Interview with Curtis Leroy Williams

June 28, 1994
Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
Albany (Ga.)

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**Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South**

An oral history project to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s.

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Interview with
Curtis Leroy Williams

Albany, Georgia
June 28, 1994

Interviewed by
Sally S. Graham

Unedited Transcript by
Cathy H. Mann
Graham: I am here with Mr. Williams in Albany, Georgia?

Williams: Albany, Georgia, yes.

Graham: Let's start from the beginning, when and where you were born and sort of your background.

Williams: I was born in a small town called Waukeenah, Florida. That's outside of Monticello, Florida. Monticello is about, I don't know, maybe one or two thousand people. It's in Jefferson County in Florida in north Florida near Tallahassee. I attended public schools of Jefferson County. The school was called Howard Academy which is a rather strange designation because it was a high school but it was Howard Academy Elementary, Primary, High School. That is the high school from which I graduated in 1957.

Graham: Was that a segregated school?

Williams: It was definitely, very much so. I remember when I was a junior I was editor-in-chief of the school newspaper and I wrote an editorial requesting a gymnasium. We played basketball outside with the court enclosed with pieces of tin to keep the wind out whereas the white school had a gymnasium and I said we want a gymnasium. That was the type of editorial. My principal kept it from being published, of course. He said would explain to me now later, now almost thirty or forty years later, he still hasn't explained to me why but I understood. So that was basically the way it was, segregation. As you know, the 1954 desegregation meant very little to us at that time in terms of any changes. So I graduated from a segregated high school.

Graham: What were some of your earliest memories of realizing or being taught about racial barriers?

Williams: Well, the movie. I loved going to the movies and we had to go to the balcony. Got a better view I think. (Laughter) But we had to go to the balcony to the movie.

Graham: Was there a separate entrance?

Williams: Yes, separate entrance. At the bottom of the stairs there was a little booth where blacks bought their tickets and was into a little door in there. On the white side was a spacious entrance, popcorn and all that kind of thing. If you wanted popcorn in there you had to request it. The lady who took up the tickets at the top of the stairs had popcorn in a box, bags in a little box and we would, and I remember she dipped snuff as I recall. (Laughter) And she sold us that popcorn which I rarely ate. I suppose I was something of a closet militant. I wouldn't do things like that. I went because there was no other movie to attend. That's the only reason I went. But other things I would not take part in. I didn't realize it at the time that I was being in a sense a militant, especially with that article. I was very outspoken about it at the time but mostly around the school and naturally administrators kept that under wraps as much as possible. But I do remember that whites did come to see the basketball games. We had a fairly good team, basketball team, and they used to come and see us play.
Graham: Where would the whites sit?

Williams: They came and stood around. We had no seats. Everybody came and stood around to see us play. In fact, I don't remember having any benches to sit on once we came off the court. I think we stood there until it was time to go back, as I recall.

Graham: So you were playing basketball?

Williams: I played basketball, yes.

Graham: What other high schools did you play?

Williams: Other black schools in the area, mostly a place called Madison, Florida and Greenville, Florida. Those are cities about thirty or forty miles away. We didn't go that far to play.

Graham: How did you get there?

Williams: By dilapidated bus, school bus. Now that I look back on it I realize there was great disparity in what we had at the black school and what the whites had at the white school. I might add that there was a gymnasium at the white school, spacious one, that high school from which my sister later graduated.

Graham: What year did she graduate?

Williams: In 1970, 1971, I'm not certain of that date. About that time.

Graham: Was she one of the first black students to go to that school?

Williams: No, I don't remember when it was integrated but she wasn't one of the first. It was before that. And strangely enough they got along extremely well, very little racial friction of any kind. And once they integrated the teams played together extremely well, the boosters supported everybody. That's the way it was. It was an interesting situation.

Graham: The companies and all the supporters, they were integrated as well?

Williams: Yes, at that time, very easily and quickly with very little rancor as I recall. I don't remember any incidents.

Graham: How far away is Jefferson County from the biggest city? Would that be Tallahassee?

Williams: Tallahassee is the closest to Monticello. It's about twenty-six miles west of Monticello. On the edges of Jefferson County it's about maybe ten miles away from the borders of Jefferson County.
Graham: Did you hear about any racial strife when you were I guess in high school?

