

**Mary Louise Williams**  
**First Person Plural**  
**Tape Summary**  
**4 June 2020**

[NOTE: Bracketed information is from unrecorded follow-up conversations on 2 August and 23 August 2020, as well as written submissions from Mrs. Williams]

**Tape 1- ZOOM0006**

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 [10 December] 1927  
Parents Tollie and Octavia [Carter] Robinson  
Father disabled veteran, ran general store and café [also maintained the family farm]  
Grandfather was a funeral home director, and Grandmother was school teacher, helped to raise me  
Mother was beautician, then homemaker and assisted with the store [voluntary Parent Teacher Association]  
16 years old, went to live in Little Rock with an aunt in order to attend Dunbar High, only lasted one semester, was homesick  
Went back home, attended Conway County Training School in Meniffee  
Half-brother, Alonzo Thomas Robinson, six years older than me, died at 41 [mother's son from a previous marriage, died at age 42]  
Father was very active, constable, where I got my drive from  
Description of the Morrilton area  
Attended Philander Smith College freshman year

5 mins in

MW Loved Philander, built friendships, involved in integration actions at Sterling and restaurants  
Got interested in politics- Social Studies and History major in addition to Music  
Wanted to be a social worker, but father wanted me to be a music teacher  
Finished last three years of college at Lincoln University (Jefferson City, Missouri)  
First job [in 1949] in Bearden, Arkansas for one year teaching music to children during day and veterans at night, huge pay difference—1800/yr to teach children vs. 3600/yr to teach veterans  
Magnolia schools for 3 years under B.T. Williams  
Went back to Morrilton because father and grandfather were ill  
Grandmother heart attack when I was 12 [correction: when I was 22]

AR Extended family in the Morrilton area?

MW Uncles, aunts, and their children in Morrilton and Hickory Hill [Robinson Carter Turner, Sutton Shavers, Smiths, Levels, Williams, Mitchell, Debose, McDaniel Brown, and Poole. Also have family in Plumerville, Little Rock, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Kansas City, Phoenix, St. Louis.]

[Aunt June Frances Carter Turner was only 5 years older than me and people thought we were sisters, she went to Dunbar High School and junior college. At that time, 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. Married Willie Turner in Minden, Louisiana, taught English at the Black high school there and then became one of the first Black counselors in the white high school]

AR Elementary school?

MW First 4 years at Plumerville [Elementary School], then finished at 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 mins

AR Principles modeled for you growing up

MW Street named after my father, 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 1969

AR Mother?

MW Housewife [Beauty School, couldn't do hair for health reasons]  
Very active parent, PTA, supported and followed all of my activities all the way through college  
I played cello growing up [correction: played the piano growing up and cello in college]  
Grandson is now 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 they need

AR Dunbar just one semester?

MW Left after Thanksgiving, more comfortable at home [I moved to Little Rock with my Aunt Sarah in order to attend summer school and complete my senior year at 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.]

AR Interesting because typically only hear stories 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 mins

MW Father raised grapes, peaches, cotton on a plot of land outside town  
Experiences picking cotton, water girl [Field work was not for me. I'm happy that I got one year of experience.]

At 14, started spending summers with an aunt in Tulsa, Oklahoma  
Teenage summer job at Brown-Duncan's Tea Room every year until finished college  
Went to Lincoln University homecoming to see cousin Dorothy, decided to transfer  
Originally wanted to go to Howard, slum conditions in Washington deterred

AR High school in Menifee?

MW Rode 5 miles to Menifee on the bus from Morrilton [correction: from Plumerville]  
Went back and taught there, then drove myself [from Morrilton]

AR Philander Smith?

MW Music major at Philander Smith  
Became [music] history major at Lincoln University in 1947 [in Jefferson City, Missouri]  
Finished high school in 1945

AR Summers in Tulsa, used to being away from home

20 mins

MW Worked entire life, like being around people  
Served on Quorum Court for 16 years after retiring [1993-2010]  
Taught and did school administration for 42 years [1949-1993]

AR Driver for protestors at Philander Smith?

MW Just went around and checked the city out  
[Explains Philander students explored the racial boundaries of the city through group exercise in the college physical education classes. 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 clothing. She sometimes served as 'water girl' and driver when needed for these expeditions, as I and other students did not wish to use segregated public water fountains/facilities. Remembered companions included Ozell Sutton, not yet demobilized from World War II service, but sometimes home & always interested in community activities. She did behind-the-scenes support work because 'father told me he didn't want to see my name in the paper; the student activism really picked up later after I left Philander.']

AR Political work at Lincoln University?

