

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

Racial Tensions

O. H. 727

DAVID WILLIAMS

Interviewed

by

Ronald Rice

on

June 19, 1981

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: DAVID WILLIAMS

INTERVIEWER: Ronald Rice

SUBJECT: service, job experience, racial violence, riots

DATE: June 19, 1981

R: This is an interview with Mr. David B. Williams for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the racial tensions in Farrell, Pennsylvania during the 1960's, by Ronald Rice, at 301 Hamilton Avenue, on June 19, 1981, at 1:00 in the afternoon.

Could you begin by telling me where you were from originally?

W: King George, Virginia.

R: Were you born there?

W: Yes.

R: Did you grow up there too?

W: Until I was about nineteen.

R: You went to school there then?

W: Yes.

R: Where did you come to, Sharon or Farrell?

W: Sharon.

R: What do you remember most about your childhood?

W: It wasn't the worst and it wasn't the best. My mother worked and my father worked. The people they worked for helped out a lot; they were rather nice. For the little bit that I did go to school, I went to an all black school there. It wasn't integrated.

R: That was in the 1940's?

W: Yes, late 1930's and early 1940's because I quit in 1945 on account that the war was on and a kid could get a job then anywhere. My home was on a naval base, and a kid could get a job anywhere. I never will forget that my first job was a water boy. The fellows that I worked with were old and drabby. I was the water boy, and they would come around and talk and I had the water tank on my back to kill the time while they were goofing off. There was quite a bit of a problem there, but I never followed it. A lot of people are under the impression that if you are black and you come from the south that you are . . .

R: Did you have a large family?

W: There were five of us.

R: Five children?

W: Right, three girls and two boys.

R: And you were the oldest?

W: Right.

R: You quit school and you got a job during the war?

W: Yes.

R: You were too young to be drafted?

W: I was too young to be drafted. I was right at the middle age for working as far as they were concerned. I mean not as far as they were concerned because they didn't make me quit school or anything like that or ever forced me. I will never forget that I had an uncle who was in the service and was stationed in Australia. He wrote back to my mother to make sure that they kept me in school. Evidently he was working hard times with his education and everything, but I quit anyway.

R: Do you remember what grade you were in when you quit?

W: I think I was in the eighth or ninth grade. Then I started working in construction. Then I went into working for a grocery store; then I went back into construction. I think I was about fifteen or sixteen years old then. Then I went to Washington, D.C. which is about forty miles from our home, and I worked construction there all summer. Then I started my one job building a big high rise here. Then we would start another job or else because of the weather . . . They would lay most of the laborers off unless you were skilled like an electrician or a carpenter;

they would work all year.

I think it was around August and my uncle had been here since around the early 1920's working in the mills. He was visiting, and my brothers said that he was coming back with me; my brother was too young because he was around sixteen years old I think. Anyway, that was when I got to this place. He told me to be ready Saturday night because that was when he was leaving.

R: To come to this town up north?

W: Yes, to come back to Pennsylvania. It is only 368 miles from here. So that Saturday night I think we struck it out. That was before they had the turnpike all the way up, and there were no interstates.

R: What year was that then?

W: 1948. We rode all night; I was so tired. That is why I have been working in the mill ever since.

R: When you got up here in 1948, then where did you go?

W: I went to Shenango, Inc. I worked in the mill through January of 1951.

I got drafted from Sharon. Then they sent me back within miles of my home for basic training. They sent me within fifteen miles of my home for advanced training in tank. I was in a tank outfit. I'm not much into tanks and all of that stuff; I wanted to cook.

R: Were you in the Army?

W: Right.

R: How long were you in the service?

W: Two years.

R: Then you got out of the service and came back to the Shenango Valley here?

W: Yes. I came back and went back into the mill. Then I went to trade school in New Castle off and on for about forty years I think. I learned the bricklaying trade. I would go to school there in the winter, and then in the summer I was working with a guy by the name of Fred. I think I learned more off of him than anyone.

R: Practical experience?

