



**William Danforth Williams  
Oral History Interview**

**Tulsa Historical Society & Museum  
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INFORMATIONAL SHEET ON INTERVIEWEE

TULSA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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400 CIVIC CENTER

TULSA, OKLA. 74103

Name William D. Williams Address & Zip 2233 N. Denver Blvd. 74106

Occupation Retired Teacher

Brief Chronological Background Completed high school at B. T. Washington H. s.,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma 1922. B. S. Degree from Hampton Institute, Virginia  
M. S. Degree in Business Education from the University of Denver, (Colo.)  
Taught business subjects at Washington High, (Tulsa) forty one years.

In order to assist the interviewer, as well as yourself, please list in chronological order items in your own experience area in which you may be able to tell of happenings or experiences which may be unique or different, or which you feel may give support to, or a different angle or viewpoint from other historical material which has been reported. \_\_\_\_\_

Dad owned one of first automobiles in Tulsa

Worked for Thompson Ice Cream Co. Archer and Boulder streets

Was engineer there because of knowledge of steam engines. Good Pay

We lived at the plant for a while. Moved to Greenwood Street.

Mother taught school at ~~xxx~~ Fisher settlement on road near Hisson Center's  
present location

Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977.072.001

Please list your principal activities of the past, including all details you feel are pertinent (civic, educational, military, athletic, cultural, etc.) including offices held or the role you played

Please list place and date of birth, parentage, and other pertinent information about your family background Was born March 15, 1905 at Hot Springs, Arkansas.

There were no facilities or Black doctors in Tulsa, so Mother was  
sent to Hot Springs for the event. I am the son of Loula T. Williams  
and John Wesley Williams

Please indicate if you are single, married, widowed, etc. Widowed

Please list names and addresses of sons and daughters who are living:

Anita M. Christopher, Optometrist - 1618 N. Lewis, (Office) Tulsa, Okla.

2211 E. 29th Place North (74110)

David Owen Williams 2909 Northumberland, Richmond, Virginia 23220

Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Richmond, Va.

(It would be appreciated if you would attach to this sheet any biographical sketches, copies of newspaper clippings, or copies of other material which you feel might be of help in providing background material on yourself or your activity)



# Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977, 072, 001

DATE: 3-29-77

Interviewer: Jan Sparks

VOICE IS VERY FAINT, STATIC, SOME RE-TAPING

INTERVIEW SUBJECT:

WILLIAM DANFORTH WILLIAMS

TAPE:

28, Side 1 Right , Side 2 Right

PAGE: 1 of 8

MEAS.

SUBJECT MATTER

DRAMATIC QUOTES (KEY BY NO.)

- 1065 Father: John Wesley Williams, mother: Lula Thomas Williams
- 1118 Father lived in Mount Bayou, Mississippi. I always asked him why he moved to Indian Territory and he'd just laugh but wouldn't tell me. He was here about 1901 or 1902. We always surmised and teased him about getting in I.T. for safety like the outlaws and he'd just grin.
- Mother went to Huntsville, Alabama to school and they met somehow down there and they married in Jackson, Tennessee.
- 1155 I was born in Hot Springs, Ark. They lived in Tulsa but because they were black there were no doctors for her so he sent her to Hot Springs to have me and brought me back. I was born 3-15-05.
- 1160 My mother was active, a good businesswoman, my old man was a good mechanic. He had one of the first automobiles in Tulsa. He worked at the ice cream plant in Tulsa running a steam engine to freeze ice cream. His skill had been a black fireman to shovel coal on trains in Mississippi. The engineers were white. He had experience in this when he came to I.T. and got the job with the ice cream co. He was in charge of the boiler and all the pulleys and things, so they were both pretty well fed to get along and she was a seamstress, a schoolteacher. He was a photographer. Most of the pictures were lost in the riot except a few in my photo book I had taken to school a day or two before and they were saved. The ice cream plant, Williams Confectionary at Greenwood and Archer, and down the street on Greenwood there was Williams Garage. They owned a one-quarter oil land and wanted to put a rooming house there and found out he was going to have his garage under the rooming house and there was an ordinance you couldn't have that and they had to build and they wondered what to do so they put a theatre there.
- 1227 Which Williams family was this? Mildred Williams came here from Redfern in the 20's. It was all black. (INTERVIEWER: WERE THERE THREE WILLIAMS FAMILIES HERE? YOURS AND MILDRED'S AND \_\_\_\_\_ ? ) Yes and none were related
- 1264 Our first home was on Boston. We had one room at the ice cream plant. They let us stay there. We weren't there long. We lived at 102 N. Greenwood, listed in the 1916 phone directory at the library. We had a 3 story, brick, three bedrooms, kitchen, bath, lavatory for people who traded at the confectionary on the first floor. J. C. McKiefer (sp?) was the dentist on the third floor, my uncle was on the 2nd floor.
- 1306 I remember an oak hallway umbrella stand with mirror and places on the side to hang hats, it was 6' tall, 30" wide, got that from my aunt in Texas, destroyed in the riot. We didn't eat at home much. Ate at the cafe next door. They were too busy. I'd just go to the register, get money and go next door to eat.



# Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977.072.001

Page 2 of 8

3-29-77

WILLIAM DANFORTH WILLIAMS

- 1358 Burned trash in oil drums outside in back. When we got broken dishes, etc, in full container, the city trashman hauled it off. I don't know where.
- 1381 The first blacks settled at 11th, Frisco, Guthrie, etc., because we couldn't get across the river to Red Fork. Blacks were trying to get to oil country just like the whites. Then moved over to Boulder, Cheyenne, Boston at 1st, and the first business on Boston near where John 3:16 Mission and on Cincinnati up to Union Station until it was built and then when that land was taken they migrated to the Greenwood area which was very early settled and then near 1st and Madison there was a small settlement there near Redlands, and of course at early 1900's that was settled and in the 20's South Haven blossomed after the riot and Snake Creek at 81st and Harvard had a settlement, it was also called Rentie (name of town) but maps had Snake Creek on it. After the riots, Snake Creek was settled. Alsuma was settled before the riots.
- End of Side 1 Right                      Beginning of Side 2 Right
- 001 (A re-recording of the original tape evidently. Lots of echo, static, quality is worse than on side one)
- Alsuma was a farming community. Snake Creek was a suburb, like getting out of town today. Snake Creek and South Haven were an outgrowth of the riot.
- 042 The crookedness of the way the city is laid out is due to Frisco RR coming in here and they would ferry people across the road. They had no plans so they set up houses any old way. As it grew, the city fathers voted to straighten the streets due north and south. That is why when you go from Cathedral Square you jog at Boulder, 10th and 11th, etc.
- 59 Standpipe Hill was named for the city water supply. The tall stand pipe reservoir gave pressure and it was just a huge round pipe.
- 93 Greenwood before the riot was one of the places in the United States where on that street you could get practically everything you needed, clothing, groceries, businesses, rooming houses. On Sundays, most of the women in town worked for white community as maids and had living quarters and if you will notice out on 14th, 15th, between Boston, Baltimore, in there, as far as 21st Street, people wouldn't build a house without servants quarters and when they got off they would collect down on Greenwood. Finally there was a dance hall for dances and of course all kinds of joints.
- 129 My mother ran this Dreamland Theatre as I told you and she would belong to the theatre booking association and finally it worked up to where she had 3 theatres, one in Muskogee, one in Okmulgee. There was another black theatre in Oklahoma City so they would come as far south as Kansas City and then they would work out of Kansas City, go to Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Okmulgee and Muskogee. You could book them for 6 weeks just in this area. Bojangles was in one group. Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, others. There was a place called the Palm Garden.

# Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977.072.001

Page 3 of 8

WILLIAM DANFORTH WILLIAMS

3-29-77

Billy Crain ran it. It was a joint that had a bar in front and a gym for boxing. He'd let the kids come in during the week but you couldn't come in front. You had to go around and he had fellas that helped train them and they had boxing every Wed. night and a kid could work in a battle royal, 5 of them in the ring together fighting and you could work on up and be in the preliminaries if you were good enough. Most of us kids knew nothing about basketball. We played baseball and boxing, later on the school started football.

162 (Garbled) nick names of fighters. "Crazy Red" is my age. He was a relative newcomer, everyone else is gone now.

