

Mary Louise Williams  
First Person Plural  
Tape Summary  
4 June 2020

**[NOTE: Bracketed information is from an unrecorded follow-up conversation of August 2 and 23, 2020]**

Tape 1-Zoom M0006

Intro-Acadia Roher interviewing Mary Louise Williams for First Person Plural via video conference on June 4, 2020.

AR Birth, Family, Early Life?

MW Born in Plumerville, Arkansas on December 10, 1927

Parents: Tollie and Octavia (Carter) Robinson

Sibling: Alonzo Thomas (mother son from a previous marriage, 6 years older than I) died at age 42.

My father was a disable veteran, played active part of the community serving as a constable, ran general

Store /café, and maintain the family farm. I credit my drive from watching his word ethic.

Mother was a beautician, homemaker, voluntary Parent Teacher Association, and assisted with the store.

Grandfather was a funeral home director, and Grandmother an Elementary school teacher.

I start my formal education at Plumerville Elementary School for the first 4 years of school then

Transferred to Conway County Training School in Menifee AR. My Aunt (June Francis Carter) had

Graduated from Dunbar High School located in Little Rock Arkansas, at that timer Dunbar and Menifee

Were the only two accredited school for Blacks located in Arkansas. My Family believed that opportunity

for success could be achieved at Dunbar if I, like my Aunt finished my senior year at Dunbar High School.

I moved to Little Rock with My Aunt Sarah in order to attend summer school and complete my senior year

Dunbar High School. I got homesick and left after one semester, and returned to Conway County Training

School in Menifee, and completed my senior year. Attended Philander Smith College in that fall to start

my freshman year.

5 minutes

MW Loved Philander: built friendships and involved in integrations actions at Sterling restaurants

Became interested in politics. Social studies and history major in addition to music

Wanted to be a social worker. Father wanted me to be a music teacher

Finished last three years of college at Lincoln University (Jefferson City, MO)

1949, First job in Bearden, AR for one year teaching music to children during the day and veterans at night. Huge pay difference-\$1800/year to teach children vs \$3600/year to

teach vets

Worked in Magnolia Schools for three years under B.T. Williams

Went back to Morrilton because father and grandfather were both ill

Grandmother had a heart attack when I was 22.

AR Extended family in the Morrilton area? Robinson Carter Turner, Sutton Shavers, Smiths, Levels, Williams, Mitchell, Debose, McDaniel Brown, and Poole

MW Uncles, aunts, and their children are in Morrilton and Hickory Hill: Plumerville, Little Rock, Tulsa, OK, Kansas City, Phoenix, St. Louis.

Aunt June Frances Carter Turner was only five years older than me, and people thought we were sisters. She attended Dunbar High School and junior college. After she married Willie Turner in Minden, LA, she taught English at the black high school there then became one of the first black counselors in the white high school.

AR Elementary School?

MW Frist 4 years in Plummerville, then finished in Menifee. Conway County Training School

AR Family Dynamic in the household?

MW Good home, good father

Finished college at 19. Father told me four key things that I have lived by: don't get your honey where you get your money, look people in the eye when you're talking to them, do your work well, help those that you can, and keep God in your life.

10 minutes

AR Principles modeled for you growing up

MW Street named after my father the philanthropist

Bought 40 utility poles and convinced city council to run electric wire to black side of town

Students would come to the general store to study by electric light

Father died in 1969

AR Mother?

MW Housewife. Beauty School-couldn't do hair because of health reasons. Very active parent. PTA. Supported and followed all of my activities all the way to college. I played the piano growing and the cello in college.  
Grandson is now a tenured professor at Penn State. I supported him like my mother supported me.

AR Incredible support system

MW Concerned kids today are not getting the parental support that they need

AR Dunbar just one summer school and semester

MW Left after Thanksgiving. Was more comfortable at home

AR Interesting because typically you only hear of people coming to Dunbar from outlying areas and staying, but you went home.