MW Spent most of time studying  
Sorority community service work  
Sat in on some 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 more than 30 years, then was diagnosed with arthritis  
Haven't practiced, hard to play now  
Taught piano at Center Stage for more than 15 years  
Played at Sunday School for 47 years, first at Mount Zion  
Have been at St. John's for last 12 years, Mother of the church  
Taught music for 20 years, then in administration  
Quorum Court for 16 years  
Chair of Election Commission for 3 years  
[I was one of 5 people that integrated the Classroom Teachers Association, became co-President; friend 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 mins

MW Quorum Court experience, meeting so many different people  
[Second] husband in the Air Force [Orville M. Williams]  
First husband's mother was school principal, lived down the street from each other  
1950 married Billy James Brown, divorced after one year  
We worked together at the school in Menifee, then he was accepted to Wash U law school  
Went to Oakland in 1950 to visit a cousin, called and sent my divorce papers

Shared love for music, sports, plays at Robinson Center  
He wasn't ready for marriage  
Brown's belongings were stolen his first day in St. Louis, so joined the army  
Deceased

30 mins

MW Remained friends with Brown all my life  
1959 married again, married for 40 years  
One daughter, had her at age 30  
Three grandchildren  
Second husband passed away in 1997

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 same church  
Churches attended by family/as a kid: St. Paul AME, Mount Carmel MBC, Unity Baptist  
First husband remarried, adopted a child, his children call me for birthdays and holidays  
"unusual situation"  
Very active with my sorority and church, traveled a lot, kept myself busy those 8.5 years  
Freedom of not having children yet

35 mins

AR What drew you to AKA?

## **Tape 2- ZOOM0007**

[3:15 blank and navigating technical difficulties at the beginning]

AR AKA?

MW AKA organized in 1908 at Howard University as a women's service organization  
Joined in 1947, first national meeting in 1948  
As regional director, chartered 17 chapters including Jonesboro, Arkadelphia, Magnolia,  
Conway, Fayetteville, and some in Louisiana, Texas, and New Mexico (most on white  
campuses)

5 mins

MW University of Arkansas in 1953- one of five Black music students, stayed in an apartment  
house together  
Degree in Education with second degrees in Music and Administration  
Never had to apply for a job, usually recruited  
Students in my last music class made a book to show appreciation

Taught music at Booker Junior High (Little Rock) when it first opened  
Taught music at Henderson Junior High- only white students at first  
Vice Principal at Hall High, no Black women in high school leadership at the time  
Principal for summer school  
(reading of prepared personal statement)  
Daisy Bates lived 2 blocks from my house  
9 years on board of Daisy Bates Foundation  
Grandfather was part of Mosaic Temple board along with Bush [and other Black leaders]

10 mins

MW Story of Daisy Bates  
Daisy Bates house [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.]  
Bothers me that many local people have never visited Daisy Bates house/museum

AR Back to AKA

MW Caught my eye in college  
Racial makeup of Missouri colleges  
Liked that AKA was the first Black sorority ever organized  
Loved the community service aspect, scholarships, tutoring, overseas missions  
Sorority house currently on 24th and Chester  
Like being involved, keeping busy  
Current problems with equilibrium keep me from being more active, physical therapist  
At 92, time to sit down and rest

AR Memories of first AKA meeting or events?

MW Fashionetta (fashion show), Ivy Ball, Founder's Day program  
Tutoring, senior citizen's programs, arts

15 mins

MW 295 members of Little Rock chapter, more in Conway  
Chartered 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 is first building bought by Black women in Arkansas  
16 Chapters in Arkansas, biggest chapters in Blytheville, Fort Smith, Forrest City, Magnolia [and Little Rock]  
Conway chapter is defunct  
When I moved to Little Rock there were five chapters, now only one

Been in 70 years and in the federated club 51 years  
American Association of University Women for 55 years, integrated group, only Black woman living that has been there that long  
Dad said: "Always carry somebody with you."  
TOP Ladies of Distinction- focus on senior citizens, status of women, beautification, teens (TOP Teens), organized in Little Rock in 1972

AR Differences in integrated vs. Black women's groups

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

20 mins

MW Quorum Court members used 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 my life  
Quorum Court- two black men and otherwise white men, I was the only woman- at a general meeting called them out for using the n word, never heard it used again  
While VP of county Democratic party, decided to run for President and won by 70 votes, Faced anger from white woman who lost and her friend [The two left the party and did not return. Both have apologized for their behavior.]

25 mins

MW Henderson Junior High, one of only Black people in the school, trouble with the school counselor in 1967, advocated for myself with the counselor in front of the Principal

AR Stood up for yourself in so many instances

MW Husband's military career, lack of access to adequate medical care

30 mins

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

35 mins

MW 90<sup>th</sup> birthday attended by more than 500 people at Philander Smith Bridge club, play once a month since 1950  
Enjoy Robinson Center plays, dinner theater  
More than 75 certificates in my lifetime  
Very concerned about preserving and telling Black history  
“My story is in my house”

AR Second husband?