- W: Right. I was more or less trying to pick up an extra buck by going to school because they would give you so much money. I forget exactly how much it was. But out of the money that you had to pay the school, I got an extra \$50 or \$60 a month. The World War II veterans were going to school, and the government would take care of their schooling. I was happy because I was really trying to learn because I was determined to get out of the mill. Then as things went along, things got better--the conditions got better in the mill and all that--and I'm still doing fine. I will be there nine years I hope, if Reagan doesn't cut the social security.
- R: Is this in Shenango?
- W: Sharpsville, Pennsylvania.
- R: Is it a very big plant?
- W: It is probably about 300 or 350 with four floors. Right now the floors are that high. They have two, big plants in Pittsburgh. Their headquarters is in Pittsburgh.
- R: Going back to the service, did you go overseas at all?
- W: No.
- R: You stayed in the States?
- W: Yes, I stayed in the States the whole time. I had a lot of good training. When they did try to send me overseas, I faked them out of going over. My time was limited, so it would force taxpayers too much money then, I guess, to send me over and then come back because they didn't keep me over two years.
- R: Where you work now at Shenango, did they ever give you any special training for what you do there?
- W: No, I'm a postman operator. That is a horizontal type, moving type. I think when he put that thing in, it cost him about a quarter of a million dollars. Now it costs over a million to put it in. I was a chainman, and I helped them load it off the railroad when they brought it in. When the guy stuck the pick in the hole to dig the foundation, I was there, and when they cranked it up and it started running, I was right there. People always said I was nosy, and I was always looking over somebody's shoulder. I think I waxed that machine for about one year; I waxed and operated it.
- R: What are some of your chief interests besides working? I think you mentioned before your grandchildren.

W: Well, I don't know. From the day I got married I was always trying to struggle to do better than I did. I think that is the name of the game, and that is what is happening in this country today. In recent years things really didn't materialize. I tried to educate my first daughter Stephanie. She borrowed money; she got the money. She went a little while, and then she dropped out. Now she is working for the federal government, but it was just wasted money because the job that she has now was more or less . . . She was going to a professional secretary school in Pittsburgh.

R: Technician school?

W: Yes, and she borrowed this money to go to school. I think she started around August and went until November. And all that money that she paid these people just went down the drain. Then she left and went to California. She didn't like California so she came back here, stayed around here a little longer and then went to Washington, D.C. She floated around there for about six months or better and through some of my associates from the church, she got a job. They say you should know someone, and it is good to know someone all the time.

My second daughter, I went through hell with her. She had a baby when she was really young and the boy she was going with, I had a lot of trouble with him. As a matter of fact I wound up in the hospital for a week. They have a little baby. I treat her just as one of mine because he hasn't done anything for her. That is the name of the game, you know, to me.

R: If we could jump back to the 1960's here, what was an average day like for you living here? Did you live in Farrell at the time, in the early 1960's?

W: Yes.

R: What was an average day like in the early 1960's?

W: I was working part-time in the mill. I would go out and work with this guy; I would do little odd jobs like laying a few blocks to build a garage for someone, pouring a little concrete here and there.

R: In addition to working at the mill?

W: In addition to working at the mill.

R: Do you live on Hamilton still?

W: No, I live on the next block, 395. In the wintertime you can see the house from here. I got run out of there in 1970.

I think it was around this time of year.

R: Did the house burn down?

W: Yes, and I was out working part-time then. Instead of fixing the house up, I sold it as it was and took the money and put it into this one. That is how I got here. I wasn't heavy into it. I always did belong to a church, but I wasn't heavy into it. I'm really not heavy into it now, but I'm a trustee. I pay all the bills and things for the the church.

R: What church is that?

W: Bethlehem Baptist. I take care of all the bills which is a headache. At that time I was involved in the Elks, Twin City Elks. As a matter of fact, the night that the first riot broke out in Farrell I was sitting at a party there. A few kids came in and said they were going to do this and were doing to do that, but I really didn't believe it. I said that this couldn't be happening to a little town. Some of the stuff that they did, I was for, and some of it . . . I don't know. It didn't really make too much sense.

R: Can you recall the first time you heard about some of the black minority leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King? What do you recall about him in the early 1960's?

W: I think he was a great man; I really do.

R: How did you hear about him, through the radio?

W: Through the radio, television; I buy Jet magazine every week, and I always read about him. My brother went down when they had the march in Washington. I don't know if you remember it, but you probably heard about it.

R: Yes, I read about it.

W: I think it was the best thing that could ever happen to a black person; I really do. But there have been so many people who have come along since him that twisted everything that he stood for around and misused it. I really don't think that man lived to hurt anyone; I really don't.

R: Can you recall anything about the rioting in other American cities in the 1960's? Do you remember hearing about Detroit?

W: Yes, Washington, D.C. especially because I had a cousin there.