MW Daddy's girl

AR Modeled political and community activity

15 minutes

MW Father grew grapes, peaches and cotton on a plot of land outside of town  
Experiences picking cotton, and worked as a water girl  
Field work was not for me. I'm happy that I got one year of experience.  
At 14, started spending summers with aunt in Tulsa, OK  
Teenage summer job at Brown-Duncklin Tea Room every year until I finished college  
Went to Lincoln University's homecoming to see cousin Dorothy, and I decided to transfer

Originally wanted to attend Howard, slum conditions in Washington deterred

AR High school in Menifee, AR?

MW Rode five miles to Menifee on the bus from Plummerville, AR  
Went back and taught there. Then drove myself from Morrilton, AR

AR Philander Smith?

MW Music Major at Philander Smith in Little Rock, AR  
Became music history major in Lincoln University in 1947 in Jefferson City, MO  
Finished high school in 1945

AR Summer in Tulsa. Accustomed to being away from home.

20 minutes

MW Worked entire life. Enjoy being around people  
Served on the Quorum Court for 16 years after retiring [1993-2010]  
Taught music and served as a school administrator for 42 years from 1949-1993

AR Driver for protestors at Philander Smith?

MW We did not protest; protesting came later. We were checking places that we were not able to go into or not welcomed.  
Just drove around to check the city out  
[Explains Philander Smith students explored the racial boundaries of the city through group exercise in the college physical education class. They took long walks north on Broadway across into North Little Rock (site of the present Dickey Stephens ballpark), east into the central business district, west along what is now University Avenue. Their attention focused on restaurants and stores such as Sterling, where they could buy, but not eat or try on clothing. She sometimes served as a "water girl" and driving when needed for these expeditions, as I and other students did not wish to use segregated public water fountains/facilities. Remembered companion included Ozell Sutton, not yet demobilized from World War II service, but sometimes home and always interested in community activities. She did behind-the-scenes support work because her father told her she didn't want to see her name in the newspaper; the student activism really picked up later after she left Philander Smith.]

AR Political work at Lincoln University?

MW Spent most of the time studying  
Sorority and community service works  
Observed sessions at the Missouri Capitol  
Music major-busy practicing. Had to do a concert at the end of the year  
Played cello through college. Used the school's instruments  
Taught piano for over 30 years until I was diagnosed with arthritis  
Haven't practiced because it's so hard to play now  
Taught piano at Center Stage for more than 15 years  
Taught at Sunday school for 47 years, 1<sup>st</sup> at Mount Zion  
Have been at St. John's for the last 12 years, Mother of the Church  
Taught music for 20 years then became an administrator  
Quorum Court for 16 years  
Chair of Election Commission for 3 years  
[I was one of 5 people to integrate the Classroom Teachers Association. Became co-President; friend Ms. Tollette was Treasurer]

AR Favorite song when playing for yourself?

MW To God Be the Glory, Moonlight Sonata, Clair de Lune and The Lord's Prayer

25 minutes

MW Remained friends with the Family Brown of all their life  
1959 remarried. Was married for 40 years. He passed away in 1997  
Had one daughter at the age of 30  
Three grandchildren

AR Divorce was rare at the time. Women heavily criticized, experience as a woman?

MW So busy with students in Menifee  
Stayed friends, families remained close, all attended the same church  
Churches attended by family as a child: St. Paul AME, Mount Carmel MBC, Unity

Baptist.

1<sup>st</sup> husband remarried, adopted a child. His children called me for birthdays and holidays  
“unusual situations”

Very active with my sorority and church, traveled a lot, kept myself busy those 8 ½ years  
Freedom of not having children yet

35 minutes

AR What drew you to AKA?

Tape 2

[3.15 blank and navigating technical difficulties at the beginning.]

AR AKA?

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated  
A Legacy of Sisterhood and Timeless Service

Confined to what she called “a small circumscribed life” in the segregated and male-dominated milieu that characterized the early 1900s, Howard University co-ed Ethel Hedgeman dreamed of created a support network for women with like minds coming together for mutual uplift and coalescing their talents and strengths for the benefits of others. In 1908, her version crystallized as Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first Negro Greek-letter sorority. Five years later (1913), lead incorporator Nellie Quander ensure Alpha Kappa Alpha’s perpetuity through incorporation in the District of Columbia.

