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Elbert Williams

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

ELBERT WILLIAMS

The year 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law on August 6, 1965. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 abolished literacy tests and poll taxes designed to disenfranchise African American voters and gave the federal government the authority to take over voter registration in counties with a pattern of persistent discrimination. Before the Voting Rights Act came to fruition, numerous people gave their lives in the quest for social justice and the right of the franchise as granted by the 1870 ratification of the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution. This amendment granted African American men the right to vote by declaring that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude". Using poll taxes, literacy tests and outright intimidation to stop people from casting free and unfettered ballots, Southern states effectively disenfranchised African Americans. Four years prior to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund's litigation of the 1944 *Smith v. Allwright* case that outlawed "white primaries", Elbert Williams, a resident of Haywood County, Tennessee, and one of the earliest known members of the NAACP, was lynched because of his membership in Brownsville's newly inaugurated chapter of the NAACP. Williams' demise came eleven years before the Christmas night bombing of Harry T. and Harriett Vyda Simms Moore's bedroom; fifteen years before the lynching of 14 year-old Emmett Till; and twenty-three years prior to Medgar Evers' assassination.

When consideration is given to those whose lives were taken in the struggle to gain voting rights, Florida's Harry T. Moore or Mississippi's Medgar Evers are among the first persons to come to mind. Evers, a native of Decatur, Mississippi, and an alumnus of Alcorn University, was a civil rights activist, organizer of voter registration efforts,

demonstrations and boycotts of companies that practiced discrimination was the first field secretary for the NAACP in Mississippi. Because of his civil rights and voter registration efforts, at 12:40 a.m. on June 12, 1963, Byron De La Beckwith, a white segregationist and founding member of Mississippi's White Citizens Council, shot Evers in the back in the driveway of his Jackson home. He died less than an hour later at a nearby hospital. Evers' life ended twelve years after Harry T. Moore. Moore organized the first Brevard County branch of the NAACP in 1934 and became its president. He later traveled throughout the state of Florida organizing branches. In 1941, he organized and became President of the Florida State Conference of NAACP branches. In 1945, he formed the Florida Progressive Voter's League and became its Executive Director. This organization was instrumental in helping register over 100,000 black voters in the State of Florida. Because of his civil and voter rights activities, as well as his activism in the Groveland Rape Case, on Christmas Day 1951 the Ku Klux Klan placed a bomb beneath the floor joists directly beneath the Moore's bed. Moore died on the way to the hospital; his wife, Harriett, died nine days later. Tennessee's Elbert Williams met an earlier, similar fate for wanting to participate in the political process.

Williams was born on October 15, 1908, in rural Haywood County, Tennessee, to Albert and Mary Green Williams. In 1929 he married Annie Mitchell, and they eventually moved to Brownsville, where they worked for the Sunshine Laundry. The Williamses became charter members of Brownsville's NAACP chapter, organized in May 1939. One of the first actions taken by members of the Brownsville's NAACP chapter was to work to register African Americans to vote in the upcoming presidential election the following year. Although no members of Haywood County's African American community had been allowed to register to vote during the 20th century, on May 6, 1940, five members of

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Brownsville's NAACP Branch unsuccessfully attempted to register to vote. Within 24 hours, the threats and reign of terror began. White extremists destroyed Brownsville's NAACP branch and over 20 African American families fled the area. Despite the mayhem that catapulted Brownsville into a state of chaos, the Williamses did not leave.

On June 20, 1940, many in Brownsville, including Elbert and Anna Williams, listened to the radio broadcast of the second fight between Joe Louis and Arturo Godoy. Louis successfully defended his title by winning the match over his opponent in the eighth round. After the fight, as Elbert Williams prepared for bed, Tip Hunter and Charles Read, city police officers, and Ed Lee, manager of the local Coca-Cola bottling company knocked on their door and forced Williams, who was barefoot and clad in pajamas bottoms and an undershirt, into the awaiting vehicle. They questioned him about his activities with the Brownsville NAACP. That was the last time anyone saw him alive. When he did not return home by the next morning, Annie Williams attempted to find the whereabouts of her husband. After three days of anxiously awaiting some word about her husband, Annie Williams received that ill-fated call on Sunday June 23, 1940 at 7:30 a.m. from undertaker Al Rawls. He wanted her to come to the Hatchie River because two anglers found the mutilated "body of a colored [sic] man". Williams, still clothed in what he was wearing the night of his abduction, was found with a rope around his neck, which was fastened to a log. He was beaten and bruised with bullet holes penetrating his chest. His head was twice its normal size. The Coroner ordered no medical examination, and held his inquest on the riverbank that same morning. His verdict was "Cause of death: unknown". Similar to what the Coroner wanted to do with Emmett Till's body some 15 years later, the Brownsville's Coroner did not want Annie Williams to see her husband's body. However, she insisted. Upon identifying her husband's body, she started to cry. One of the white men in attendance told her, "We ain't gonna have no hollering here". After she identified the body, they told Mrs. Williams that the body was to be buried immediately. According to his death certificate, Elbert Williams' death was ruled a homicide by "parties unknown". After retrieving the body from the Hatchie River and wrapping it in sheets, Al Rawls placed the body in a pine box and subsequently buried the remains of Elbert Williams in Taylor's Chapel Cemetery. Neither Annie Williams nor

members of the family attended the burial. She immediately left Brownsville and ultimately settled in New York.

Because of the atrocities committed in Brownsville, the county seat of Haywood, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's Special Council investigated the murder and interviewed numerous witnesses. Like so many others, these interviewees challenged violent assaults discursively and engaged in what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* described as calculated "speech acts," which should be viewed as a form of direct action protest against racial violence.

Pressured by the National Office of the NAACP, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to investigate the death of Elbert Williams. The DOJ promised a broad inquiry. It ordered the United States Attorney in Memphis to present the case to a Federal Grand Jury; NAACP Special Council Thurgood Marshall monitored the investigation. Marshall discovered that FBI agents took Tip Hunter, the leader of the lynch mob, on their rounds to question witnesses. Subsequently, the DOJ reversed its decision and closed the case citing insufficient evidence. Marshall criticized the DOJ for its investigation and failure to prosecute. As in many cases involving the death of those who fought to obtain civil and social justice, no one has ever been prosecuted for the death of Elbert Williams. According to some, Elbert Williams of Brownsville, Tennessee was the first known person affiliated with NAACP killed for his civil rights activities and seeking the right to vote. Twenty years later, at the height of the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Brownsville's NAACP re-organized in 1961. Those responsible for Williams's death have never been prosecuted.

- Linda T. Wynn

For More Information:

Heather Catherwood, "In the Absence of Governmental Protection: The Struggle of the Brownsville NAACP to Secure the Right to Vote." Northeastern University School of Law, May 2012. On-line at <http://nuweb9.neu.edu/civilrights/wp-content/uploads/Williams-final-essay.pdf>