R: How did you receive most of your information about rioting and racial unrest in other cities? Was it mostly television, radio?

W: Through the media.

R: During the 1960's living here in Farrell, could you sense any growing racial tensions?

W: Not really. I would say seventy-five percent of the people who I worked with were white. I really didn't see any difference because I guess the people knew me and knew what I stood for and all that. The whole issue in Farrell, I would say, more or less was copied; they saw what they were doing in the big cities, so they decided to try it in the little cities. They would get away with it. It was just like the big cities. The big cities would hurt themselves in some way, and right here in Farrell I know that they hurt themselves. I know different people who have stores here in Farrell where they depend on these people. I could name a few stores that my people bought clothes from on credit. You would pay them when they weren't cutting back. I didn't do that. I remember that when I first came here, there were certain people right in Sharon who I would go to and buy stuff from, but not clothes and groceries. It didn't make too much sense to me because I always believed that before you take your money and go out in the street and have a good time, like I know a lot of people do, you get your groceries. If you need a pair of shoes, you go and buy a pair of shoes and pay cash for them. Then you don't have to worry about it because before you get them paid for, they might be worn out and before you get the groceries paid for, somebody might have eaten them up.

R: Right. Well you answered my next question. A lot of people feel that racial violence and stuff that happened in Farrell was the result of what happened in other cities, sort of like a domino effect.

W: Right.

R: Do you pretty much agree with that?

W: Right.

R: Was your life or any of your family's lives ever affected by any racial tension or violence here in Farrell?

W: Well, no.

R: Maybe in work or in school? Do you recall any specifics in your neighborhood down in through there?

W: I never had any problem. People like to use that excuse that they discriminate against us. That is the thing that worries most black people. Everything that I went after, like if I want into Copperweld, I got in. With my job in the mill

right now I am satisfied. I could have been foreman right now if I would have gone after it, but I didn't want it. I don't believe it is any different in the north than the south. When I bid on this job, I put David B. Williams on it. Someone said, "Man, they don't want any niggers on this job." I said, "How do you know this?" He said, "Well, they are going to mess you up." I said, "Well, they are going to mess me up. I'm going to put my name on it." I never had a minutes problem the day I put my name on that job. I never worried too much. All I wanted was just a peaceful living, mind my own business, and go on my way.

R: Do you know if any of your friends were ever directly affected by any racial tension or violence?

W: No, I know of people who caused problems. A lot of people go out and look for problems. I know not from my relation but I know people who found it; they went and looked for it and they found it.

R: What can you recall about some of the burning and the damages that were done to some of the businesses in Farrell like Pick Electric and Hamilton Drugs and such? It was on Idaho I think.

W: Right, everything was on Idaho Street. They didn't touch Hamilton Drugs. I don't think they touched Pick Electric.

R: I think his windows were broken.

W: Well, they broke a window or something like that.

R: Would you label what happened in Farrell in the summer of 1969 as a riot?

W: Would I label that as a riot?

R: Yes.

W: No. I think it was a bunch of people trying to get attention, to let people know that they live in Farrell too.

R: What can you recall about the Black Youth Action Committee? Do you know who they were?

W: Yes.

R: What do you remember about them?

W: I think they were out to gain self-recognition. I hate to say it. They were fast talkers, more educated than me. As I grew older I learned a lot. I was always around the educated people in my life, even in Virginia and in Washington, D.C. I was always around people who did things for themselves.

Those guys didn't do a damn thing for themselves. They weren't looking for it, and half of those guys didn't have any jobs and still don't have any jobs. They were fast talkers and they were getting a bunch of dummies around town to go along with them. That is my opinion of them.

R: You think their motives were pretty selfish then?

W: They were out for self-recognition.

R: How do you think the Sharon Herald reported events in Farrell during the 1960's? Were they fair or biased?

W: I think they were pretty fair.

R: How do you think the Farrell police dealt with all the racial problems in Farrell?

W: I give them an "E" for effort because I think that is one of the main problems in this country. I will say this: I do believe that the police department needs to be dressed up around the country and Farrell is one of them. The chief's brother and I worked hand in hand in the mill together. I told him that I thought that the police departments all around the country need to be dressed up, to clean up their act. In the 1940's it was over Farrell of the headhunters. You would hear them say that they were headhunters and that they would go out and look for blacks to beat on. The police in Washington, D. C., there are people on the force who could beat you on the side of the head and all hell would break loose. I think that is one of the main issues that is still in this country; as they say, one man can start World War III.