Together with eight other coeds at the mecca for Negro education, Hedgeman crafted a design that not only fostered interaction, stimulation, and ethical growth among members; but also provided home for the masses. Form the core group of nine at Howard, AKA has grown into a force of more than 265,000 collegiate members and alumnae constituting 972 chapters in 42 states, the District of Columbia, the US Virgin Islands, the Bahamas, Germany, South Korea, Japan, Liberia, and Canada.

Because they believe the Negro college women represented “the highest-more education, more enlightenment, and more of almost everything the great mass of Negroes ever had -Hedgeman and her co-harts worked to honor what she called “an everlasting debt to raise them up and to make them better.” For more than a century, the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sisterhood has fulfilled that obligation by becoming an indomitable force for good in their communities, state, nation and the world.

The Alpha Kappa Alpha program today still reflects the communal consciousness steeped in the AKA tradition and embodied in AKA’s credo, “To be supreme in service to all mankind.” Cultural awareness and social advocacy marked AKA’s infancy, but within one year (1914) of acquiring corporate status, AKA had also made its mark on education, establishing a scholarship award. The programming was a prelude to the thousands of pioneering and enduring initiatives that eventually defined the AKA brand. Through the years, AKA has used the Sisterhood as a grand lever to raise the status of African-Americans, particular girls and women. AKA as enriched minds and encouraged life-long learning; provided aid for the poor, the sick, and unserved; initiated social action to advance human and civil rights; worked collaboratively with other groups to maximize outreach on progressive endeavors; and continually produced leaders to continue its credo of service.

MW The organization stressed scholarship, service and sisterhood.  
AKA organized in 1908 at Howard University as a women’s service organization  
I joined in 1947 and attend first national meeting in 1948  
As regional director, I chartered 17 chapters in Jonesboro, Arkadelphia, Magnolia, Conway, Fayetteville, and locations in Louisiana, Texas and New Mexico (mostly on white campuses).

5 minutes

MW University of Arkansas in 1953-one of five black music students. We stayed in an apartment together.

Degree in education with second degrees in music and administration  
Never had to apply for a job. I was usually recruited.  
Students in my last music class recently made me a book to show appreciation  
Taught music at Book Junior High (LR) when it was first opened  
Taught music at Henderson Junior High – only white students first  
Vice Principal at Hall High. No black women in high school leadership at that time  
Principal for summer school  
(reading of prepared personal statement)  
Daisy Bates lived two blocks from my house  
9 years on the board of the Daisy Bates Foundation  
Grandfather was part of Mosaic Temple board along with Bush’s and other black leaders

in LR

10 minutes

- MW Story of Daisy Bates  
 We would not have a Little Rock Central High School story without Dunbar, Horace Mann, Mrs. Bates and the Little Rock Nine students. A statue of Mrs. Bates will go up in Washington, DC in 2021.  
 Daisy Bates House  
 Bothers me that many local people have never visited the Daisy Bates house/museum
- AR Back to AKA
- MW Caught my eye in college  
 Racial makeup of Missouri colleges  
 Like that AKA was the first black sorority every organized  
 Loved the community service aspect, scholarships, tutoring, overseas missions  
 LR Sorority house currently on 24<sup>th</sup> and Chester  
 Like being involved and keeping busy  
 Current problems with equilibrium keep me from being more active. Seeing a physical therapist  
 At 92, it's time for me to sit down and rest
- AR memories of first AKA meeting or events?
- MW Fashionetta (fashion show), Ivy Ball, Founders Day program, Tutoring, senior citizen and scholarship program
- 15 minutes
- MW 295 members of LR chapter. Even more in Conway  
 Chartered the UCA chapter
- AR Other women's organization you mentioned
- MW Association of Colored Women's Clubs (oldest black women's organization est. 1904)  
 Office in house at 10<sup>th</sup> and Cross. First building bought by black woman in AR  
 16 chapters in AR. Biggest chapters in Blytheville, Fort Smith, Forrest City, Magnolia, and LR  
 Conway chapter id defunct  
 When I moved to LR, there was 5 chapters. Now only one remains  
 I have been in the federated club for 50 years  
 American Association of University Women for 55 years. Integrated the group. Only black women living that has been there as long.  
 Dad said, "Always carry someone with you".  
 TOP Ladies of Distinction-focus on senior citizens, status of women, beautification, teens (TOP Teens was organized in LR in 1972)
- AR Differences in integrated vs. Black women's groups