Williams: I don't recall because the papers we got were "The Florida Time Union" and "The Monticello News" and "The Tallahassee Democrat" and they had very little about that kind of thing. It seems that it was an effort to keep from knowing what was going on. Very little access to television at the time. I don't remember many people having televisions. My friend had one as I recall, his parents. I suppose that's the only way we could really get current news.

Graham: How did blacks get information about the blacks, the black community? Was there a black newspaper or radio station?

Williams: No, no black radio station. We got a great deal of news through the "Pittsburgh Courier" mostly and you know how much local news that would contain. I think it was published in Pittsburgh. Not much local news could be included, just general news.

Graham: Would relatives send it to you or were people able to get it?

Williams: We were able to buy it. I think there was a vendor as I recall coming around selling door to door.

Graham: When were you born?

Williams: In 1939, January 29th.

Graham: And what were your parents doing, farmers or what were they doing?

Williams: My mother was basically a domestic. My father worked in the woods, a logger for most of his life.

Graham: Like sawmills?

Williams: Sawmill kinds of things, yes, cutting down pine trees, loading them on a truck and shipping them off to sawmills to be reduced to be converted into paper and other kinds of products.

Graham: Is that what most people in your county were doing, was that the main occupation?

Williams: That was among the best paying occupations and, of course, farmers, maids, domestic yard people. I myself worked around a yard as I was growing up, the watermelon fields, tobacco fields, cotton, those kinds of things, seasonal things.

Graham: How old were you when you first went into the field?

Williams: I probably was in junior high.
Graham: Were those kinds of seasonal things, were you taken out of school to do those kinds of things?

Williams: Oh no, no, no. There were some students who didn't come to school until they harvested certain kinds of crops. We knew that but I was living in what was called town at the time. We had moved to Monticello and so I was in the big city and wasn't around those areas where cotton and tobacco were grown. We had to go out to what we called the country which was only about five or ten miles from Monticello. So there was very little in Monticello proper to do.

Graham: And Monticello is the town where you were saying there was a movie theater?

Williams: Yeah, that's where the movie theater was.

Graham: What other kinds of things did blacks do for like recreation? Was that also segregated?

Williams: Everything was, everything, the library. Nothing was integrated when I was growing up except hardships.

Graham: Was there a black library? How did that work?

Williams: Well, the school would loan books for us and sometimes hand-me-down books from places where our parents worked. This is how I got into reading. My mother worked at a place and she used to bring books home, magazines and all kinds and I used to read them. That's how I got into reading.

Graham: So there was like a public library there in Monticello but blacks weren't allowed to go?

Williams: They were not allowed to go. Everything was segregated except hardships. We all shared in that.

Graham: What about the actual place where you were growing up? Were there white families and black families together?

Williams: Let me see, close by. Where I lived, in the next block we had white families. I think we lived in the last block where blacks lived in that particular area where I was. I had white families to the west of me and to the north of me. I could look down from the back yard into the back yard of a white family. And I remember looking down and seeing some young boys and I was told they had come from Germany and it struck me then at how quickly they were assimilated. I just knew that something wasn't quite right. I thought about these guys from Germany are coming in and they're having such a reception and just live here. I didn't voice my opinion that much about it but I knew something wasn't quite right about it.

Graham: How did you voice your opinion in other ways?
Williams: I suppose by achieving what I could under the circumstances doing it as well as I could. I saw it as a kind of challenge. You have to remember that it was basically a way of life in the south and there wasn't a great deal of questioning so much as wondering, not really working against it. We didn't have the courts of law on our side at the time. You could wind up killed for resisting or at least you thought so.

Graham: Did you grow up hearing about the white terror against blacks and lynching?

Williams: Occasionally I would hear about it. As I said, the news media was pretty much controlled so we didn't hear but maybe we would have relatives who would come down from the north and we would hear about certain things.

Graham: Did they think that life in the north was better or equal to life in the south?

Williams: Well, they definitely thought it was better. Aside from the, the interesting thing about Monticello is aside from the obvious separation and obvious differences in facilities, there was not a lot of hostility between blacks and whites for some reason.

Graham: Why do you think that is?

Williams: It's rather strange, I don't know, I don't know. But people were basically friendly to one another. Now that I look back on it it's a very interesting situation. I remember that one of the people who came to see us play was an insurance agent who when I went off to college got me a job so that I could make money. He was very supportive of me. He always would come and find out what I was doing, how I was doing and when I went off to college he was constantly in touch with my mother about what was happening with me. I remember that very well.

