

## Eyewitness to Jim Crow Edgar Williams Remembers



**"I didn't have a whole lot of education, but with the good lord and my mother willing, I was able to understand how to plant my crop and make my crop heal per acre, and that is how I got you all through school."--Edgar Williams, being interviewed by his daughter, Christine, a high school social studies teacher.**

*[Edgar Williams grew up on a sharecropping farm in North Carolina, then became a sharecropper himself as an adult. A resident of Ohoskie, North Carolina, Mr. Williams looks back on the limitations imposed by Jim Crow, and his personal struggle for success despite the odds against him.]*

### To the student:

As you read this first person account of life under Jim Crow, ponder the following:

- What were the aspects of Jim Crow that kept Mr. Williams' father from the fulfillment of the American Dream?
- In theory, the idea of renting land and working it to get ahead seems like a great idea. What do you see as the flaws of the realities of the sharecropping system in the South in the 1930s and 40s?
- Notice the deliberate decisions Mr. Williams makes in his own adult life that differ from the decisions his father made in similar circumstances.
- In the course of the interview, what are Mr. Williams' priorities for his life and his family's life?

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I was born down on the river, just below Lewiston in a place called Wheaton Mary and Howsis Plantation. The house was kind of small. It didn't have any feeling in the inside of it. The floors had cracks in them. We had steep wallpaper to try and keep the air out. There were certain places in the house that you could look up and see stars at night. The snow would come through those cracks.

**Sharecropping** was a thing where you would go to Tom Griffith, the owner, and get a little food for the week and then you would work the land as they wanted you to. You would plant in certain areas on the farm what they wanted you to plant. Then you had to work it and plow it, and cultivate it like they wanted you to cultivate it. The biggest thing the sharecropper got out of it was what they hid and what few clothes they wore. They didn't get much money. In my day they would get a dollar or two here and there. Maybe five or ten dollars here or there. All of the corn and cotton, peanuts, and beans were harvested and sold. They say they took it all to feed us and buy what few clothes we wore. You could get work clothes such as a shirt, a pair of overalls, an old pair of shoes and stuff like that. Most of the shoes were handed down from one child to the other. The oldest child would be bought a pair of shoes and when they would be too small for him, they would give them to the next child under.

They had a town called Lewiston, which was seven miles from where we were. We would go there every Saturday and get groceries and if we needed a pair of overalls and shirts then we could get it from there. Then when the fall came they claimed they took all of that out of the harvest fee. That was a very little food you bought. The Griffiths kept the record of how much money we spent each week in their store, but there was really no way of knowing if we had been charged fairly, because my daddy never saw the record. We could dispute their record, but we still wouldn't get any money. They wouldn't listen to us. At the end of the year we got what was left over from the crop, which was very little. During the winter, my daddy hunted, he fished, he trapped and he would kill deer. If he killed a deer he would share it with the other people around. They didn't have nowhere to keep it. They had to eat it, share it, or throw it away.

We were living out on the place we called "the river." This was the Roanoke, a hundred acre range that we lived on. One year, there was a severe flood. We knew it was coming. We got all the cows, hogs, and chickens that we could and got them off the river and got them up to Lewiston. The water did come. We were living in a one-story house. When that water got at its peak, there wasn't anything sticking out but the roof of the house. As a boy I was a very good swimmer, but most black people hated to swim. They couldn't get from one hill to another if they didn't swim. We got all the cows out that we could and mules. We loaded one cow on a boat, because that was the only way we could get it out. We got in water as deep as a telegraph post and the cow turned the boat over. We had to cut her loose cut her out so she wouldn't drown.

My brother went under with her and cut her out and we swam to the hill which was two miles. We lost everything, our furniture, our clothing, everything in our home. The water destroyed all our beds and all the stuff like that.

The government had a thing they called WPA and they would go around and help people clean the flooded houses so they could get back in there. They had this government system in place that was supposed to replace all our furniture that we had lost in that water. But when the lady came down to see what we needed, Griffith came with her. My mother would take money we got from my father's trapping and buy little things for our house such as a stove. She had bought an eight-eye range stove that we shelled peanuts and chopped wood for different folks so that they would pay us a dollar or fifty cents. My mother had a great big stove. At that time stoves had an oven on top of it, the warmer, which you could put your food in and it would keep warm a certain amount of time. It had a tank on the side where you could put your water in and keep it warm. When the flood came and destroyed all the stuff, Tom Griffith was supposed to refurnish us. The government lady came down to take down what we had so she could get us new stuff. They were going to pay him for it and he would get the stuff to us. What happened was we got no new stuff. All we got was second hand stuff even though he got paid for new stuff. He was supposed to give us the new stove back, but he gave us a little used four-eye range instead. I was old enough to know right from wrong and I knew that was wrong. It made me very angry. There wasn't much that I could do about it. I knew it wasn't right. At that time I had to go along with it. We went back to sharecropping just like we had been.