MW Sorority is sisterhood  
I'm a member of one integrated group, 90% white  
Go in with an attitude that you're an asset  
You will be treated the way you allow people to treat you

20 minutes

MW Quorum Court members use the n word [n word means "dirty person"]  
First involvement in politics at age 19, worked on white Sherriff's campaign in Morrilton  
Backhanded compliment bothered me all of the time  
Quorum Court-two black men and otherwise white men. I was the only woman. At a general meeting, I called them out for using the "n" word. I never heard them using it again.  
While VP of county Democratic Party, I decided to run for Pres. I won by 70 votes.  
Faced anger from a friend of the white woman who lost. The two left the part and did not return.

25 minutes

MW Henderson Junior High-one of the only black people in the school. Trouble with the school counselor in 1967 because I advocated for myself with the counselor in front of the Principal

AR Stood up for yourself so many instances

MW Husband's military career. Lack of access to adequate medical care.

30 minutes

MW Demand respect and cooperation  
Roby Brock was my student and wrote a story on me  
New York play directed by my grandson  
Experience in NY being around so many of color  
Some good friendships with white people  
Won highest award and honor in the Democratic Party  
Did not learn much about black history in school, learned about slavery...nothing else  
Bothered about black police shootings  
Musician grandson  
Description of pictures and awards on the walls (see photographs)

35 minutes

MW 90<sup>th</sup> birthday-more than 500 attended the event held on Philander Smith's campus  
Bridge club-since 1950, play once a month  
Enjoy Robinson Center plays and dinner theater  
More than 75 certificates and awards

Very concerned about preserving and telling black history  
“My story is in my house”

AR Second Husband?

MW Sergeant Orville M. Williams

I met him through my aunt who owned an apartment where Canaan Baptist Church parking lot is now located on 17<sup>th</sup> and Izard Streets

30 years old. My family wanted me married.

He worked at the LR Air Force Base

Courted about a year before marriage our in 1957

Did not go with him as he moved for work, but I visited him in the summer months

He spent eight years in LRAFB, then was transferred to San Francisco, El Paso and several other places. Military life is difficult, particularly for women. Most women stayed on the base, but I hated it. In the 50's, most women on the bases didn't have a college education and just wanted to have babies and relax. “I tried.” I visited in the summers and always thought maybe I would change my mind. I went to 5 or 6 bases where he was stationed. I told him that he could stay in service as long as he wanted, but it was clear that it wasn't the life for me. He was a flight engineer –E9, He stayed in service for 30 years. He was always on temporary duty travel and would be away for 6-8 weeks at a time. I would have been on the base alone he was off working most of the time. He was sent to Alaska for six months, but he was usually gone for less time. Because he was away, I spend 45 weekends one year traveling for sorority work. I put a lot of mile on my car. Never would have been able to do that if he was home. He tried to come home at leave once every 60 days because he loved his daughter. When we would travel to visit, it was always on our own dime. We went as far as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Alaska.]

40 minutes

MW Not impressed with limited life on bases, particularly for women

“That never was my style. I was really miserable.”

Too busy to follow husband around.

Arkansas Black Hall of Fame

Arrived at work at Hall High School at 6:30am. Helped the Democratic Party headquarters in the afternoons

Maintained a Hall High School clothes closet. Sterling department store would call when they had a sale.

Always hoped to inspire youth to strive for better

Long term relationships with youth who know they can come to me for anything

“I tell all of them: When you're around me, two things: Don't lie and steal. If you steal, I don't want you around.”