Graham: Did you decide one day that you wanted to be a director or how did that actually come about?

Williams: I think I loved adventure growing up and I heard of the FAMU Players, Florida A&M Players, and I was drawn to the concept of creating actions on my own. I suppose that was a kind of escape from what was happening. With the plays I could go any place I wanted to or movies I could go any place I wanted to. I suppose that was one of the motivating forces. I started writing plays I suppose around eighth or ninth grade. Very crude materials I now recall. (Laughter) I remember writing a play where I was dealing with segregation and domestics and their employers, I did. But I had that feeling of friendship among the different individuals. Now that I recall, it comes back to me now. I remember even the kinds of paper I wrote it on, some kind of paper my mother brought home from where she worked. It had illustrations and writing on one side and blank on the other side and that's the side I wrote on. And when the FAMU Players came down to Monticello to present some one act plays, I showed it to the director, Randolph Edmonds, and he encouraged me to keep writing and I had a love for theater from that point. But when I went off to school I thought of majoring in history or music and then I gravitated to English because the little school I attended did not have theater so I went into English.
Graham: What school did you attend?

Williams: Friendship Junior College in Rock Hill, South Carolina, not far from, just below the North Carolina border. And I had a professor who was interested in what I was doing. I also tried to write poetry so he was trying to show me how to measure the lines and those kinds of things and I think he steered me toward literature and English and so I went from there to Morehouse College in Atlanta where I majored in English and minored in sociology because I was interested in social relationships. It's always been that way, even in writing because I write about those kinds of things. And from there to Atlanta University. When I graduated from Atlanta University I had what was called a Merrill scholarship to attend school in England, Manchester University. And all of these things, places, are parts of how I got into directing. I came back and I worked a number of years as an English teacher at South Carolina State and Albany State and then I went down, I had a friend who was working at Albany State who went to Florida State to get his degree in speech and he told me of a theater program and so I went down to check it out. I met a man named Frank Gallano and I applied for admission to the MFA program in playwriting at Florida State and I was accepted. I sent in my acceptance fee and in the meantime Gallano moved to the University of Texas at Austin and he told me of a Ph.D. program. And so I said what sense does it make to go to an MFA program when I can go to a Ph.D. program. So I was accepted at Texas at Austin and I was in the playwriting program there but I had to take directing. I just wanted to write plays, I didn't want to learn all these other things. Don't tell me about theater history and all these other kinds of things. I didn't realize the importance of all of these, how they are interrelated. And I began to enjoy directing. I went to all the directing projects, everything. I missed none of them for two or three years. I went to everything and just soaked it up. And when I came back to Albany State I went from the English department to the speech and theater department and I was a theater person so I had to direct plays. That is what I did. Based on my experience at Texas I had to do a directing project and I was in the class with a man noted as one of the top directors in the United States, Francis Hodge who did a textbook on directing for Prentice-Hall. He is an excellent director, inventive, elderly man at the time but very adventuresome and very contemporary in arts and teaching. It's amazing how he could just see things. I was very impressed with him. And so basically that's how I got into directing.

Graham: What was your first play that you directed?

Williams: I think it was "Morning, Noon and Night" by Ted Shine. As I recall it was a story about a grandmother who poisoned the grandfather.

Graham: What were the kinds of, I guess, story lines but on the stage for traditionally black colleges that you were teaching at were performed?

Williams: Well, black story lines mostly and many of the plays I directed were my own. I wrote plays that I thought that the area could relate to. Not to say that it was supposed to be regional but I thought these were situations that anybody could but particularly this area. I wrote plays about poverty and other things in my background. I had been poverty stricken myself. And we did, we would occasionally do plays that were considered white plays. My reasoning
was that if one goes to the university at Duke, for example, if one goes there one sees plays by white authors. You don't say but that's what you do. You see very few plays by black authors so I had no () about plays by blacks. In fact, I did plays of some authors who were not well published or well known like Ted Shine, a very good playwright but little known outside of the black community and not even known in this area. So I would do plays by black authors and some of my own because I knew the facilities here, I knew what access I would have to actors and so I could write plays that would lend themselves to the kind of situation we found ourselves in.

Graham: When you were in classes were black authors taught or black playwrights?

Williams: When I took classes, no.

Graham: How did you educate yourself about the playwrights that were out there?