Other than farming the only thing you could do was what we call logging. We had one black man in my community that had a small logging farm. His name was Joe Louis. He was fortunate enough to have a couple of pair of mules of his own. He would take those mules during the fall or winter and go in the woods where he could find a track of land where he could get logs. He would cut logs, hook the mules to them and drag them onto the river. He would roll them to the river, stake them together with spikes and steel rope. About eight or ten together and they would cut them and turn them loose and then they would take them out of the river. He owned his own mules and you could say that he owned his own business.

We rarely attended school. We were only allowed to attend school days when the weather was so bad that you couldn't do anything else. You couldn't work in the field. You couldn't cut bushes. You couldn't cut the bushes on the edge of the field. Then you could go to school a little bit, but then you had to walk four or five miles to get to school, a one room building. They had only one heater in the school that sat in the middle of the floor. There were hardly any textbooks or supplies for us. You had maybe one book for reading and one for arithmetic that you shared among all the students in your family. But most kids quit school by the time they were 12 or 13 because they had to work in the field. I only got to the second grade in school. I had to work because we had a big family, 17 brothers and sisters in all. And we all worked the farm. The Griffiths persuaded my father to pull us out of school to work the farm. When we would go to school, they would come down and tell my daddy, "John Marr [my father], those kids can't go to school. They have to do this and that."

As far as the white man was concerned you were never to call him by his name. You always said, "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Boss", or "Captain." We were very much in danger because we had to do what the white man told us to do. If we didn't then they would get together and beat you up. People know them as **Klan**, but we called it Redneck. If we didn't call them Redneck we called them Paddy Rovers, because if a white man was near, somebody would say, "Paddy Rover coming," the white man wouldn't know what you were speaking of, but the rest of blacks would know. They would take cover in whatever they were doing to hide themselves or protect themselves from him seeing what they were doing if they thought it was wrong according to the white man, because if they didn't they got punished.

We had no say, and no black person in my community could even vote. The way they did it was you never knew what day they were voting on. They wouldn't tell you, and even if they did tell you, you would have to be working on the farm and they made it so complicated for the ones that did get there, that the ones like me who didn't have an education and weren't able to read **weren't allowed to vote**. A lot of them weren't able to spell their name which my daddy couldn't do. A lot of them couldn't write or read their name. The only way they could cash a check was putting an X and get somebody else to sign it.

I need to explain to you some of the things that went on before I got a chance to do some of the things that I wanted to do. After a certain period of time I was getting to the point where I knew some of the things that were going on weren't right and I didn't like it. It wasn't anything I could do about it. At an early age I got married. I did that because I wanted to get out from under my daddy's rule and get out on my own. The second year I was married, I made a little money because at that time the old man Griffith had gone off and his boys had come on. One was Tom Griffith and one was Charles Griffith. Charles Griffith was different from the other Griffiths. I stayed there two years and I did good. I made a little money every year I stayed with him, which I feel like he did me fair.

Then the next year I moved to the other brother. This is where the trouble starts. When I moved in he wanted me to do what the rest of them were doing. I told my mother when I was a boy that when I was a man and had some kids, no white

man was going to do to my kids what my dad let the white man do to me. I made God that promise. When I moved with the other brother he came wanted to do me like his dad did my dad, pull my kids out of school. I wouldn't go for that. He had the overseer come down there and I paid no attention to him. I told him that he is a man like I am. I had to believe in it and stand for what I believed in. That is what I believed in and I followed through.

I stayed there one year and in that year they did the **settling up**. It involves you going up to the store and they will let you know how much you had spent during the year and how much crops you had sold and what you had left. At that particular time I was on my own. I didn't buy anything because I didn't want to pay him anything back. I figured that if I didn't get it, I wouldn't have to worry about paying him back and when the crop was sold, he would just give me my money. When the crop was sold he owed me \$30. That is all he paid me, but when he paid me that \$30 I sweet-talked him to give me that receipt. I was so nice so he gave me the receipt. Once I got that receipt I knew then I didn't owe him anything. My corn that I had put in the barn, half of that was mine. I sold my half. It brought me a hundred dollars. Some of the blacks went and told him that I was selling corn. He came down the next day red hot and feeling the heat, I told him I didn't sell his corn. His corn was in the barn. I sold my half of the corn. He said to me, "All that corn is mine." I said to him, "No, it can't be yours, because you said you paid me \$30. I have the receipt that you gave me. I didn't owe you anything. Half of the corn is still mine. Your half is in the barn and I sold my half." He replied to me that I was going to give him that check. I replied to him, "The only way you are going to get this check today is to kill me and take it, because I will never hand you this check. It's mine, I earned it, you got your half of corn in the barn, I sold my half which I had a right to do if I wanted to. I don't owe you nothing. Half of that corn was mine and I sold my half and this is the money that I got. I am going to use this money to have a little Santa Claus and a little Christmas for my two kids." I said, "I am not going to give you a dime of it." He got real angry. By that time I was getting angry too, because I know what I had already promised God and I had made up my mind that I was going to fulfill what I promised him. I said, "Mr. Griffith, if you put your foot on God's earth today I am going to whoop your butt for stuff that your daddy done to my daddy when I was a boy and I couldn't do anything about it. Now I can. Put your foot on God's ground," and he wouldn't do it. He was scared to do it. I got so angry I tried to drag him over the door to get him out of the truck and he rolled with his truck and went down the road and stopped and called my dad and told my dad that he needed to get some help for me because I was crazy. But he left. I had Christmas with my family with my check and with the rest of it I kept to eat, because I knew well I wasn't going to be there another year.

Each time I moved it was better. I eventually moved to work for Mr. Peels on his farm. Mr. Peels was a black man who owned land. Mr. Peels rented me the farm. When I moved over here with Mr. Peels the first year was rough. The next year after Mr. Peels found out that I wanted to make something for myself, I wanted a life for my family, and he gave me the benefit of the doubt. He let me work like I wanted to work. I made good crops for Mr. Peels. The second year I told him I wanted to buy a tractor. I said, "I found a tractor I want. I went to the bank and the bank said they would let me have the money if I get somebody to co-sign with me." When I asked Mr. Peels about doing this, he looked me in the face and said, "I will never co-sign for you to get that money." That kind of hurt when he first said that. I said to myself, "I didn't think he would do that." But, he said to me on the back of that, "I tell you what I will do. I will write you a check right now for the tractor and you can go get the tractor. I am not going to the bank, because if I do and you fall short I have to pay interest on that money, but if I let you have my own money the bank has nothing to do with it. You can pay me if you want to pay me, but I won't have to pay interest on my own money, because it is my money." He pulled out a check from the checkbook, wrote me a check for the tractor, and I went out and got my tractor the same day. I came back home, rented me three more weeks of tobacco that I would tend on his farm because I had a tractor to plow with. I tilled that back that paid for that tractor. He told me to pay him like I wanted to for that tractor. \$100, \$5, \$10, whatever I wanted to pay him, I could pay him. He didn't bother me whatsoever. That is when I became a man of doing my work. I sold the crop, I got the checks, I cashed the checks to Mr. Peels. Mr. Peels would give me my half, and his half, and what have you. That is the way it should have been in the first place.

I didn't have a whole lot of education, but with the good lord and my mother willing, I was able to understand how to plant my crop and make my crop heal per acre so that I could do this, and that is how I got you all through school. In the meantime, I promised God that my kids would have education so I didn't keep you all out of school. When I kept my kids out of school it was when I wanted to keep them out, not when the white man wanted me to keep them out. I told each white man after I left the Roanoke River, "I am the man that raises the crop. My wife and my kids don't have anything to do with it. If you want to come cussing about it, you come and cuss me. If you cuss one of my children or my wife and I find it out, then you are going to have to answer to me and you aren't going to like what I do." So that didn't happen.

I would like for young people to know that even though life was very harsh, parents taught their children how to stay out of trouble and what to say to white people. Most black people in my community were happy and had some successes in life. Many people found a way to stand up for some of their rights. Sometimes you would be successful, sometimes you would have to leave town. It was a time when many people, especially young adults, left the South and moved North. Most of my sisters and brothers left the South and resettled in New York. I feel that most black people have been successful in life despite the unfairness of Jim Crow.

My greatest regret was being unable to get an education. I was successful in attending several reading classes sponsored by a local university and have learned to read. I was 65 years old when I took those classes. I feel strongly about the importance of a good education, and was determined that all of my children were able to complete high school, and the majority of my children have college degrees. I feel that many of today's black children are missing the opportunity to get an education. This is a shame because blacks have fought and died for the opportunity to get a fair and equal education.