Three grandchildren, four great-grandchildren, five great-great grandchildren.

Church Life

Morning and Evening meditations

Sybil Jordan Hampton friendship

45 minutes

MW Concerned family will box up my papers and throw them away when I'm gone

AR Consider donating your papers to an archive

MW AKA now has space for archives

Invitation to visit the Daisy Bates House

Daisy Bates educated herself. He did so much for the community. Businesses boycotted her newspaper. She ended her life a pauper. John Walker and Ozell Sutton paid her bills for years. I provided her food taken to her by my grandson who is now the professor at Penn State.

### Daisy Bates Bio

Daisy Bates was an American Civil Rights activist, publisher, journalist and lecturer who played a leading role in the Little Rock Integration Crisis of 1957.

She was born on November 11, 1914 in Huttig, AR. She passed away on November 4, 1999 in Little Rock, Arkansas. She was married to Mr. L.C. Bates and was the author of *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir*. She received an GED and took courses at Philander Smith and Shorter College.

When Daisy Bates was just three years old, her mother was killed by three white men. Although Bates was just a child, her biological mother's death made an emotional and mental imprint on her. The unfortunate death forced Bates to confront racism at an early age and pushed her to dedicate her life to ending racial injustice.

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional. After the ruling, Bates began gathering African American students to enroll in all white schools. Often the white schools refused to let black students attend. Based used her newspaper to publicize the schools who did not follow the federal mandate. Despite the continuous rejection from many Arkansas public schools, she pushed forward.

When the national NAACP office started to focus on Arkansas' schools, they looked to Bates to plan the strategy. She took the reins and organized the Little Rock Nine. Bates selected nine students to integrate Central High School in LR in 1957. She regularly drove the students to school and worked tirelessly to ensure they were protected from violent crowds. She also advised the group and even joined the school's parent organization.

Due to Bates' role in the integration, she was often the target for intimidation. Rocks were thrown into her home several times, and she received bullet shells in the mail. The threats forced the Bates family to shut down their newspaper.

After the success of the LR Nine, Bates continued to work on improving the status of African Americans in the South. Her influential work with school integration brought her national recognition. In 1962, she published her memoirs, the Long Shadow of Little Rock. Eventually, the book would win an American Book Award. Bates was invited to sit on the state during the program at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Due to a last-minute change, Bates was invited to speak at the march.

In 1968, Bates moved to Mitchellville, AR. The majority of black town was impoverished and lacked economic resources. When Bates arrived, she used her organizational skills to pull together residents and improve the community. Bates died on November 4, 1999. For her work, the state of AR proclaimed the third Monday in February, Daisy Gatson Bates Day. She was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom in 1999.

MW Mentoring youth has been my life's passion

AR Who were the people supporting you?

MW Father was a WWI Veteran

Middle class upbringing, grandfather had a 13 room home which was divided into apartments. When he became ill, it burned down the day after he died.

Rev Jamison told stories and read the funny paper to us as children

Parents and grandparents were the best models

Dr Purnell and Dr Smith in my sorority saw something in me that I didn't see in myself.

My mother was very good in math and spelling. I would call her for spelling help. She's say, "What are you going to do when I'm gone?". I'd say, "I'm going to get a dictionary then."

2013 I got really sick in my 80s. I had fluid in my organs and was hospitalized for 14 days.

Fell in 2020 and haven't felt myself since

AR Mentors in politics

MW Became good friends with the Clintons

Their daughter was in the kindergarten class at Hall High School where I was the Vice Principal. I received the William Clinton Celebration Circle Founding Volunteer award section forty-two. We wrote the manual that the volunteers used.

My parents, church family, teachers, and former students

55 minutes

MW Women in my church, mother and aunt (United Methodist minister), sorority sisters

Got along with white folks

"You can't change people, but you can choose the people you want to be around."

AR Quorum court experience?