Williams: Just by reading. I came across a book called Black City, U.S.A. Ted Shine had a hand in publishing that book and the series of plays, about forty-five black plays. My initial readings were white plays. And even in high school I would get plays and I would read them. These were the ones that were available because I don't remember reading a single black play, not one.

Graham: When you were in high school did you have access to books written by or to novels written by black authors?

Williams: Yes, we had one or two. () Dunbar, of course, everybody believed he was a great author, even whites, I suppose because of the language in which he wrote. And I enjoyed those forms by Dunbar. Langston Hughes, of course, one of my favorites. I don't remember how we got access to them whether through the library or just somebody who gave us books.

Graham: And you graduated from high school in 1957?

Williams: 1957.

Graham: The FAMU Players, were they ()?

Williams: Yes.

Graham: Where did the players that you saw, where did they all come from? Did they come from the south? Did they come from all areas?

Williams: I'm not quite certain, probably from the south. A friend of Edmonds was the, one might call the dean of the black directors. He was extremely good. It shows you how segregation worked at the time. He was at Florida A&M. He had very few other opportunities except maybe at another black school but he was extremely qualified, extremely good. And he had a national reputation among blacks and I suppose the whites who knew of his abilities probably. A&M at the time had an outstanding theater program because of him. I think he was
trained at Oberlin, I'm not quite certain but I think. He was trained in white schools and came and applied just as I did with Texas. I applied those technical things and all those other things that I knew to black plays, black theater.

Graham: Is this something you wanted to do, you wanted to go to traditionally black colleges and () those programs?

Williams: Yes, that's what I wanted to do. I remember my supervisor, dissertation supervisor, telling me that he said well, you can get a job almost any place you want now if you want. I said no, I came here to get this information so take it back to Albany State. That was my aim and I think this was basically the aim of many blacks who grew up in my generation of sharing although opportunities opened up in predominately white colleges they were still interested in dealing in predominately black colleges. Not to say only to blacks but whoever comes, white, Spanish, blacks but at least in that situation.

Graham: How could you find your actors for all your plays?

Williams: Through auditions mostly or some would come and ask about the players and I would take their names and we would have tryouts on them. Once upon a time we had a speech and theater department that was combined with music and arts, the fine arts department. Even then we had only a few majors. That's the only reason for the combining of the three departments and so most of our actors came outside of speech and theater.

Graham: The play that I saw, (), where were those actors from?

Williams: Community, one was a student from Albany State, Reginald. The other two, Geraldine Huntley is an instructor at Daugherty High and Erma Young is a nurse.

Graham: And they just heard about the others from the employee's union?

Williams: Right, I told Geraldine, I've known her for a long time and she said she wanted to work with me and I wanted to work with her, I've seen her work. So I told her about it. And Reginald I taught at Albany State. He's an English major but he's interested in theater. And Erma, Erma came because she read about it, a new author that I had known well.

Graham: One of the ladies because of the independent kind of monologues?

Williams: That's Geraldine, yeah. I heard her do a poem at the Museum of Art and at that point I wanted to work with her. She's extremely talented and dedicated and committed.

Graham: For people that are coming to school that haven't had formal training but have talent, how has the black community bolstered that?

Williams: By giving opportunities to train that talent. As I was saying, like Reginald, for example, Reginald was not basically trained as an actor although he took one acting course from me. Just given an opportunity I would take anybody who was committed enough and had the
basic talent to work with a play because for me directing became teaching as well. I would work with them about stage decorum, movement and all those kinds of things and so we would encourage them to participate. Now churches often have little plays for Easter and Christmas, and I used to work with churches on their little pageants. Maybe I shouldn't say little pageants.

Graham: Did you grow up in church?

Williams: Yes.

Graham: What, like a Baptist church?

Williams: Baptist.

Graham: And they had little pageants?

Williams: I appeared in them. I think that's, now that you mention it, one of the reasons I was interested in theater. I would be in these plays, school plays. I can remember some of the things I did like having to kick a nose off somebody. (Laughter) And to show you how ill equipped we were, on this particular play we didn't have make-up. We didn't have access to all that kind of thing. So whoever this was was supposed to have a long nose that I was supposed to kick so the director took a wad of chewing gum and extended it. I couldn't kick that high so I just slapped it off as I recall. I think this is why I loved it so much that how to adjust to the moment, theater was adjusting to the moment so many times. Although one might rehearse and rehearse and rehearse and things come up as you well know that one does not anticipate, you work your way out of it. I like that.