179 Buildings were rebuilt after the riot but now they are skeletons, what is left, the expressway took the rest.

187 The first church I remember was the First Baptist Church on Archer Street. They split the church and the other half went to what is now Mt. Zion Baptist Church. My mother was a CME from Tennessee (Colored Methodist Episcopal). My old man was Advocate Methodist Episcopal, now called Vernon AME. The CME church now on Lewis, Christ Temple, it was on Frankfort but blown away by a tornado. Several years ago the tornado damaged it beyond repair. The AME on Easton Street is now Cincinnati Ave, and it has got this funny looking roof. I remember Rev. Abernathy back then as the first Baptist minister. I don't remember if he was the first one or not, then at Mt. Zion, the Rev. McGee was my Christ Temple pre

222 The first school was established by Jake Dillon, a local businessman. In 1913 Booker T. Washington High School was on Elgin and Easton, right where Charles Johnson is now. Charles Johnson was renamed after the new BTW was built. In 1905 Jake Dillon, a local businessman and constable opened the first school for black children in the small Baptist Church building at Archer and Street.

I started teaching in 1929. In 1925 there was a general recession over the country but it pulled back up by 1929. We were able to have yearbooks every year but the last one I remember in yearbooks was 1931 and we didn't have another yearbook until 1955. There was the riot, the depression, the war, we didn't have the money for yearbooks.

267 I went to grammar school at Dunbar on Hartford where the city garbage trucks stopped. Hartford came down and dead-ended and the school was in the middle of the street, a two-story brick, 8 rooms approximately, I went from 3rd grade up. The first two years I was down in Texas with my mother's sister. She got me off of Greenwood because it was too rough and she thought I might get killed because we lived right at the corner, at the heart of it all. After two years she couldn't stand it and she sent for me. So I came back here and graduated high school in 1922.

282 Donnie (?) Harrison McGill, he was my shop teacher. I thought he was the greatest man who ever lived. He had finished Hamilton Institute in Virginia and he was a genius at making things like furniture and he taught us to play tennis and basketball and one year he was the football coach.



I thought he was the greatest man in the world. He would tell us about Hampton by the Sea, what a beautiful place it was and I'll never forget he told us you'll never know the value of a smile. I used to wonder what the great thing about a smile was until I met a girl. And we'd be in church and the men sat on one side and the women on the other and I could look in her face and every Sunday we'd get in the same seats and I could look at her and we'd smile. We had ROTC drills at the church and I went to Hampton because of his description and it was a beautiful place. He influenced me a lot. I thought he was great.

309 My high school coach, Seymour Williams, influenced me. I was the quarterback on the Booker T. team and we went to Hampton and I was a little small for a colored and my weight was 160 but I made the team and made quite a record. That is one of the reasons I decided to be a teacher. My people were in business though but right after the riot with the recession and all we lost everything. It just didn't work trying to rebuild. We couldn't get enough money to keep us going. I had prepared to be a dentist and I had to come home because my parents needed me and I was working up at the yard on the ships and I got in and found out there wasn't anything I could do. A fella in Sapulpa needed a coach and Seymour Williams, my old coach, told him I was here and I wasn't doing anything. I'd had two years of college, so they hired me and I fell in love with teaching. So when I went back I changed my major from just business to business education and that is where I took all my shorthand, bookkeeping, and I was always a good typist, so I started teaching business.

345 (Garbled) List of names of people from the past.

362 Outstanding citizens - mostly doctors, Dr. R. T. Bridgewater, O. W. Gurley, Jim Cherry, my people, the Goodwin's, they had offices at 1st and Main, the various preachers, of course. There were a lot of nice "characters" who were a little shady but nice human beings (laugh).

379 The worst thing that happened to Tulsa was the riot. I don't know where to start. It depends on where you were for your version of the riot. What all of us agreed was that it started because of the threat through the Tribune paper that they were going to lynch a negro tonight. I remember reading that article, so by the time all the blacks had read that thing they went down to see about it and Bonnie Cleaver was like Gunsmoke, Marshal Dillon back then, I thought he was the most wonderful man in the world. He had no fear. I saw a fella have a gun on him and he said now put it away, put that gun down and your're talking to Uncle Bonnie now and he got the man's gun. That impressed me. He was a sheriff's helper down in the county building and all of the crowd was around, black and white. So they were talking and saying there wouldn't be any lynching and Uncle Bonnie said now I want all of you to go back home. I'm going to stay here to see that there won't be. So they all started away and about a block away somebody fired a shot, don't know if it was black or white, and then it was all down hill, they cut loose and fought all night.

The next morning they were trying to come in on Greenwood down there, surrounded the place and the militia came in and started rounding blacks up to put a stop to it but what happened was they would allow those fellas to come in behind them after they had taken the



blacks and they started looting and burning. Now the cause of it they claim is that the girl said a boy tried to rape her on the elevator. They both worked at a building downtown. Now that is what everybody says but you can ask 20 people and they will have 20 versions of what happened. It depends on where you were if they were up on Standpipe Hill and saw Pegleg Taylor shootin at whites and hittin them or if you were down at Greenwood and Archer where I was and seen my dad with that rifle, we all had different versions of what actually happend that morning. But I do know they caught me about 4 blocks away from home, lined me up, took me down to the convention hall, the municipal theatre, and they never did catch my old man. He got out as far as Pine Street and one of his white business associates picked him up and took him home. That afternoon the operator of the theatre came down to the convention hall and bailed me out but didn't know where mama was so the next morning I ran into her downtown. They had said it was safe to be on the streets. I saw her and yelled Mama and ran right up third and main and boy was that some greeting. She bought a lot of things for the confectionary and one of the salesmen had taken her home to stay. But none of us knew where the other was.

I was a junior in high school, age 16. My mother wouldn't let me go. Some man came to the theatre, got on stage and told everybody to go home and get their guns. The operator of the theatre was white so he took off for home and he came out to bail me out that evening and took me home for the night. I'll never forget it.

468 Because of the recession in 1924-26, everything was bad, things couldn't be built back up successfully. Clear up through 1929 crash, the early 30's, depression, Greenwood didn't get a chance to be built back successfully. Then another recession, then the large chain stores made business, black and white, fold, plus the decision in 1954 to integrate. It was a marvelous street, people did nice business up until the 50's.

Up until the 1950's we couldn't eat out or go to theatres. If we didn't know someone to stay with when we traveled we'd have to sleep in our cars.

534 "To lynch a negro tonight" was the headline the night of the riot. No one knows the amount of people killed but at least 100, black and white. People didn't keep records of blacks.

585 Lindsey Williams crawled under the house when he saw the men coming. They set fire to the house, stood off and looked at it and he was afraid to come out and they went away but it had burned down to the place where he was and he was burned but he wouldn't come out but he lived. He would have been shot.

590 They gathered  
The colored men at Greenwood and Easton and a group of other fellas. They would bring them here from different places so we had to march down Greenwood to Archer, but everything down Archer was burning so they would march us on over to the Frisco tracks and down the track to Main Street and in the back to the \_\_\_\_\_ and I passed where we lived, that building right there, and I saw a guy come from up in my mother's upstairs where we lived and he had her handbag and she had one of those leopard coats, a fur coat, pretty expensive, and you could see



the belt off of it hanging out of this bag. \_\_\_\_\_ Garbled  
I should have been afraid but I hadn't gotten up far enough where a lot of killing was going  
on because I had just been running and run into a guy with a shotgun, "all right, nigger,  
\_\_\_\_\_ run damn nigger," so I put up my hands and he searched me, \_\_\_\_\_ and  
took me down on the streets \_\_\_\_\_. Killing was going on all around the  
North Main, Frankfort, \_\_\_\_\_, back of Standpipe Hill. They came in the back way  
and we had a lot of opposition \_\_\_\_\_, the militia too, you know.

633 (INTERVIEWER: A BLACK WOMAN TOLD ME THE OTHER DAY THAT THE BLACK COMMUNITY WAS NOT BITTER.)  
Not now, but then they were bitter, no matter what she says. Everything was burned. (SHE WAS  
A SMALL CHILD) But I was 16 and I remember. I didn't hear my parents talk about it much.  
We lived in a tent at First until they built back the Dreamland Theatre and the living  
quarters upstairs. I was selfish and interested in myself and school and football and  
whether they'd have a team and we were getting ready to have the junior-senior prom and  
they'd burned down all the dance halls where you could have it and how would we go to school  
and then when school did start, oh you know kids. You don't associate much with your parents  
except at eating time. I know they must have felt a tough fight trying to get the loans  
to get this building built back and after they were successful the recession set in and  
they couldn't make the payments. They sold the property to get enough money to make it go.

671 Most of the loans were from black organizations like American Woodman \_\_\_\_\_ and the largest  
were the Oddfellows and \_\_\_\_\_ and then they would have black auxiliaries and they  
had treasuries built up so they could loan money. A few whites helped but building and loan  
associations and banks didn't help.

685 The radio announced it was safe to go out again and I was at this movie operator's house and the  
next day the only news on the radio was the riot and they announced the chief of police said it  
was okay to be out, things were safe again so he took me to town. He had to look for a job  
too. I got out, then I saw a sign, dishwasher wanted, so I went in and applied, got the job.  
I worked there one meal and went down the alley between lunch and dinner, no, they only served  
noon day lunches, where Coney Island is now, it was a cafe then. I got through washing and  
he said you can go now and gave me \$1.50. I walked down the street and walked right into  
Mother crossing the alley by NBT and the next building to it at 3rd and Main. We had a nice time  
hugging and kissing. She was going up to her lawyers office to see what could be done and while  
she was up there I told her I was going to see what was left of the building. I got down there  
and I'm telling you, \_\_\_\_\_. My uncle had a place up on the hill that they  
didn't get and we all piled up with him, sleeping on the floor and everywhere.

We lived in a tent 3 or 4 weeks and we were all wondering what we'd do when it got cold. Some  
people still had army tents by winter, sleeping 8, and a kitchen, with boards up on the  
sides, close that old flap and it was pretty warm.



# Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977.072.001

3-29-77

WILLIAM DANFORTH WILLIAMS

Page 7 of 8

- 744 I don't think black Tulsa will ever be the same. It just has to be melted in. I believe that is the way it will have to be everywhere. One community of black and white, it is getting better.
- 762 When I was working on that ship docked at Jacksonville, about 8 blocks from downtown, one day I broke my belt on the carriage watch, where you go down and meet the cabs and take the bags and walk them up and take them to their room. You could tip a decent dollar a trip. I walked down town to get me a belt and on my way back I got to a street and the green light was on and I thought I'd better get on back to the ship and when I got half way across the street I heard this police whistle and "hey, negra, you, come here," so I turned around and went back and he said "can't you see?" I said "yes sir," and he said "you're one of these smart New York niggers ain't you?" and I said "no, I'm from Texas" and I don't know today why I told that man Texas instead of Oklahoma except that it seemed like in Virginia that Oklahoma seemed like China to those people and if I'd said Oklahoma he'd been mad because he'd just know no niggers lived in Oklahoma. So he said, "I want you to watch that sign and when it turns green I want you to walk over there and when this one turns green walk here and back to me" and he walked me around that thing 4 or 5 times and finally I said, "boss, can't you let me go on back to the ship?" I had my badge, cap, uniform, and about that time I heard the whistle blow the first whistle they were letting the plank down. He said, well, one more time and I'll let you go. And finally he says alright, if I ever catch you down here again I'm going to break your head and I said yes sir, and I started walking fast and he says \_\_\_\_\_ that was humiliation, I'll never forget that.
- 810 And another time I was going to Tuskegee with the track team of 5 boys. We had one car with 7 of us in it and went to Memphis, started south, and got down to Scottsboro and had a flat just out of town so we put on the spare, went on in town, stopped at the filling station and so I got out of the car, they were scared, and I walked up to this great big pot bellied man and said could we get a tire fixed here and he said, yeah (looking down at the car) with the Oklahoma licenseplates on the front and back, "what place in Oklahoma you niggers from?" Seymour said we're from Tulsa. Tulsa, "\_\_\_\_\_ used to live in Tulsa right up on top of Standpipe Hill, you know where Standpipe Hill is?"
- 838 My wife was from Kentucky. When we went to Kentucky on trips we had to go to St. Louis and go from there and it is so much easier now to go through Tennessee. We can stop at motels, restaurants, anywhere now. It was so nice to take my grandson on a trip through there and travel is just so much better than it used to be.
- 879 Discusses grandson and the Roots TV show, vaguely, eating on the trip with his grandson and miscellaneous wishing that they had kept track of the family or could track down an old family Bible.
- 911 The blacks came here before statehood, stayed through & built and were cut off at one time and there was a struggle building. Mother was a college graduate, the old man wasn't and I had to



# Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977.072.001

WILLIAM DANFORTH WILLIAMS

Page 8 of 8

3-29-77

go to college whether I wanted to or not. I couldn't get a masters degree in Oklahoma. I had to go to Denver. One daughter is an optometrist. 2 daughters are in college, one in optometry and one in dental. Another girl we call a college tramp. She just loves to go to college. Right now she is in New England.

969

I was an only child. You don't miss it so much until you hear someone say "Im going out to visit my brother or sister" and you realize you don't have any.







Tulsa Historical Society & Museum 1977 072 001