MW Daisy Bates and Dr William Townsend pushed me to run  
While on the Election Commission, Daisy pointed out that I knew more people than anyone in Pulaski County  
I didn't want to run initially.  
Planning Board discussions about I-630 and city development  
Name on the Big Dam Bridge and plaque at NLR Convention Center  
I learned a lot traveling on the NACO board. Only five blacks served on the board out of 119 members.  
Voted for the trolley car that helped change the bus lines  
Citizen Police Academy  
Worked with Buddy Villines  
Training on chemical dependency and issues of drug abuse amongst teens and adults  
How white parents handled drug abuse and teen pregnancy  
Work since 1967 in integrated situations  
"Children are not prejudiced. It's their parents who teach them to be prejudiced."  
Teaching and classroom organization strategies

AR Henderson-work there soon after it was built?

MW It had been there for a while.

65 minutes

MW Friendship with Dr Jocelyn Elders and supported her crusade for condom use

AR Career, raising children, all at once

MW Busy life, kept daughter with me or in dance classes and other activities  
Daughter went to college. She works for the Dept of Human Services. She's not in good health.

Visited my husband at various bases around the country  
My mother also came to live with us.  
Raised my grandson, Steve (my daughter's first son birthed at age 17).  
Daughter eventually married a second time and had two additional children  
My mother helped care for my grandson. "That was her heart." Cultivated his love for theater and music.  
Mother come imitate anyone such as great actors and actresses  
Grandson started at the Arts Center at the age of five.

AR Looking back, how have women's opportunities changed?

MW Rockefeller paid a part of my salary at Morrilton and was sad to see me relocated to Little Rock, but he paid for the concert robes for Booker Junior High as a gift.

70 minutes

MW Award scholarships annually  
Watching Hilary Clinton run for President, I realized we may not be ready for a female President.  
Questions about Trumps motive to divide races  
Hilary Clinton was well qualified. If she couldn't win, I wonder who could?

AR Why isn't the US ready for a woman President?

MW I hope that they are, but I'm not sure.  
My motto: Yes we can. I hope in 2020 we can prove it.  
Racist Double standard with Trump and Bible picture verses President Obama.

75 minutes

MW Coronavirus  
End of Days by Sylvia Browne  
Rising infections and lace of mask wearing

AR Order of the Eastern Star

MW Easter Star for 71 years  
My mother was at the highest ranking  
My daughter is a member and officer  
I'm also a Daughter of Isis.  
Similar to the sorority. Its purpose is for building relationships and community services.  
Somewhat religious.

AR Crossover among these groups.

MW Not really  
Some of the groups have strong focus on running for office  
Youth mentorship and college orientated  
"You are in college to get an education in order to take care of yourself. Now, if you find a husband. That's a bonus."

80 Minutes

AR Anything, we didn't discuss?

MW "My passion was; you've got to have the same rights. Give me a chance. The same chance that you have. Give me the same playing field, and I'll and you will, too."  
1600 people at St. John's, Mother of the church. Mentor younger congregants  
Marriage and divorce concerns about children getting caught in the middle.

I served under 3 white Presidents as First Vice President for eighteen year with the Pulaski County Democrat Committee. During that time we forged a good working relationship until the last of the three Presidents became ill and I had to complete his term. I decided to run for President 2 executive committee member of them did not support me in my political campaigns. They Didn't want me to be chairman of the committee. Subsequently I won the election by seventy vote, my opponent and secretary until or no longer active with the party, both have apologized for their behavior.

AR Forged your own reality. Makes space for us all.

MW Citizen's Police Academy  
Class Number 5

85 minutes

MW I don't like to be out front. I prefer to do my job and get out of the way.  
Honorary doctorate degree from Philander Smith College  
AR Black Hall of Fame Honoree  
First woman on the National Board of Counties  
Open invitation to come see my paper and award s at my house  
Archiving my papers  
Volunteer founder of Clinton Presidential Center. Name on brick outside of the museum.  
I helped to write the tour guide. I was a volunteer for eight years.

AM Thank you.

**END NOTE: Researchers wishing to make a timed comparison of the Williams audio and print interview materials are referred to the tape summary:**  
**[WILLIAMS-Mary-Louise-20200604-SUMMARY-FINAL.pdf](#)**