MW Met him through my aunt who owned an apartment house near Canaan Baptist Church on 17<sup>th</sup> Street [and Izard]  
30 years old, my family wanted me married  
He worked at Little Rock Air Force Base  
Courtied about a year before marriage [in 1957]  
Did not go with him as he moved for work, but visited him in the summer months [He spent 8 years in LRAFB, then sent 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 50s, most women on the bases didn't have a college education and just wanted to have babies and relax. “I tried.” Visited in the summers and always thought maybe I would change my mind, went to 5 or 6 bases where he was stationed. Told him he could stay in service as long as he wanted, but was clear that it wasn't the life for me. He was a flight engineer-- E9-- stayed in service 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 because he was off working most of the time. He was sent to Alaska for 6 months, but usually gone for less time. Because he was away, I spent 45 weekends one year traveling for sorority work, put a lot of miles on my car. Never would have been able to do that if he was home. He tried to come home at least 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 mins

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 at 6:30am, in afternoon went to help at the Democratic Party headquarters  
Maintained a Hall High 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 mins

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 Daisy Bates’ house

Daisy Bates educated herself, did so much for the community, businesses boycotted her paper

She ended her life a pauper, John Walker and Ozell Sutton paid her bills for years

Taking my grandson to school at Penn State, depressed being in such a white environment, always supported him

50 mins

MW Mentoring youth

AR Who were the people supporting you?

MW Father was WWI veteran

Middle class upbringing, grandfather had a 13-room house, which was divided into apartments once he got sick, burned down the day after he died

Reverend Jamison told stories and read the funny paper to us kids

Parents, grandparents were best models

Dr. Purnell and Dr. Scott 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’d say, “What you gonna do when I’m gone?” I’d say, “I’m going to get a dictionary then.”

2013 got really sick in my 80s, fluid in my organs, hospital for 14 days

Fell in February 2020 and haven’t been myself since

AR Mentors in politics?

MW Clintons became good friends [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.]

55 mins

MW Women at 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  
Didn’t want to run originally  
Planning Board discussions about I-630, city development  
Name on the Big Dam Bridge and plaque at NLR Convention Center

60 mins

MW Voted for trolley car, helped with changes to bus lines  
Citizen Police Academy  
Worked with Buddy Villines  
Training on chemical dependency, issues of drug abuse among teens [and adults]  
How white parents handled drug abuse and teenage pregnancy  
Worked 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- worked there soon after it was built?

MW It had been there for a while

65 mins

MW Friendship with Dr. Jocelyn Elders, 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, works for Department of Human Services, 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, daughter’s first son birthed at 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 could imitate anyone, great actor  
Grandson started at the Arts Center at age five

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

MW Rockefeller paid part of my salary at Morrilton, sad to see me go to work in Little Rock, but paid for the concert robes for Booker Junior High as a gift

70 mins

MW Give money for scholarships every year  
Watching Hilary Clinton's run for president, realized we may not be ready for a woman president  
Question about Trump dividing races  
Hilary Clinton was well qualified, if she didn't make it nobody can

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

MW Hope they are, but not sure [My motto: Yes we can. I hope in 2020 we can prove it.]  
Racist double standard with Trump and Bible picture versus [President] Obama

75 mins

MW Coronavirus  
End of Days by Sylvia Browne  
Rising infections, lack of mask wearing

AR Order of the Eastern Star?

MW Eastern 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, for building relationships and doing community service, somewhat religious

AR Crossover among these groups?

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

80 mins

AR Anything we didn't discuss?

MW “My passion was, you’ve got have the same rights. Give me a chance, the same chance you have. Give me the same playing field and I’ll make it and you will, too.”  
1600 people at St. John’s, Mother of the church, mentoring younger congregants  
Marriage and divorce, concerns about children caught in the middle

AR Forged your own reality, makes space for all of us

MW Citizen’s Police Academy [Class number 5]  
White and Black men did not support me in my political campaigns, did not want me to be Chairman  
One of them finally admitted I was truly a friend at his wife’s funeral

85 mins

MW Don’t like to be out in front, prefer to do my job and get out of the way  
Honorary doctorate from Philander Smith College  
Arkansas Black Hall of Fame  
First woman on National [Association] of Counties [learned a lot traveling on the National Association of Counties board, only five blacks served on the board out of 119 members]  
Open invitation to come see my papers and awards at my house  
Archiving my papers  
Volunteer founder of Clinton Presidential Center, brick outside the museum, helped to write the tour guide, volunteered at the center for 8 years

AR Thank you