R: Do you think that the police might have added to some of the problems of Farrell then?

W: What really started it was a fire up on Spearman Avenue. A little kid got burnt up there. Well, she died from whatever. That really started the whole thing in Farrell; I remember that now.

R: What year was that?

W: I don't know what year that was.

R: 1968, 1969?

W: Let's say 1968. That was what started the riot because the firemen didn't respond like they should have. A lot of that stuff I really don't know about; I really wasn't that interested in it, and I didn't want to get involved in it. I guess I was scared to get out of there because I do know that people were taking potshots, and they were firing at

random. They didn't care who they hit and all that. Through the media and watching on television, in Washington a lot of people got killed who were innocent people and innocent bystanders. I just really didn't get involved in what was said. I didn't pay too much attention to it. If they said that they were coming down to burn 305--at the time I was living there--I wouldn't have known about it. I didn't know about it. Every move that was made in town, why, the Farrell police and the city officials and the courts knew who was who and who did it and who caused it and everything. I was standing there in the middle one day and a guy said, "Who does Maurice Hopkins think he is?" He was supposed to be the so-called leader then. I didn't even know him, and I'm glad I didn't know that.

R: How did most of your friends feel about what was going on and how the police handled the situation, pretty much the same way you did?

W: I think they were about the same way as I was. They thought about on the same line as I did.

R: You mentioned the city government. How do you think Farrell's city government handled the problems in Farrell?

W: Pretty good. I will give them the "E" for effort too. A lot of this racial stuff was something that no one knew how to handle, not even Martin Luther King, and he was one of the greatest. In other words, he happened to be an educated black man. He knew how to just keep on striving to make progress. A lot of these people around Farrell and Sharon didn't really believe in what was happening. I didn't believe it. To see the things that I have seen in my days which really had . . . I worked with people who have seen lynchings and have seen people beat on and everything else. But I have never seen anything like that. I heard a little bit about it; I read a little bit about it, but I never saw those things. I worked with black people down through the years that have said that they worked for just bread and butter with no money involved. I never in all my days have worked for nothing. I always was paid. I worked all my days just about with white people. I heard them say that they would work from sunup until sundown. I never did that. I had hours. I would go to work at 8:00 in the morning, and I got off at 4:00 or 4:30. People didn't know how to handle it. Then a lot of people who lived down south, it really wasn't a bad place. There are a lot of farmers. Most of those people, all they know is farming or working in the mill, cutting wood for the floor and stuff like that, you know, a lumber mill. I did that. I know people who hate the ground that you walk on. I can't understand it. Sometimes I ask, "Why?" They will say, "I have seen this," or "I have seen that." Then some of them just want somebody to pick on.

- R: It is pretty easy to stir up.
- W: Right, and then if he is a fast talker, he can stir up a bunch of people.
- R: Then you pretty much think that most people can get what they want if they go about it the right way?
- W: I really do. I believe that anybody can get anything he wants in this country if he goes about it the right way. I really do believe that. Back to my uncle, he died in May of 1979 and was a millionaire; he was a millionaire. I got the papers right back in the room that I could show you now.
- R: Was there any group of people or movement who tried to better things in Farrell during the 1960's?
- W: Yes, there were groups, but they really didn't know how to go about it. When stuff pops up, they don't know how to handle it. No black person knew how to handle it but Martin Luther King and Whitney Young who, at that time, was the head of the Urban League. Well, they were educated people. They knew how to handle people. In my opinion, there are so many people yet in Farrell who don't know how to handle it, and in Sharon. Most of them are fast talkers and they go out for the self-recognition.
- R: So it is pretty much a learning experience for everybody then?
- W: It was a learning experience for me. It was a good experience. I was around with the so-called leaders then. They got what they wanted.
- R: Self-justice?
- W: Right, and they could stir up hell in this town. Right now they can do it.
- R: Again?
- W: Right.
- R: Can you recall any specific examples of racial prejudice in Farrell during the 1960's in real estate or on the job or social?
- W: I never was injured in it. I always went so far. I came up in the late 1930's and early 1940's and in the 1950's. I went to a black school, an all black school. In other words, if I wanted to buy a house way up on Roemer Boulevard where the school is, there aren't any black up there yet; I think Dr. Lowe was the first one up there. If I had the money in

my pocket, before I would attempt to buy that house I would go around to all of them and ask them if they would mind if I moved in. If they would tell me that they didn't want to be bothered, I wasn't going to force myself on them. It is just like one of these restaurants in the south. There isn't anyway in the world that I would force myself on these people because I still believe that people can point. I wouldn't force myself on anyone.