Graham: Wonder if it was something like Pinocchio?

Williams: I don't know but one of them had a long nose, it could have been. Had a long nose I was supposed to kick off but I couldn't do it. I'd be in them little church pageants doing poetry with my hands behind my back, you know, and toes hooked together.

Graham: What would that stand for, toes hooked together?

Williams: Just didn't know any better. That's what it was. Or one being self conscious about things. I've never one to, if you were doing this on video I would be different because I'm not, despite working in theater and that kind of thing, being on stage, I'm not a very public person. I do not like being interviewed necessarily. I'm doing this basically because you got in touch with me through Reverend Wells whom I greatly respect. That's the only reason. Otherwise I would have said no. I would not be sitting here now. This is a man I greatly respect.

Graham: A very warm gentleman.

Williams: And genuine. And one doesn't find people like that a great deal. They are rare individuals.
Graham: Were you in Albany during, kind of after the movement? Is that how you knew him real well?

Williams: No, I knew of him. I came to Albany in 1965 so I missed the movement proper. I worked with him on reunion of workers or participants in the movement. That's how I got to know him. But I'd heard of him and I've seen some books that he has compiled, scrapbooks. You might have seen them.

Graham: Those are all like clippings and articles about black leaders?

Williams: Un-huh.

Graham: He takes them around to different places, right?

Williams: I'm not certain what he does with them. We had a retrospective of the movement some years ago and one of the individuals had borrowed a book from him, a scrapbook. That's when I learned of him. And one would hear from time to time about people who had participated in the movement. His name would come up, Dr. Anderson and others. Some I've met, some I've only heard of. () King and those individuals.

Graham: (Sally's voice is very low.)

Williams: I think when I got here most of the things were, as I recall, integrated or moving to integration. I remember hearing of () Caldwell going to Albany High playing on the football team. And I think at that time, to make a comparison, Monticello was far more integrated than even Albany was. Albany now is probably closer to where Monticello was maybe almost thirty years ago with the relationships, cooperation.

Graham: You mentioned that like in Monticello there was a more of a warm feeling between blacks and whites. What was the feeling when you came to Albany?

Williams: There was a kind of hostility, still exists I think. But I got that feeling, more rancor, more division. But you have to take in consideration that Monticello is a much smaller town. You have more educated people here so I think the transition could have been a lot better, smoother, faster but it hasn't worked that way.

Graham: Do you ever feel that you may be pigeon holed as being a black director and therefore must deal with black issues?

Williams: That's almost a given. People tend to see black directors as interested only in blacks. But as I grew up Eugene O'Neal was my favorite playwright. That's what I had. I have a collection of his plays. I just read everything, "Great God Brown," all of those, I read them. I read them before I even knew whether he was black or white. I wasn't thinking that. And when I write plays or direct plays I'm not thinking necessarily this is a black thing, you wouldn't understand. I'm saying this is a black situation. This is what has happened to an individual in a particular situation as it would happen to Hamlet in his situation or anybody else's situation. And
my reasoning is this, that in "Crimes of the Heart," for example, nobody has to keep saying we're white, we're white, we're white. You know that and you have these references as you recall to blacks, you know, the young black boy and the maid. I wish they'd get rid of it. It's about white people and do I pigeon hole white directors for that? That's the way it works but I can direct a play about whites because instincts are basically the same. I don't say we're all the same, that's not true, I don't believe that because we differ. Even among blacks we have differences, our likes and dislikes, conservatives, liberals, all kinds of individuals among blacks. I'm not saying that we are one. I'm saying whatever I'm dealing with that's a particular situation dealing with this particular group. And I don't mind doing that. I think if white directors did more with black plays I wouldn't have to do that. I'm doing it because it's a neglected area. That's why. And I'm always interested when these individuals are writing criticizing black studies departments when you have Asian studies and Russian studies and all. What are you talking about? William Shakespeare, when you read him, that's white studies. He was a white man. That's what I see, it's just a fact. I'm not bitter about it because I love Shakespeare. Oh my goodness, I love it and I taught it and I believed in it and still believe in it. But I believe that there are black playwrights who approach any white playwrights you can think of. And if the characters did not have black names or call themselves black you wouldn't know it. If you just changed the designation you could have a white play in many instances. Plays are based on conflict and one confronts whatever is his obstacle. Whatever the obstacle is he confronts it. And if it's discrimination, that's it. How are you going to write a play about somebody confronting dragons and discrimination is a thing that's keeping him down or keeping him, whether mentally or physically, keeping him from achieving what he thinks he ought to achieve.

