worse they were in the 1930's for African-Americans. So, he eventually got

his degree. And I think he had wanted to go to medical school, but he couldn't afford that, so he, I think, was getting ready to be a teacher, or decided he might try teaching. But then World War II came along and he was drafted I think in late 1941. After he reported for duty, he was offered the opportunity to take a test to qualify for officer candidate school. And he took that test and succeeded so that he would start a training as a-- to become a second lieutenant when he first started in the military.

And then, as it turned out, he did most of his training at Fort Huachuca in Arizona. As you may know, at this time, the Army was still segregated. He was not actually deployed overseas. He had wanted to be one of the Tuskegee Airmen, but he couldn't qualify because he had vision problems. And so he-- his vision wasn't good enough to be pilot. So the war came to an end, and really before he could get himself out of the military he was informed that he was being assigned to be a part of the occupation of Japan, starting in 1947. And so, the whole family, as did many American military families, moved to Japan. My dad was stationed in Yokohama. My mother and I-- I was born in 1946, so I was about a year old when we headed off to Japan. And it was a pretty good time for my mother, actually, because even though the army was segregated, because my father was an officer, he may have been a captain by then, we were entitled to have two servants. So my mother had one child and two servants for

those years. And then my brother was born in 1949, just before we left Japan. And I think after that everything was downhill domestically because she had two children, and my sister was born in 1951. No more servants. We're back in the U.S.

Ms. Boone: (Laughter) Right.

Mr. Williamson: My father was sent off to Korea to be in combat in the Korean War. I think it was 1950. And by that time, President Truman had issued an Executive Order in 1948 ordering integration of the U.S. military. So I think-- you know I was actually reading an article the other day about General Ridgway, who may, I think may have been in charge of— well MacArthur was there, and Ridgway was one of the generals in charge of our forces in Korea—but he was apparently a believer in integration. And so, I think my father was among the first black officers to command white troops. At the time there was a great worry that white people would just say, “Well, we’re not going to take orders from a black man.” And there were plenty of racial tensions in the military, but my dad served there. I believe he won a Bronze Star. And then the family was, before he left, he had been stationed in the Oakland/San Francisco area. And so that’s where we were while he was away at war. You know, I was only four or five years old, so I had some sense that he was-- well when you are a small kid, you tend to think of war like a football game or something, like a competition, and not worry as much as I’m sure my mother did about what could

happen. But fortunately, Dad was not wounded or killed and so he came back from Korea.

And around that time, he-- when he came back, he was later assigned to Fort Story, Virginia. But, my mother and father had decided that when I started school-- I was the oldest of the three children. I think I mentioned that my brother George was born in Yokohama, Japan in 1949, and my sister Brenda was born in San Francisco, at the Letterman Army Hospital, at I think the Presidio in 1951. And I guess by '51, I was getting pretty close to school age. My parents decided they wanted us children to stay in the same school system rather than move around the country the way military children typically do. They didn't tell us specifically, but I think one of the concerns was that many of the military bases were in the South and they didn't want us to be going to segregated schools. And so we-- the sacrifice that our family made was that for a period of about six years where my dad was stationed places—he was in Fort Story, Virginia and he was sent to Alaska for a while, and then he came back and was stationed at the Pentagon and was at Fort Myer, Virginia. During those years we usually only saw him one month out of the year when he was on leave, except for a couple of summers when we came East. In the summer of '53 the whole family came East and spent the summer visiting with him when he was at Fort Story, Virginia.

And then in the summer of '58, I think it was '57 or '58—'57 I guess, yeah I think it was '57, yeah summer of '57. I persuaded my mother, well I persuaded my parents to let me come and visit my father by myself. Now today, they would probably be either sued or arrested for allowing me to do what I kept pestering them about, but I was very fascinated with trains. This was back when people actually used passenger trains. In fact, when we had come back in '53, we had, my mother, brother and sister and I, had come on, taken a train across the country. And I wanted to do it by myself, and I was like ten years old. And what they agreed to, after extensive negotiations (Laughter), was that I would fly back to Washington. I haven't questioned my mother about that, but I think the theory was, if somehow I was going to disappear, they wanted me to spend the summer with my dad before that happened. Then I could take a train back, by myself. Because taking the train meant that you, when you went from Washington to Chicago, you not only had to change trains, you had to change train stations. Because of the way the American railroad system was set up. I had studied a lot about that as a ten year-old. So I knew I wanted to take the Capitol Limited train into Baltimore-- Baltimore, Chesapeake and Ohio, no it was the Baltimore, Ohio, Chesapeake—they called it the B&O for short—and then I was going to change stations and get on a train called the California Zephyr, which had dome cars.

Ms. Boone: Okay. What's a dome car?

Mr. Williamson: It's a two level railroad car, where on top, there is, it's a glass top, glass or plastic. Anyway, you can look out of the top of the train. And so, I knew that there were going to be very scenic vistas that you could see sitting up in the dome cars, traveling through the Rocky Mountains, and then later through the Sierra-Nevada, when you go to California. And you know, obviously to be allowed to do this, I had to be a kind of strange child. (Laughter) So, I actually, of course, I didn't think it was all that strange, since I was used to being whoever I was. But I suspect the other people on the train, who were just about all white, though it odd that I would give lectures in the dome car about what things we were going to see and do during the day. Like I would tell them we were going through forty-six tunnels and this was the town where they're going to wash the train cars and that sort of thing.

One of the things, well I never talked to my parents about it. Well one reason, in retrospect, that I think they really didn't need to worry much about my being by myself, even though I was so young, is that the, you know, the people who made the beds and took care of the passengers on the train were Pullman Porters, all of whom were African-American then. You didn't know about Pullman Porter.

Ms. Boone: No.

Mr. Williamson: You should know about Pullman Porters. A. Phillip Randolph was the head of the union of Pullman Porters, which was one of the most, if not the most important African-American union in the first half of the

twentieth century. And also, if you read the story about the migration of black people from the South to the North, you'll find the kind of early scouts and pioneers for moving were these Pullman Porters because they actually went outside of the South and travelled all around the country and saw that you didn't have to have a segregated society in America.

But anyway, there were all these brothers who, I am sure, when they saw me, you know, on the train, I – for all of them – they were going to be my uncle.

Ms. Boone: Right.

Mr. Williamson: Well anyway, I made it back.

Ms. Boone: So tell me a little more about your childhood. So your mom was for the most part, raising you by herself.

Mr. Williamson: Well, I say for the most part. From the age, I'd say, six to eleven. Also, it's very different, when you say "raising by herself," obviously, my Dad was providing for us. We didn't see him as often as we would like. But, we were certainly aware that he was an important, positive presence. If we got too out of line, our mother would point out that this was something she'd have to tell our dad about. That was a major deterrent to getting out of line. You didn't want to cross Dad. He was a wonderful, loving father; but, you know, back then, if you misbehaved, your parents got a strap out and gave you a whooping. It was normal.

So, what my mother—who's an incredibly resourceful person, who did have a big challenge because the town that we settled in—not really by design, but just kind of by chance—was an all-white community where there had never been any black children in the school system before. And so there was my mother, with her three kids and, for reasons I still do not understand, my mother refused to learn how to drive. Here you are in 1949, 1950. We moved into Piedmont in 1952. Before then we lived in East Oakland. East Oakland now is all black, although at the time that we were there, it was a more racially mixed community. Piedmont was right next to Oakland. It was a much more affluent community. The range in Piedmont was pretty much solid middle, to very, very rich. It didn't really have poor people in Piedmont, and didn't really have very many working class, blue-collar people. My father was an army officer, so we were not wealthy, and we did not live in the sort of mansions that many of my classmates did. But, we had a perfectly nice four-bedroom house.

So there were many challenges for my mother in terms of just, you know, how do you get groceries when you have three kids? So as a child growing up, I had a big basket on my bicycle. I would often be sent to the grocery store to get stuff. We all had to learn how to use public transportation, which some people think nobody in California during the 1950's knew how to use the buses, but my mother certainly

did. She said, “You don’t have to wait for the bus for long if you know what the schedule is. You just are there a few minutes ahead of time.” And, I am trying to remember how she used to get out to the place where she could buy groceries most inexpensively at the base Commissary. And right now, I have to go back and ask her how—when she wanted to really go buy a lot of groceries—how did she get back and forth to the Commissary. Because the buses that we took from Piedmont—we had to take three different buses to get out to the base. When we were a little younger, we had lived on the base. And that’s when my dad was, I think, before he went to Korea. Then we moved to East Oakland. Again, I think before he went to Korea, and lived there for a while. And then he went to Korea. And then, when he came back, we moved to Piedmont, which is where my mother still lives.

Ms. Boone: Same house?

Mr. Williamson: Same house that we grew up in. But she, well both of them, I think, are part of the greatest generation that doesn’t really get the notoriety and attention that has been focused on Caucasian members of the greatest generation. And I think it’s because we haven’t really had, I don’t know, a good book or a good movie about what an extraordinary challenge it was for black parents to be raising children in an America that was in the midst of beginning to integrate. In the 1950’s, especially in the South, but also in many northern cities, if you didn’t

understand the written and unwritten racial laws, it could be very dangerous for you. I don't know if you knew, in the 1960's, there was a black kid who was looking for a summer job in Cicero Chicago. And he was killed just because he came up to somebody's door and asked for a summer job. I think it was-- Cicero was a Polish neighborhood in Chicago.

Now in California, the neighborhoods are not, they were not in the 50's as racially polarized or tribalized as they were in the East. When I came East to college, I learned there were Italian neighborhoods in North Boston. The Irish neighborhood was South Boston. In New York there were Jewish neighborhoods, and Irish and Italian, and Puerto Rican. People, they really knew their territory. In California, the white people were not as tribal. Because many—obviously not just black soldiers like my father—but there were many people who moved to California after World War II because they had been uprooted from their homes and shipped overseas to fight in Japan. And that meant they had to go through California. They said, “This looks pretty good here. And it's warm.” And you would hear these stories of people who would say, “Well I'm not going back to my home state. Just send my stuff here. I'm not leaving here.” So there were, in California, there were a lot of newcomers from all over the country. There was still plenty of discrimination and racism, both against blacks and Hispanics and Asians—because also out in

California we had a lot of Asians—but you didn't have de jure segregation the way you did in the South.

And there was more integration. Although there were many neighborhoods that were racially segregated informally because the real estate agents wouldn't show black families homes in certain areas. The reason, in Piedmont, that we had got our house, actually, was that the former owner was a very interesting white guy, sort of iconoclastic white guy, Mr. Stotten, Rio Stotten. He didn't like Piedmont, which was very conservative. It was a very conservative community back in those days. Very conservative. Primarily Republican community. He didn't really like the environment there. So, I think in part, one of the ways he decided he'd get back at Piedmont would be to sell the house to a black family. (Laughter) So he fixed Piedmont with the Williamsons. (Laughter)

Ms. Boone: So tell me a little bit more about growing up in a segregated—Well the country was segregated, and when you were like in the third grade, there was—I think about that time—there was *Brown v. Board of Education*. And you were already in an integrated kind of environment. Did that have any impact on you or your family? Do you remember discussions about that?

Mr. Williamson: No. As a third-grader, I don't remember having discussions about national politics or the civil rights movement at that age. You know, I think as a third grader, I wanted to be like other kids in my community

and in my school. Maybe by the third grade, the *Mickey Mouse Club* was on TV and I would watch that, and care about those things. I was conscious of racial tension because some people would call me names or they would make comments because they thought it was so odd that I would be at the playground or go on fieldtrips with all these white kids. And so, America is sort of drenched in racial awareness and different types of discrimination or, if not discrimination, signals that you were not entirely welcomed, or you were not viewed as normal. And so I had to learn about that as necessity as a young child.

But my parents adopted an approach that—I think there were a number of African-American parents who were, who would move their families into integrated situations and concluded or believed that—if you started talking about race it will encourage your children to feel hatred toward white people. Particularly if you told your children the truth about how racist America was. So, they did not bring us up with explicit racial consciousness. They brought us up with the view that, “You are as good as anybody in this community.” That’s the basic value. And “We want you to take advantage of the schools, the recreational programs, to the fullest extent.” And “Do your best.” Now they didn’t say it in so many words, when they said, “Do your best,” you just realized even as a black child, that really meant that you had to do better than all the white people.

In retrospect, I had this awareness that would play out in ways that, in retrospect, were unfortunate to have to deal with as a child. But, they are ways that shaped me a lot. For example, understanding that somehow, whatever I did, particularly if it was bad or deficient, would be attributed to all black people. Nobody said that in so many words, but you got that fairly early. When you outdid white people, they didn't attribute that to all black people. Then they shifted to, "Oh, you're an exception."

So for example, there was a game called Rover Red Rover. Do you know what that game is?

Ms. Boone: No, I don't.

Mr. Williamson: It's a kind of tag game where you have one kid that starts out in the middle of the playground. The other kids are lined up. And you can call out people to get to the other side of the playground—either individually or in groups. If you call 'em out in a group, then for all the kids you tagged before, they can help you tag other kids. When I would play that game, I was just fortunate that I could run fairly fast and be elusive. I was always the last kid who was tagged, because it was going to take all the rest of them to catch me. (Laughter.) But when I played, I would do each one of them one at a time to send the message, one on one, "None of you will be able to get past me." Now that's not really the most fun way to do it. But, and as I said, I didn't really think about it beforehand, but somehow I said this, I had this

instinct that this is part of sending this signal that you wanted to be treated equally, but you found that you had to excel.

So in class, if you got the second or third best grade, there were white kids that would feel high. “See somebody did better than Tom.” Because they somehow had the view that if any one of them did better than you, they won. But you kind of had to do better than all of them to send the message that you had won as the black student in the class.

Ms. Boone: And was that the case often? Were you were the best in the class?

Mr. Williamson: Yes. We were fortunate that all of us Williamson children did well in school. Actually all of us were actually admitted to Harvard for college and we all did well in school. Our parents, they weren’t pointing us toward an Ivy League school. My father, I told you, had graduated from Morgan. My mother grew up in Bel Air, Maryland. Her mother died when she was a young age. She was raised by her grandparents. Her family was of such modest means, they couldn’t afford for her to go to college. Her brother did go. My uncle LeRoy. And he was both a great athlete and a top student. I think on my mom’s side of the family there is a fair amount of athleticism and a fair amount of smarts that even though my mother herself didn’t go to college, I am sure that the Hall genes – my mother’s maiden name was Hall – helped us out that way.

And it was, you know, it was something that-- we were all kids that enjoyed learning, so that we didn’t really see it as a racial crusade

as such, but it was more to have status. And particularly, because of the kinds of jokes that people made and portrayals of black people, as kind of slovenly and stupid, I felt from a very early age that's not how I want people to think about me. And I am willing to expend as much energy as it takes to demonstrate that you should not think of me as stupid or lazy. Again, I don't know how conscious I was of this at the time, but I ended up having the sense that if I always get higher grades than you, it'll be awkward for you to suggest that I am dumb. 'Cause even if I am dumb, you are dumber. (Laughter.)

Ms. Boone: Right. A good comeback. So, when you were younger, did you have an idea of what you wanted to be?

Mr. Williamson: Well, at different stages I did. I think I originally wanted to become a comedian.

Ms. Boone: Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: I thought it would really be cool to make 'em laugh, to make them happy. I didn't as a little kid, I didn't have as much laughter in my life as I wanted because I was always sort of worried about excelling and worried, trying to figure out why there were some people who obviously didn't like me, or drew certain kinds of lines about what they would share. Some kids never invited me over to their house, even though that was very normal for children in my community. My brother had an experience—I didn't run into this directly—where he was invited to someone's house, and when he got to their doorstep or

their porch, the mother of George's friend said, "Well, you can't come in here. We don't, you know, allow anyone black in our house." You know when you're a little kid that's pretty crushing and bewildering. It's like, "I didn't steal anything from you and I didn't beat up your kid. Why would you feel that I can't come into your house?"

On the other hand there were families that were very welcoming and warm. So that, I think it really didn't make sense for me to develop a stereotypical view of white people. I knew a whole lot of white people. I knew how different they were, both toward me and toward each other. For some things I didn't pick up on until later were just ironic, -- just remember it's a small town. Piedmont is only twelve thousand people. It had three elementary schools, one junior high and one high school. This is really small town America. Twelve thousand people. In my elementary school, there was just one class of 25 kids. So that means in your grade you have twelve or thirteen boys and twelve or thirteen girls. That's small. But that also meant you were aware of what happened to everybody. So when we were old enough to be Cub Scouts, all the boys wanted to be in the Cub Scouts den. But Jerry Goldstein for some reason didn't become a Cub Scout. And it wasn't until a couple years later I learned that the Den Mother, I think it was Donald Graham's mother, he was a kind of pudgy, blond white kid, she was anti-Semitic and ironically, apparently did not object to a black kid being in the Den, but she would not let a Jewish

kid join. Again when you're in a little, small school and everybody knows each other and what you're doing, you're very conscious then of being left out of what the other boys are doing, because there is literally ten or twelve boys in the class.

So we were embraced by the teachers in the school system. You know how sometimes you run into these teachers who-- they don't seem to like children and you're wondering, "Like, why are you a teacher?" The third grade teacher seemed like that to me. But particularly my second grade teacher, my fourth grade teacher, my fifth grade teacher—they didn't seem to like kids too much either—and my sixth grade teacher she just loved the Williamson kids.

In our little town, our neighborhood, your social life, if you will, for the boys revolved around being at the playground and that was when, in those days, you would have a college kid who was hired by the recreation department—or two of them, usually a guy and a girl—to be playground directors. They would help to organize activities. They would just watch over the kids to be sure nobody did anything really stupid. And if you got hurt they would take care of you. To a person, all of the playground directors were very supportive of me and my brother and my sister. The girls didn't come down to the playground as much, but my brother and I pretty much lived there. To the point where if anything, there was kind of discrimination in favor of us in some instances. For example, once somebody stole

twenty dollars from the purse of the female playground director. The police were called to the playground and they interviewed all of the kids who had been on the playground, except me because the director Joe Maroux had said, “There’s no way he did it.” So that was very different than the experience of black kids around America.

Once I was walking down the street and, actually, somebody in our little group threw a rock and broke the window in someone’s house. My friends, of course all white, they ran away. I just kept walking down the street and I am sure the police were all told there’s one black family in this community. I was the captain of the, first-- well you start being the traffic patrol and you’re a sergeant and then a captain. So I was in charge of the traffic patrol and we worked with the juvenile officer. So in that sense, I was known in the police department. But I just decided to keep on walking down the street and they just came up and asked me if I’d seen any other kids around who had done anything. I lied to them and said I hadn’t. (Laughter.)

But, again, there were dimensions of the experience that were really quite positive and welcoming. But in some ways they were not the greatest training for getting ready to understand what was out there in the larger American society and understanding how most black people oriented to what was going on out there and understanding how most white people thought about you. So third grade, *Brown v. Board of Education*, would have been too early and also it didn’t result in any

change in my situation. I had started in kindergarten in 1952. I think it was 1951. I think it was 1951 or '52. But, for me, I showed up at school and knew the kids from being on the playground. And it didn't really occur to me until maybe the fifth grade when there was this white kid who was maybe a couple years older who said, "They're not gonna let you go to the high school." I, by then, knew the civil rights movement was going on and there were these school desegregation issues. So everybody knew in '57 there was an enormous amount of publicity around what happened in Little Rock at Central High. I don't remember if I asked somebody or my parents about that remark. I didn't like the guy who said it to me. And I didn't trust him in other ways. And there was nothing else signaling that I wouldn't be going to the junior high or the high school and there were things suggesting that some people were looking forward to my coming there. It was a small town, but if you were a good athlete, everybody knew about that, too. We played -- there were three elementary schools -- we, you know, we had a little league where we'd play against them. Other than this one guy, John Batalie, no one ever said anything like that and that was not an issue. But, I was becoming increasing aware that there were parts of the country where there were these—what seemed to me even as a little kid—these kind of savage, insane reactions to black kids coming to the same school as white kids. When you're a little kid,

it's pretty difficult to understand why that would be a source of controversy and violence. You just wanna come to school.

I started to read at a fairly early age. I had a funny incident, to me in retrospect, I went to the Oakland Public Library. Piedmont, I'm not sure if it had its own library system. I don't think so. The town was too small. For some reason, between the first grade and the second grade, I really got into reading. My second grade teacher was very nice to me. Very encouraging and supportive. I think it was probably the second semester, I went to the public library and I had already developed a technique at my elementary school, well I think the teachers must have been able to figure this out, but I don't know what it was like at your elementary school, but they had part of the library for the kids from the first to third grade, and they had another part of the library for the higher grades. So, I would crawl under the table to sneak over into the upper-grade section, pull a book off of the shelf, and then I would crawl back under the table and try to pretend that I had gotten it from the lower-grade section to check it out. Because the big book of fire engines and that stuff got to be pretty boring, pretty quickly.

And then, when I was seven, I went to the Lakeview branch library. I don't know if I knew about it before or I just happened to pick out Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. I said, "I'd like to take it out." This white lady-- I'm sure-- I had a sense she was trying to be

nice. But she said, “Maybe you should pick another book.” I said, “No, this is the book I would like.” I could sense that she didn’t think I would be able to understand or read this book. I don’t know if that was just because I was seven, or because I was black, or probably some of both. I don’t know how this idea came to me, but I said to myself-- because it was a fair distance. I’d either walked or ridden my bike down to this library, so I really want to take this book home with me. So let me make a proposal to the teacher. I said, “Let’s make a deal. You open the book to any page you want. If I read that page, would you let me take the book out?” She said, “Okay.” She opened it. I read the page and took the book out.

Ms. Boone: Your negotiation skills are tip top! From seven! So you were saying, when you were younger, you didn’t have a concept of the larger issues that were going on in America. At what point did you have that introduction, do you think?

Mr. Williamson: Well, I think certainly in ’57, when Little Rock occurred, I would have been—how old was I—eleven years old. So I’m in the sixth grade. That, I think, greatly, dramatically heightened my consciousness. But you just knew from the culture—the name calling and the stereotypes—you know you didn’t see any black folks on television. Of if you saw them, you had Beulah, somebody’s maid, and you had—what was the guy for *Jack Benny*? What was his name? He was like his butler. It was like Rockster. I liked *Amos and Andy*. My Dad

didn't like the show. Because to me, actually, I don't know if you've ever seen it.

Ms. Boone: I haven't.

Mr. Williamson: Well, a number of the people in *Amos and Andy* are buffoonish. There was a lawyer. Used to call him Catfish, or something like that. There was a kind of bumbling guy, Andy. But Amos was a taxi driver and he was a very savvy, mature guy. What was the lawyer's name? He was a real caricature. But when I watched *Amos and Andy*, I thought it was funny, and I always identified with Amos. I didn't realize that white America was assuming that black people were the buffoon types, which my father didn't like. So I used to kind of have to sneak around to watch *Amos and Andy*.

And then also around ten or eleven years old, I started reading *Newsweek* magazine regularly. I used to read it cover to cover. I don't think I was that into reading the newspaper each day, but I really liked reading *Newsweek*. So that increased my consciousness of what was going on around the country. You couldn't avoid knowing that people tended to think there was something strange about your being successful in school and being part of a white community.

Now, at that time, I wanted to be like everybody else. I wished I had freckles and straight hair. I asked my mother if I could straighten my hair. Back then there were black entertainers and a lot of political figures, a lot of ministers, they would conk their hair. My

mother said absolutely not. She said, “Are you crazy?” So I got the signal that was not cool. But, most kids, I think, want to be like their peers. And that was the world I lived in. I was coming to the realization I couldn’t be like everybody else and I had to start figuring out how to deal with being, you know, the only “Negro” in my class. Until I got to high school, we were the only black family in the community. The only other black kids in the school systems were my brother and sister for a while. There was one of my aunts, her children lived around the corner from us, but they moved out when I was in high school. We were the only black people.

At the same time there was that growing consciousness of discrimination in American society and there were things that were happening in the Bay area: there were demonstrations, and sit-ins, and there were lunch counters at whatnot where blacks were not allowed. Woolworths, I think, was a chain that didn’t allow that. And they didn’t hire blacks to sell cars on Auto Row in San Francisco. So I am reading about this stuff. And of course, I would read *Jet* and *Ebony* and you would read about the atrocities that occurred.

But at the same time, for example, when I finished with the Cub Scouts I joined the Boy Scouts, and by chance, the troop that I joined was run by a school teacher who was very resourceful and creative about the programs that he established. We had the largest troop in Piedmont. Most troops had 20-30, we had 100 kids in our

troop. It was really big. He seemed to recognized positive qualities in me very early. Even though I couldn't swim, and in order to become, I think it was, a first class scout eligible to be a patrol leader, you had to have the swimming merit badge or something, he granted me a waiver because he wanted me to become a patrol leader. And it was also pretty clear to me that he wanted me to become the senior patrol leader, so that I was in charge of Sting Ray Patrol-- I was the scout, the highest ranking scout in the troop. And he was very good about teaching leadership skills. He would prepare an agenda, and we would consult about what would be on the agenda. To me, it seemed natural, because, by then, around the time I got started in scouts, Boy Scouts, my father had been able to arrange to get himself stationed back in the Bay Area. Being who my dad was, he wanted to make up for this time away. A lot of these scouting things—camping trips and whatnot, but mainly camping trips—you know, they asked dads to come along, but only a few come. My father never missed a camping trip. Plus he was an Army officer and so when he learned, you know-- he was a country boy and an Army officer, so camping was just second nature to him. He was a Lieutenant Colonel by then. So, people would refer to my father as just the Colonel.

Here, again, my childhood experience wasn't, it didn't really resonate with what was going on generally in America, because when I visited my father at the office, we'd walk down the hall, and these

white people were saluting him. And so, when the scout master said, well, you know, "You should be the leader of the patrol," you wore uniforms, and you gave orders, and whatnot. That's what my Dad did. And so, I thought that was natural. To me there was nothing strange about that or particularly pioneering or trailblazing. I thought you had to earn it. So my patrol, we-- there was a competition in terms of various things that you did to show that your patrol was being run well. The scout master used to have a point system. So we just obliterated the point system with the Sting Ray patrol.

I'm not sure if there was an election. I think the scout master decided who would be the senior patrol leader. But that was-- since my patrol had outdone the other patrols that wasn't-- I don't think that was a controversial issue in the community that I was operating in.

I think the first incident that really brought home just how strange and racist the society was, was when I was in the eighth grade. I ran for vice-president of the junior high school and was elected. You know, being a Williamson child, I didn't think it was that big of a deal to be the vice-president, since I wasn't the president. But I am not sure why I decided-- I probably figured there was some other kids that were more popular, so I'd have a better chance running for vice-president. But to my astonishment, my election to be the vice-president of Piedmont Junior High School became a front page story of the San Francisco-- in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which was the

biggest paper in San Francisco then. It was covered by the radio stations.

Ms. Boone: Wow.

Mr. Williamson: I think it's pretty weird. I'm just the vice-president of the junior high school. But it's clear this seemed quite remarkable to white America. And you also have to understand that Piedmont was known to be this very socially elite community. You have San Francisco society on one side of the Bay and then on the East Bay Side—Oakland, Berkeley, Piedmont—Piedmont was the place where there were debutants and coming out stuff. A lot of wealthy people. So yeah, front page of the Chronicle. On the radio stations. Probably would have been on the TV stations, but my parents wouldn't, they wouldn't allow me to be videotaped or photographed. And I came to understand fairly quickly why. Because after this publicity, we started to receive hate mail.

Ms. Boone: Interesting.

Mr. Williamson: We started to receive threats on my life, which, you know, again, when you're thirteen, this is a very strange country. Why are there people that feel threatened that there's some thirteen year-old black kid who's the vice-president of the junior high school—an all-white junior high school. But it was sobering. In a way that helped me connect and understand these things that are going on in the South could happen here. In fact, I used to always have to walk to school, but for two

weeks after these articles came out, my father drove me to school because they were concerned that something might happen.

Ms. Boone: Because of your different experience living and going to school in an all-white community, did you feel that the civil rights movement didn't necessarily, wouldn't necessary advance you? Did you feel it was something that was contained to the South?

Mr. Williamson: No, no, no, no, no. I felt, I think as was the case with many black kids who were being raised in white communities, for the first time—and I talk about this greatest generation of black parents—it's very tricky to protect your children from the attacks on their self-esteem, while at the same time saying, "You need to go out there and be a credit to your race." We understood that was our job. I understood-- it wasn't a particular choice, it was just that, that's part of who I have to be. For me, it was more that I've been given certain gifts. Good Lord has given me these gifts. I can do well in school. I can compete well in sports. I should use those gifts to try to advance the interest of my people. That will be, to me it seems that was kind of my role in the civil rights movement; to make sure that white people who came into contact with a black person such as myself... As it turned out, it wasn't really possible to do on the scale that I had hoped. I very naively thought that if I set a positive example, white people in general would understand that you shouldn't stereotype black people as a group, that you should appreciate that there are black people that have

the same or greater abilities as you do, and that the society should be interested in supporting and nurturing black people just as white people are nurtured, so that the best and the brightest could contribute to society.

Ms. Boone: But instead you were seen as an exception?

Mr. Williamson: Yeah. I mean that was underscored when I graduated from high school. Graduation night when I was the, I gave the-- I wasn't really the valedictorian. I didn't have the highest grades. I may have actually been fifth in my class. But at my high school, they didn't do it just on grades. They picked the student who was considered the outstanding student-- who was deemed to be the outstanding student, and you gave the speech at graduation. And classmate after classmate came up to me and said, "Tom, it's really been great being in high school with you. You know I really don't even think of you as being black anymore." And so, I knew I was going far away for college and this reaffirmed why I wanted to, or why this community wasn't fulfilling to me and it of course frustrated and depressed me to think that the model Negro approach was largely ineffective. These people didn't generalize to the rest of the black community what they thought about my positive attributes or qualities that they regarded as superior to theirs. They moved that into the exception category, as if somehow I didn't belong to my own race because I was so much better than they were.

Ms. Boone: I'm curious, what kind of interaction did you have with the black community growing up? Did you go to a black church? What kind of interaction did you have?

Mr. Williamson: No we-- My parents wanted us to be fully integrated into Piedmont. So even though my father was of the Baptist tradition, he wanted us to be at Piedmont Community Church. I went to the church-- You know I had a funny incident that in retrospect, may have been a little bit of discrimination. I was eight or nine years old. I think I went up by myself, because again, my mother, she didn't have a car and they wanted me to go the church and I asked how I could join. They said, "Well, you have to memorize the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the 100<sup>th</sup> Psalm in a week in order to qualify to be at church." I have a feeling if I had been a white kid, they wouldn't have asked me to do that. But it didn't faze me, since to me that was just another student task, and "Oh I can do that." So I just memorized the psalms, came back and recited them, and, "Okay, you can come here." And there was a church youth group, Pi Kai group, that I became active in and a student administrator and all that. So that was my religious world.

I had an aunt who came to live with us for a while. She went to a Baptist church. And you know if you aren't familiar with the Baptist church and you are a little kid, particularly a little kid who's been raised in a white church, white Protestant church, I would go a few times to my Aunt Berta's church, Reverend Richardson's church.

I can't remember the name of his church now. But things seemed a lot more ruckus in the black church. It was kind of exciting—the singing and whatnot. But then, when the minister started to preach and people began to testify, and women started to pass out and then the women in white outfits and the white gloves came and you're worried, "Am I going to pass out? What's going to happen to me?" It actually was kind of scary.