R: Well, do you think that any single group was responsible for the racial unrest and violence that happened in Farrell?

W: A single group, no. No, it was just a bunch of people who just got together like that overnight. They said, "Well, we are going to do this, and we are going to do that," and they didn't know what in the hell they were doing; they didn't know how to do it or how to go about it. They just formed themselves overnight, and then they would hear about this one in Chicago or hear about this one, or somebody from the Black Panthers. They were stirring up a lot of trouble in California at the time, and they were pretty strong. They were making people . . . I don't believe that you can make anyone do anything. I strongly believe that you can lead a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink. They would just make people do this or make people do that. They were using a lot of dummies, and I hate to say it.

R: Followers?

W: Followers. You can get you a fast talker who talks really fast and loud and clear, and he could lead you a long ways. I really don't believe that there was anyone who could really lead it like it should be, like they try to do today, by sitting down and trying to talk to these people: Can't we do this, or can't you hire this kid, or can't you educate this kid or something like that.

R: Looking back at the 1960's and the situation in Farrell, what change would you like to have seen instituted in Farrell overall, maybe perhaps to better things than what they were?

W: Now?

R: Well, back in the 1960's. Do you think anything could have been done to better things?

W: Well, better education. I put a lot of emphasis on that because I didn't get it. Better relations, you know, be more interested in what is happening around here. When I go downtown and buy a new suit and put on a new pair of shoes and look clean thinking that I am the greatest thing that ever sat on a commode . . . That is the way some of the people think they are, you know, self-recognition, brag about this, brag

about that, well, I have got this and I have got that. I know people who get a new car every year or every other year and pay those long payments. I know people in town who ride around in a Cadillac, dress nice, talk loud, have got little kids of their own who don't give a damn about it. Some of them can't read or write; they don't even know what in the hell they were reading. Every time they are telling their kids the wrong thing.

R: Their priorities are all mixed up.

W: Their priorities are a little mixed up. They are telling their kids, "Well, hate this one; don't trust this one." Well, you have got to trust someone. Take a chance with him anyway, but don't give too far with him; you have got to trust someone. Feel them out. I would feel them out. If you were my boss in the mill, I would do the same thing with you. I'm going to be a little leary about you. There are people right here in this town who tell the people not to trust a white man as far as you can see. Some of them even preach it today.

R: Do you think that the racial problems that Farrell had were inevitable and that they would have happened anyway?

W: Probably so. It would happen eventually. There were people looking around for self-recognition, and they found it.

R: How different are race relations in Farrell now compared to what they were in the 1960's?

W: I would say fifty or sixty percent better.

R: Is there still a lot of that in Farrell?

W: Yes, both sides.

R: How do you feel the racial problems that Farrell had during the 1960's affected the reputation of the city in the greater Shenango Valley? Since you are working in Sharpsville, you probably hear a lot of stuff about Farrell.

W: Well, I will tell you that Farrell has a bad name now. It is not all blacks either. I know of some people down here who live on Spearman Avenue because one of my daughters went to school with their kids. This guy told me in the mill, "Do you know where that house is on the corner of Spearman and Federal Street?" He named the people who lived there. He said, "Man, there was a mob killing there years ago." I don't know how many they killed; it was like four or five people; it was more or less a gang-man slam. There are certain people, old-timers especially, who remembered those things that happened in Farrell. I wasn't too familiar with it, but that old slaying still remains with

Farrell. Farrell has a bad name; there is no question about that; they have a bad name, but I'm not going away. I'm going to stay right here as long as I can. With that racial stuff when that came along, that didn't help the cause. Even before that racial stuff came up, Farrell was known just as a hoodlum town. They said anything that you wanted to find in Farrell you could find.

R: Well, is there anything else that you feel is important that you wish to discuss that we didn't cover?

W: I don't know. I know a lot of things. Like I told you I like to keep my mouth shut about it. I see and don't see. I try to get along with everybody. I walk away from trouble. If you keep pushing, I might not.

R: Sometimes you are a lot better off to walk away.

W: Right, it is pretty rough.

R: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW