

Interview
with
L. M. WILLIAMS
January 21, 1991

By Goldie F. Wells

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Goldie: I am in the home of Mr. L.M. Williams in Enfield, North Carolina. The date is January 21, 1991, and Mr. Williams I want you to say who you are and that you know that this interview is being recorded.

Mr. Williams: I am L.M. Williams, a high school and elementary principal and I am being interviewed by Mrs. Wells and I know that it is being recorded.

Goldie: All right Mr. Williams, I appreciate you answering my questionnaire and taking the time out today to interview with me. I want you to try to go back in time and think about when you were principal back in 1964. I am doing a study of trying to compare the role perceptions of Black high school principals. Back in 1964, there were over 200 Black high school principals and last year when I sent to the State Department and asked for the number of Black high school principals they had 41 on the list and some of them are not principals of traditional high schools. Some of them are alternative school principals so you see the number is very small. I'm interviewing these two sets of principals and to see if I can make some comparisons. I want you to tell me how you became a high school principal.

Mr. Williams: In this day I was a former teacher at Eastland High School. There was a vacancy at the Enborden Middle School in Enfield, North Carolina and during the middle of the year I became principal of this union school and this union school interned approximately 1500 people. It was in the year of 1959, that I became principal of this school. This is basically how I became a principal

Goldie: You had been an assistant principal?

Mr. Williams: Well, at that time they didn't have assistant principals. The principal would appoint you to help him out but you didn't get any pay for it. There was no name such as assistant principal. Also there was no secretary at that time.

Goldie: You were your own secretary.

Mr. Williams: Yes, or you would get the business teacher at the high school but in my case I used the business education teacher to help with bookkeeping and things of that type. She would train students--she was training students anyway and this gave them an opportunity to work in our office and it was actual experience for them. Since this was a Black school this was another way that we could help our students toward a

live experience of working in an office, handling books and that kind of thing.

Goldie: So you used that as a live experience for the students.

Mr. Williams: Yes, because the state wasn't paying so we had to figure out some way to accomplish what we wanted.

Goldie: So how long did you stay at Enborden?

Mr. Williams: I left in 1969.

Goldie: I want you to tell me something about Enborden High School. How many teachers you had there, how many students you had and we know the racial composition but tell me something about that school.

Mr. Williams: During that period from 1959 to 1969, of course that was after the Supreme Court decision, I was a principal at both schools because at that time union schools were all that we had. All were Black and White you know. I was principal of both schools and at the high school we probably had about ten teachers and I guess about 250-300 students at that time because the high school had just started in 1954; we had no high school here for some time but they started around that time and they had been existing probably four or five years when I went there in 1959. As I said, they had 10-12 teachers and they had a science department and at that time the courses--we had all the main courses.

Goldie: Did you teach any of the classes?

Mr. Williams: When I first started the principals taught. Yes, I taught one or two classes. You had to teach. I enjoyed the teaching but coming into the school in the middle of the year with the former principal leaving and not being there and I had never had the opportunity to be a principal and teach at the same time so that presented quite a problem for me to be trying to do administrative work and instructional work and all that and really I just didn't do that much of other tasks to be frank about it because I couldn't work like that. But I still had to sign a lot of papers so you found some way because the state required you to teach.

Goldie: So you always figured out a way to get in somebody else's classes. All right. I want you to tell me something about--I'm going to ask you about different areas at the school and you tell all you can remember. How did you select your teachers and then how did you supervise them?

Mr. Williams: I selected them out of my own feelings after

working with teachers so long and ten years of observing the principal that I worked with. At that time the principal had to do the courtesy for judgement but if you recommended teachers it was understood then if you recommended them you hired them in the superintendent's office. But the law said that you recommend to the superintendent but at the time you had the privilege of hiring and firing teachers with a pretty good reason why you wanted this one or why you wanted another one. I would find out where he teaches and what he taught and have him to come into the school and I would interview in terms of area and try to find out the certification and qualifications based on the certification and qualifications in my opinion and then decide whether I wanted to employ them or not.

Goldie: So the superintendent didn't interfere that much with what you decided.

Mr. Williams: No.

Goldie: Once you got them there, how did you keep check on them to make sure they did a good job?

Mr. Williams: I happened to be one of those walking principals sort of like Teddy Roosevelt--Walk lightly and carry a big stick. They gave me that name down there and based on what I knew and having worked with a principal which I thought was a real good principal, I was supervised based on selection of the material and opinions of other principals and having had a course in supervision putting that together. I really supervised the teachers in terms of what they were doing in the classroom and what they were doing otherwise. I didn't stay in the office. I didn't let things worry me in the office--I stayed out where everything was going on.

Goldie: So you knew what was going on. Suppose you had a bad teacher you know sometimes you have one of those that are not doing their job. Did you have a way of...

Mr. Williams: I had a way of knowing what I would do. When I interviewed a teacher for the job. I let it be known that at least twice or three times a year we were going to have a conference and we were going to talk and then conferences were scheduled throughout the year with all the people that we had at the time and I had this conference and they understood. It got to be a common thing that I was going to walk in your room and watch what was going on and I might not say anything today but when the conference comes up we are going to talk about what I saw and how did you act when I came in your room and how did you feel and what did your students feel and all that and if I had a problem teacher and we were having a problem then after the conference we would talk about this problem and ways of improving or how we could

help to work this thing out. Sometimes we were successful and sometimes we were not because of personality problems and attitude problems.

Goldie: Curriculum and instruction.

Mr. Williams: Well, in terms of what I knew and my experience with instruction I thought that was one of the most important phases of being a principal knowing about the instructional program and observing to see how the instruction was being presented and what was happening, what was being learned and how were the pupils and teachers interacting with each other so far as the learning process. Then if the teacher felt that she needed some extra material to improve instruction and I thought that she might then if money was available and we could get it then we would try to get it. If not, we would try to find out how we could improvise something to work with because at that time we didn't have too many intervated ideas as far as that school was concerned. After I went there I began to do a lot of research and go to a lot of meetings and found out some of the intervated ideas about instruction and if I could those parts that I could put into my program then we would try to get those parts into our program to enhance instruction.

Goldie: And did you try to expand the curriculum? I know you said you didn't have the vocational when you came.

Mr. Williams: Yes, when I first went to the school and that was an old school and we initiated a self-study program and that was the best we could do. We just did it ourself. That helped me and it helped the teachers because I didn't know much about a self-study programs and so somebody was telling me that one thing that you can do different since you are here is do a self-study. So I inquired around and found out where, and when we could get going and I think we finally ended up with this Southern Association. I made some contact with them and they sent me this information and I think it was called the evaluative criteria that we got that in and I got the teachers and parents involved in the self-study and it seems that we could really do it ourselves. We went on with them and then that was a continuous on-going thing. That helped to improve the instructional program and helped improve a whole lot of things. That also made me stay on the ball to follow through all these different kinds of committees and the whole idea was to find out where the school was and what the school needed to do and how the school needed to function. I think we did a pretty good job with it and later years before I left the State came in to accredit some programs to improve the school, a State study I think. What had happened with my teachers had gone through this process writing these goals and objectives and the history of the school. Well, that wasn't a big hang up with them because they had been through it already.

Goldie: What about discipline?

Mr. Williams: Well, I always believe that discipline should first start in the classroom with the teachers. If a teacher couldn't discipline, she couldn't really teach. So we had had some program to work with that and some worked it out but the problem was I had the teachers understand that all these little frivolous things--these are your problems, they are not mine but you only send a student to the office to me if he slapped somebody or if he spits on the floor. That is your job. You have to contain and control your room. With an idea like that we didn't have a major discipline problem. Now one or two teachers would have--but that was the teacher that created her problem. She was a student teacher but as far as others there were no major discipline problems. You had to be very sensitive to the discipline problem you know and to work with the school and work with the teachers to help prevent a lot of the things that were happening. A well planned program from the top to the classroom will help solve a whole lot of discipline problems.

Goldie: What about transportation?

Mr. Williams: We had school bus transportation and I think we had about ten buses but most of the students were here in town and walked to town at that time. We had about a ten or fifteen mile radius.

Goldie: But it was your responsibility to see about the bus routes and buses and all.

Mr. Williams: Yes it was my responsibility to see about the bus routes and assign drivers and that kind of thing.

Goldie: What about the utilization of funds? The funds that you received from your county government and did you get enough and did you get any and how did you get other funds that you needed?

Mr. Williams: We got certain funds allocated for all schools in the county based on the per pupil capital. Which meant that you would get some money and they gave the superintendent X number of dollars to run the schools with and the superintendent would give each principal X number of dollars for this or that. Then you would submit your requisitions for certain things for your instructional paper and mimeograph paper and so on and maps etc. It wasn't that much and when you used it up that was all and we would have the PTA to help out a little bit. I never was a person to believe in pushing the town people for that stuff even though the children needed it. I always thought the state or county or somebody ought to pay for that and towns were poor enough anyway so they didn't have any money to be paying that.

Goldie: Do you think that the allocations were distributed equal?

Mr. Williams: As far as White and Black, no it wasn't. I know that for a fact. A lot of times in the central office when they allocated those funds we never knew because we didn't have anybody up there in the business office but we had a way of finding out that the funds were not equally distributed to schools in terms of enrollment. The White always got more of this and that than we did of it.

Goldie: Was your school desegregated before you left the principalship?

Mr. Williams: That was an important question that was raised. It wasn't desegregated at this school but what happened we had that freedom of choice of which school. Some of the Blacks went to the White school but the Whites didn't come to the Black school.

Goldie: What about your cafeteria management?

Mr. Williams: Originally, I managed the cafeteria because we had a cafeteria in 1959, and the state wasn't operating and running the cafeteria at that time. We operated that. When I went there the parents helped organize and the former principal had a lunchroom going.

Goldie: They came up with the lunchroom themselves. Our school was the only school in the county that had a lunch room as such and you didn't have all those strenuous regulations. They had a few to follow as far as the State was concerned but you ran that yourself and hired your cook and your lunchroom personnel. That was the principal's job to do that and also your job was to do that report.

Goldie: All of the '64 principals have told me about that report. You had to do that lunchroom report.

Mr. Williams: You had to do that lunchroom report and you could never get it right and it was a percentage and they didn't let you know if the percentages were right. If you got up to a certain point, they would go along with you but four or five points or something like that and they would say well that's all right. That's near to it. If you wanted perfection you couldn't get that thing right. One of the things that was required was that you not make any profit. Your report was never supposed to show any profit and you weren't suppose to show if you were in the arrears. When we started making a profit that was when I would tell those lunchroom people. Buy them some ice cream, buy them some pork chops.

Goldie: Buildings and grounds.

Mr. Williams: The county helped maintain the buildings and grounds but generally that was our job to do mostly. Keeping the grounds clean and attractive. That was basically the principal of the schools job to maintain that to a given point.

Goldie: The relationship that your school had to this community. How was it viewed in this community?

Mr. Williams: I think it was real good because when I first went there in 1959, the school was in debt so I organized what they called satellite PTA units--east end, west end, and something. They had the little meetings in the home and then once a month we would go to the big meeting and I would go in and out to the meetings and they would tell me where they were going to have them because the school was in debt too, that was one reason. That is what we organized. That put me pretty close to the parents and the homes and it was informal and that made them feel close to me. They really worked.

Goldie: They would work in their district like the east would have things in the east and then when you got together you would use that money to pull the school out of debt.

Mr. Williams: Yes, sometimes we would have a little program for the parent meeting at the school and then if there was money or a project--they each had a project and put a lot of life in the community. It worked fine and I really enjoyed it because I got to know a whole lot of parents that I would not have known personally. I was born about nine miles out in the country but still I didn't know these parents in the city and back there in the country, East school I went there and graduated from there and I knew those people pretty good but in the town it was different. It helped me to learn the rules and the difference in the people there and in the town. So here I had to deal with the two and of course that helped me by having the satellite PTA groups to get a feel of what was going on. I had two out of town because the distance was about ten miles out so that helped for them to say some things to me that they would liked to have said.

Goldie: How much administrative power and control did you have over your school site and your responsibilities?

Mr. Williams: There were times at my school that I had all the power that I wanted. You know as long as you got along with the superintendent and your parents, I didn't have any trouble. I had the power to deal with them and say what we needed to do we had to do cause he knew the parents were with me.