So I didn't grow up in that tradition. And I remember once—I think I was a junior or senior in high school—there was a program where they were bringing together youths from different church groups and I gave some sort of sermon or speech and afterwards they had college girls from Mills College—it was a women's college out there—and a bunch of them came up to me and congratulated me on what an impressive speech they thought that I had given. None of the black kids said anything to me about the speech. And I was beginning to realize that there was a really huge cultural gap, in that my sermon, speech, whatever it was, was a very kind of white, analytical approach. I didn't use any of the rhetorical flourishes of a black minister. It was a very logical speech from a nice little essay. And so I didn't connect with—my presentation didn't connect with black folks. Also Piedmont was this very, I already told you, very socialite, upper-class community that did not associate really with any of the surrounding communities. If you were a white kid and you started to date a girl

from Oakland High, Piedmont kids would kind of suggest, “Why would you be going out with such a low class person.” So in other words, very few events were-- social events, where kids from any other school came to Piedmont, were so parochial.

And I was part of that, and I think like other kids, I yielded to peer pressure. I was okay with that. I wasn't really very adventurous. And also I didn't know-- I knew enough to realize that I was not at ease just walking in the black community.

The black people I knew were my relatives who were a few out in California. My mother's sister's family. And then back East, there were zillions of relatives. And when I had visited, everybody respected and loved my father and my mother, and so the Williamson kids got an automatic pass. And we were exotic, because we came from California. I was overwhelmed with affection and embraces. But also I was cognizant that this was a different world than the one that I live in. All these relatives, they lived in the black community. Be it Baltimore. Be it Nyack, New York. Or Evergreen, North Carolina. Or Bel Air, Maryland, the small town about 20 miles north of Baltimore where my mother grew up.

I particularly remember, I was excited because my Dad had told me that my Uncle Gardy owned a grocery store. I thought that would be really cool to see. You know, my uncle owns a grocery store, maybe he'll give us candy for free. And we went. It was in

Baltimore. And we went to the grocery store. It was a little place on the corner. The store was smaller than this room. Now, we didn't have Giants, or big super markets in Piedmont. But Faughty's Fine Foods, which was owned by the father of one of my classmates, it was much bigger. You know what these corner places are like. I was just kind of amazed at how many different kinds of things he could stuff into this little place. But it was very little. And I had these very mixed feelings. I was disappointed. On the other hand, Uncle Gardy said, "You're a bright kid. You can work the cash register." And so, he let me handle the sales. He showed me how to work the cash register. And in that sense, he was much more empowering than white people where I grew up. They weren't saying, "Oh we'll let you run the cash register at our store." They weren't hostile to me, but they weren't saying, "Yeah, you can do that." And so I was confused because part of me wanted to feel ashamed that he didn't have a bigger, nicer store. But part of me was grateful that it was so much fun to be able to add up things, and say this is how much it costs, this is what your change will be. To work the machine. And kind of run a little business.

But the worlds were-- they were worlds apart. They were 3,000 miles apart, when I was in the east. When we went to visit New York City, we stayed at the Hotel Theresa. You know what that is?

Ms. Boone: No.

Mr. Williamson: You better work on your black history, black culture. Hotel Theresa was the black hotel in Harlem. During the Black Renaissance, all these black performers could not stay at the hotels where they were performing. They all stayed at the Hotel Theresa. Actually when Fidel Castro first came to the United States, when he became the ruler in Cuba, one of the ways he sort of thumbed his nose at the United States was, when he came to the UN in New York, he stayed at the Hotel Theresa. All the big entertainers at the time, that's where they stayed. Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington. Because literally, it's crazy in New York City, it's in the North and all that sort of thing, but plenty of hotels were still segregated. I don't know if you saw-- did you see the Jackie Robinson movie.

Ms. Boone: No, I haven't seen that yet.

Mr. Williamson: You have to see that. Well they talked about in 1947, they didn't want to let the Dodgers stay at a hotel in Philadelphia, city of brotherly love segregated hotels.

So, my contacts were very limited. The athletic league we played in was-- we were the only school in what's called Alameda County, which is where Oakland and Berkley and those schools are. We played in a suburban league at the next door county. It's called Contra Costa County. And there are almost no black people at those schools either. I wasn't much of a hang-out guy. I wasn't very adventurous. And I wasn't a hang-out person because if you're going

to be good at sports and you're going to be good at school, you have to practice and study a lot. I wasn't such a great natural athlete that I could just show up and excel. I had to work at it, and try to hone my skills. And so I didn't have much spare time. And I lived in a very parochial community where there weren't other kids who were saying, "Let's go to Oakland." or "Let's go to San Francisco." And so, I didn't have much contact at all with African-American peers while I was an adolescent, until I got to college. When I got to Harvard and there were 36 black guys in my class. That was like a huge number of people to know about and have some sort of peer relationship with. Even though that was only about three percent of the class, there were only three black girls at Radcliff, and one black girl at Wellesley. So, but that was my beginning of starting to have contact with significant numbers of blacks.

Ms. Boone: Well I think that's a good place for us to stop: wrapping up your high school years and starting your college experience. So, I think we will stop there. So thank you.