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From Immigrant to Ethnic: Interview with James Williams by Joseph Conforti

James Williams

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Rhode Island College

ETHNIC STUDIES PROJECT

Oral History Interview # 16

with

James Williams

April 28, 1976

By Joseph Conforti

Tape 1 Side 1

- 6 Mother was a housewife, father a custodian in public schools. He attended public schools in Des Moines. Father active in community affairs. He was chairman of one of active youth councils. By high school, he belonged to junior branch of NAACP. Natural to follow father's example of involvement so in college and afterward was often in leadership positions in black community.
- 27 Mother from Alabama, father from Kentucky--worked on tobacco farm. Moved to Des Moines when about 18--had relatives there. Then joined army. Father had little formal education but was very well-read. Wanted son to get the education he didn't have. He got encouragement at home, in community and at church to pursue education.
- 65 He was very active in church since age of 12. Joined a segregated YMCA in high school.
- 77 After high school were very few jobs for blacks in area.
- 89 Offered job at YMCA in Harlem. While in New York attended both Union Theological Seminary and Columbia Teachers' College.
- 130 Came to Providence to work with Urban League.
- 135 Mother met father while he was in army. They moved to Des Moines to find work. Four in family--2 brothers, 1 sister.
- 159 Many blacks migrated to Chicago. Had mostly been farmers in South. They lived in crowded inner city but bought lots on outskirts and had gardens. All mother's relatives went to Chicago.

James Williams

- 190 Most blacks in Des Moines had migrated from South.
- 202 He worked from 8th grade on through graduate school. In summertime, he worked in gardens, paper routes, worked in barber shops, as cashier.
- 235 Discrimination wasn't real to him until high school. Was a challenge to him, was good student, had athletic ability.
- 252 Lived in mixed neighborhood. Most men had jobs similar to his father--janitors, teamsters (all white).
- 272 Father opened shoe shine parlor but it was short-lived.
- 277 Went to college in Des Moines, had been offered aid by two black colleges in South. Thought YMCA would hire him in Des Moines but not ready to hire blacks as staff members. Also had teaching certificate but couldn't get position. When he moved to Montclair, New Jersey, he attended college and was first black to get master's degree there.
- 311 Came to New York after college. He couldn't get any professional jobs in Des Moines because of discrimination.
- 341 Was recommended for work-study program at Harlem YMCA in 1928.
- 379 Description of Harlem. His salary was low. He enrolled at Teachers' College. Worked at YMCA in Harlem for 2 years then moved to New Jersey. Became director quickly there. Active in church as youth director.

Tape 1 Side 2

- 1 Joined NAACP when about 16--was junior branch. Has remained active in it.
- 33 Has no regrets about life he chose--had little economic security but was involved in what he felt were fulfilling activities. Had opportunities to join national organizations as staff member but decided against it. His son is very different from him in that respect--felt father had made too many sacrifices. Son has opted for financial security. Daughter more like him--a crusader.
- 60 Met present wife in Providence. Native Rhode Islander from long-established family.

James Williams

- 98 Had offer to come to Providence in 1939--to work for Urban League.
- 143 Lived on West Side of Providence when he came.
- 148 Basic focus of League was economic development, betterment of blacks. Got jobs for blacks in Providence in early 1940's--Brown & Sharpe, first black worker in department store, in nursing school, first teacher in public schools in Providence, in shipyard training program.
- 190 Description of method used in getting blacks into hospital training.
- 293 Efforts to get black into school system based on qualifications of candidate.
- 395 Emphasized training and education in their campaigns to get employment for blacks with backing of Urban League.
- 398 Account of his education and experiences at Montclair State Teachers' College.
- 444 Offered teaching positions since then but prefers social action.
- 466 Reaction of his children to his service orientation. Feels people should do whatever gives them greatest satisfaction.
- 503 Was accepted by community leaders in Rhode Island and this helped in his campaign to get work for blacks in new fields.

Tape 2 Side 1

- 3 Black neighborhoods in 1940: 3 in Providence--West Side (Hoyle Square), Fox Point and East Side--Camp Street. All have expanded now. Blacks in Providence were then 1-2%, now 10% but still only 1-2% outside of Providence.
- 33 Was small black community in East Providence also--mixed neighborhood, were semi-professional people. One street was almost completely black--Dunbar Avenue.
- 46 Blacks in East Providence mostly came from Providence. But there were some families of mixed black and Indian heritage in East Providence for a long time.
- 74 Large migration of blacks during World War II--came for jobs, better wages. Many in Hoyle Square area worked in heavy industries, foundries, etc. Heavy migration when shipyard opened. Migration less now, but is continuing.

James Williams

- 87 Educational level and income level of blacks higher in East Providence.
- 95 He first lived on West Side of Providence, on Bellevue Avenue.
- 100 South Providence now fastest growing area for blacks. When he came it was very small black community.
- 115 Fox Point--mixed population both racially and religiously.
- 120 Many blacks from South located in Hoyle Square area because there were already established Baptist churches there.
- 125 Description of churches blacks attended.
- 150 He organized youth council at Urban League. Started a scholarship fund.
- 217 Feels conditions have improved greatly. Many blacks weren't involved because they felt it was hopeless. He feels Urban League has helped to develop working relationships between black and white communities.
- 245 Worked closely with Brown University on some programs, students very helpful.
- 300 Leaders of all major faiths gave League their support.
- 317 Account of how he came to head Urban League.
- 350 Served as director for 30 years. Account of friendship with community leaders. Now works with young black leaders.
- 490 Has enjoyed his life, content, involved in areas which give him satisfaction, has won acceptance in community.
- 550 His philosophy: give more than you get.
- 570 Account of his father's principles and philosophy of living.