Graham: When you were growing up was that discrimination, oppression, something that you saw in others or people in your family being kept down?

Williams: Yes, I knew that but I wasn't going to let it stop me from doing what I could do. But we knew that. We knew that we didn't have the best books. We knew that we got second hand books. We talked about that. We got second hand, third hand, fourth hand buses and books with the names of white students were already written in them when we got them. But they were the same basic information. And that's the way I looked at it. Something will change sooner or later, it will have to. But if you're going to say Jack and Jill went up the hill, whether it's in this book, a new one or an old one, that's about Jack and Jill. That's the way I saw it and I had an interest in knowledge from all sources. I really didn't think about black knowledge and white knowledge. I just thought about something that I was interested in.

Graham: When you were brought up what kind of artists did you hear about like singers or performers in the black community, information that you heard about or on the radio?

Williams: Yes, James Brown, Aretha Franklin were typical ones. Elvis Presley, Tennessee Ernie Ford, yes. Some country songs that have been recycled come on I know the lyrics because I learned them when I was growing up. "Sixteen Tons" was "Sixteen Tons" to me. I enjoyed listening to it. I listened to Johnny (), I listened to all these others too, James Brown, Muddy Waters. I listened to all kinds of music. I didn't try to pigeon hole it but I knew James Brown was black, I knew Tennessee Ernie Ford was white. I knew that. And I suppose that's an outgrowth of that situation, that one has to think in terms of white artists, black artists.
Graham: And generally everyone danced to white and black kinds of music?

Williams: We danced no, we wouldn't be caught doing that. That's going a little too far. (Laughter) No, but we would. Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, they were very popular in the black community and they were dance songs, "Don't be Cruel." In fact, I was in a little what we call a jazz band and we played Elvis Presley tunes. "Great Balls of Fire" was one of my favorites. So was "Please, Please, Please." So was "Try Me" by James Brown. "Pledging My Love" by Johnny ().

Graham: Who were the heros, people in your community? (End of Side A)

Williams: Oh, we had the athletes who were heros. And as I said, I remember members looking up to people in the community. My brother was a hero to me when I was growing up. People used to tell me how good he was in school and wondered would I be as good. I wanted to be as good as he was and I tried hard to be. Certain basketball players, Frankie Schuller, Douglas Conner, local basketball players that I wanted to be like, dribble the way they dribbled and that kind of thing. I wasn't thinking NBA and those kinds of things. Teachers I admired, Gertrude Canty and Raleigh Cox, Emery Howard who was, by the way, once a member of the FAMU Players, taught me chemistry. These individuals were my heros and of course George Washington Carver. I even liked of Booker T. Washington. Many blacks gave him a fit but he was the man who founded Tuskegee and all these things and we look at those kinds of things, things that would enable the race to progress, those were my heros. Even a drunk or two because they used to tell me don't destroy your life, don't sell your life short. Drunks used to tell me this. You see me, don't be like me! These guys would say that. I listened to them and I said no, I won't. I see some of them occasionally when I go home. There's one guy that runs around, he's truly out of it now but he used to talk to me as I was growing up. He used to tell me he was going to buy me a suit so I can go to school. He never did but I appreciated the thought. I want you to do something for yourself. And those were the kinds of people, there was the kind of love that people seemed to have for one another that I really worshipped. And, of course, my father and mother were my heros. My father who went only as far as second grade but tried to make sure that his family was fed. It might have been fatback and those kinds of things but he believed in getting what he called the groceries. I remember most of all how he used to get up with me, I had terrible ear aches as I was growing up, he used to get up. He used to tell me he was going to buy me a suit so I can go to school. He never did but I appreciated the thought. I want you to do something for yourself. And those were the kinds of people, there was the kind of love that people seemed to have for one another that I really worshipped. And, of course, my father and mother were my heros. My father who went only as far as second grade but tried to make sure that his family was fed. It might have been fatback and those kinds of things but he believed in getting what he called the groceries. I remember most of all how he used to get up with me, I had terrible ear aches as I was growing up, he used to get up. He was a logger, he had to be at work at four or five o'clock but he would get up and stay up all night with me when I had ear aches. He used to say are you alright, are you alright. He would just sit there until I said I was alright. And when I tell my students my father said to me "I love you" I say it didn't matter because I knew he did by deed. He wasn't a very fusive person or a very emotional person. Very laid back. I suppose I inherited a great deal of that. He was very laid back but I knew he loved me and that's what I appreciate about him. If he could have done better he would have. My mother was the same way. I understand she was very bright. She went on to the fifth grade and stopped to work. My mother and father got married when he was about sixteen, she was about fourteen. Hard workers all their lives and they tried to give to me a lot of their meager resources. I remember when I was at Morehouse they sent me thirty-five dollars. I knew it was a drain on them. I kept it for a whole semester. I lived off that thirty-five dollars because I didn't want the to give me anything else. I knew what a sacrifice it was for them. This is why when I
got a chance to give to them I did. And other relatives, I had relatives like that too who, I had an uncle I loved, he's dead now, my aunt. He's an uncle by marriage but any member of the family could go visit and stay with him as long as he or she wanted. He never complained. He never said get out. He would bring food. He never said work, get a job. That's the way he was and he never complained about it. Those were my heroes and they all influenced the way I am now I think, the way I act, the way I deal with people. Practically all unlettered individuals but truly concerned and giving and I love that in them. I didn't need to run around looking for role models, I had them. As I tell my students often, that if you can't find somebody in your own family or somebody close around you, you have a problem, looking for a role model. I refuse to believe that everybody in your family is rotten. I just can't believe that. Well, so much for that philosophy. That's an issue that's very close to my heart where I get talking and I won't leave here for awhile because that's what I believe. I think that's the kind of thing that sustained has me throughout my life is those kinds of people, even to the white insurance man that I was telling you about, that fellah. He got me jobs and people knew about the basketball team in the white community from him. He was spreading it. (Laughter)

Graham: I've heard about a Negro baseball league that was a Georgia-Florida team. Was that something that you heard about, did you see them?

Williams: I saw that. The man named Zoe Williams, we called him, it might have been Joe, how people in my hometown used to confuse his name, we called him Zoe Williams as I grew up calling him Zoe Williams. He was a baseball player in Monticello.

Graham: And was he any kin to you?

Williams: No, he wasn't any kin to me. He was a mechanic such as it was. I think he might have torn up more cars than he repaired. (Laughter) He was the town mechanic, black mechanic. So we had our own enterprises. There was a ballpark there where they played. I forgot the name of the team, Monticello something, I don't recall. But I used to go see them play. And when Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues I heard about that. Jackie Robinson, that's all I could hear, Jackie Robinson. So I went up to see a game and there was a fellah who was playing and he hit a home run. I said is that Jackie Robinson! I didn't know, I thought he was in Monticello. That was the extent of my vision I think. Is that Jackie? No, that is not Jackie Robinson somebody told me. Some others didn't know. Said I don't know, is that Jackie Robinson. But they knew his name so they knew he wasn't Jackie Robinson for that reason. But they didn't know who Jackie Robinson was. Yeah, we saw Shorty White, people like that, a guy we called Smy. These were the baseball players. Some were loggers, they would come in and play baseball on Sundays and Saturdays, the weekend. I remember playing in that ball park. Good seating capacity as I recall.

Graham: What teams did the Monticello team play? They were like from what towns?

Williams: Thomasville, south Georgia towns. Sometimes they went further than that but mostly around that area. Tallahassee and I remember vaguely, I don't know, I might be confusing it with another situation, playing a white team. I believe so. I'm not certain, I might
have seen it some other place. I might have read about it. You know how memories get intermingled.

Graham: So about how old were you when you first saw the teams play?

Williams: It was around 1947, 1948 so I had to be around ten, about nine or ten.

Graham: Did any of those players ever make it, like break into the major leagues?

Williams: Oh no, none of those, no.

Graham: So these guys were playing baseball on weekends?

Williams: Yeah, some of them were old too, old to me, thirty and forty. At the time I thought that was ancient. (Laughter) Thirty years old, he ought to quit! He should be dead by now! How does someone live so long! It's amazing what a perspective a child has. But I think Zoe played into probably his seventies. I saw him through what is called fly ball practice. He would hit the ball into the outfield, throw it up and hit it up. They would be standing way back and I mean to say way back, not away back. They were standing way back and he would hit the ball to them on fly.

Graham: How long did that league last do you think?

Williams: Up until the 1960's because I remember going back and finding that Shorty White's son was playing. Shorty White was short, that's why they called him Shorty. But he was a good hitter. I've seen him hit home runs. I think it's another thing about a guy that short, not even as tall as I am...

Graham: How tall are you?

Williams: I'm about five eight. Shorty must have been about five four or five, something like that.

Graham: Pretty short.

Williams: Un-huh, might have been even shorter, I don't know. He was short but he could hit. And that was among the sports outlet we had, own baseball team.

Graham: What about the uniforms, what did they wear? Did they have uniforms?

Williams: They had uniforms, yeah. I don't know how they did it, whether they each bought uniforms or whether they were a gift, I don't know.

Graham: Were those teams sponsored by the businesses in the black community?

Williams: I don't know.
Graham: You went to Tuskegee and then you went to Clark-Atlanta?

Williams: No, I didn't go there. I went to Friendship Junior College.

Graham: Friendship Junior College.

Williams: Then Morehouse then Atlanta University which is now Clark-Atlanta. At that time it was Atlanta University alone and they combined with Clark College and became Clark-Atlanta. It was just a graduate school at the time. Now it's undergraduate and graduate.

Graham: So Morehouse was like the undergraduate?

Williams: Morehead was a four year school in Atlanta, it's a four year school. Now Friendship is a two year school, or was, it's out of existence now. And when I graduated from there I went to Morehouse, a four year school. Now Atlanta University was the graduate school in that Atlanta University Center. Clark was another four year school. Morris Brown is another four year school. They had Morris Brown, Spelman, Clark, Morehouse, were the four year schools and Atlanta University was the graduate school by itself. It was a separate entity but working cooperatively with the four undergraduates. In fact, when I was a senior I took one or two graduate courses at Atlanta University. So it was only at that time, I say only in the sense that it was not connected with an undergraduate school, it was only a university. Now it combined for financial reasons with Clark and it's now become Clark-Atlanta University.

Graham: And you graduated from Morehouse?

Williams: Morehouse.

Graham: In what year?

Williams: In 1961.

Graham: And then you went to Atlanta?

Williams: Atlanta University from which I graduated in 1962 with a master's degree in English. And I went from there to the University of Manchester as a Merrill foreign studies travel student of Merrill Lynch and that group. As the chairman of the board, Charles Merrill, who was a trustee of Morehouse College, he made available three thousand dollar scholarships for students from Morehouse, Spelman and Atlanta University to study abroad for a year so they could just get the international flavor. And it based on academics and leadership and so I was fortunate enough to get one.

Graham: And you did that in 1963?
Williams: Yes and I went in 1962 and came back in 1963. I was able to study at the University of Manchester and to travel in Europe. I went to Italy and Switzerland and, of course, I traveled throughout England, played basketball.

Graham: Oh, you did?

Williams: Yeah, at the University of Manchester. This is when I really got to see something outside of the segregated setting although in 1961, well, Morehouse at the time was segregated and Atlanta University was segregated although whites were permitted to come. For the first time I got to work and live around white people, English and white and had no problems really. That's the first time I had really first hand contact with people other than blacks other than in a somewhat work-employee relationship that I had known most of my life. I remember when they had an exchange student, white student, come to Morehouse and we were all excited about that. We have ourselves a white student, can you believe it. We had white instructors at Morehouse but no white students. His name was Bill I think.

Graham: So you wanted the white student to come?

Williams: Yeah, we thought that was the way to go to be open, it should work both ways.

Graham: And you didn't have any black instructors at Morehouse?

Williams: Oh, we had the black but I was just saying that we had no white students but we had white instructors there. In fact, my psychology teacher was white but predominantly black faculty. But Morehouse hired regardless of race. That's the way Benjamin Mayes did it. He came up in a segregated situation, he understood all of that but when he became president of Morehouse he did not erect those barriers that would keep out any race as students or as faculty. I think when I look back on it and talking with you I realized that my life has been touched in many ways by very positive thinking people and very positive situations even under certain circumstances. Positive in the sense that it has given me the sense of the world, what's going on, people. One of my best friends is a white fellah from England, Terry Hill. I haven't heard from him in a number of years but we used to correspond regularly. But he kept moving around, I moved around a couple of times and we lost touch. I don't know where he is but still a good friend. I don't know whether he's even alive but wherever he is he's a good friend of mine. It was never an issue of black and white. It was an issue of we played basketball together and we were friends.
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