Goldie: I imagine it gave you some power that wasn't even

associated with the schools. You could give parents advice and all.

Goldie: How did the desegregation of schools affect your role as a principal?

Mr. Williams: Well, that was one of the questions raised and in a way it did not affect my role as a principal because we had this union school and I constantly talked with the superintendent about if he could separate the two schools. You know the high school and the elementary school and I told him that was too much for one man to do and finally he figured out a way with old rules from years ago and he found out in the old rules that we can divide the schools and put a principal in each one of the schools on the same campus. It took about a year to work that out so he worked it out and that was about 1965-66 or somewhere along that time. But still there was a lot of desegregation in the schools. I remember they had the freedom of choice and so at that time it wasn't affecting me at all.

Goldie: Did you retire in 1969? What did you do after '69?

Mr. Williams: No, what happened in 1969, they transferred me to a school.

Goldie: They split the school and you were principal of two schools at one time because you were principal over the junior high and the elementary.

Mr. Williams: I assumed the principalship of the elementary school because that was the largest of about 27 or 30 teachers or more and then I was interested in the instructional program and I thought I could work better in the elementary school with the teachers than I could in the high school because that relieved me of this football and all those extra-curricular activities and staying on the go and so I requested the elementary school and then they put a principal in the high school. We all worked on the same campus

Goldie: Oh, the same campus. You had two principals on the same campus. All right, I see.

Mr. Williams: Both schools used the same lunchroom. Still at that time they had not desegregated the schools as required--the ratio--so many Whites and so many Blacks and so I worked there for two years like that and then I had some trouble with the associate superintendent regarding the Title I program and because of that and I had tenure too rather than retire me they sent me to the country to an elementary school with about 15 teachers and that was fine with me after working all these years with 50 or 60 or 70 some teachers. That was fine with me.

Goldie: Piece of cake!!!

Mr. Williams: Piece of cake! I didn't contest it and it was all right with me because I had had my go with the schools. That was not because of desegregation though.

Goldie: It was just more of a political and personal thing.

Mr. Williams: Yes, some things that I was asked to do, I didn't do them. I thought I was right. I could have made a case out of it and I told my father about it and he said well, if you made a case you would probably win and if you win where are you going? Are you going to leave home?

Goldie: So you just took the lesser of the evils and went on and took that school.

Mr. Williams: Yes, and it was most enjoyable out there. I had no problem with. They put me out there and very seldom came out there to see what I was doing.

Goldie: Did you enjoy your job and why?

Mr. Williams: Yes, I enjoyed my job. I liked interacting with people and helping people and seeing people being helped and seeing the rewards as a result of working with teachers and pupils. I had two teachers to leave me and one went to California and one went to New York to work in the school system there and they sent word back, in fact, they let it be known--if you can work with that man, you can work anywhere in the United States. They said they had no problems in the school system in New York or California working because of me because "he was on the ball because he kept abreast of what was going on". I felt real good about that. I've had students to finish and they come back and say nice things in terms of how I had helped them even though they said I was pretty hard on them but I was hard for a reason. Because I had been out there in the world. I know what the Black world is like. You get a rose now and then but sometimes you get a thorn stuck in you. Another reason I enjoyed it too, you know Dr. Shepherd was the founding president so he used to have chapel every week and when I came out and started teaching we would have chapel every week so when I came to this school I had chapel every week cause I saw a lot of good in it because you could develop all kinds of things for dramatics and stage fright. A lot of things could happen. We had two or three glee clubs and choirs at our school. At least three, and I would always try to get me two or three music teachers and once upon a time before they integrated I think that school was the only school that had a good music program going on and it was many reasons as far as I was concerned. There are so many things that you can learn through music.

Goldie: That is one of the things that I noticed the '64 principals all talked about their chapels and you know we don't have them anymore.

Mr. Williams: No, and then what I would do when I had chapel was if the students messed up or teachers messed up I could give them hell in chapel. I'd say them White folks don't care nothing about you and you're here and we've got to do the best thing that we can and if that didn't do it I'd have a meeting with the teachers. I'd say, these are our kids. We've got to stick with them and work them. When they integrated you couldn't have a separate meeting and a lot of times after I left this school and went out in the country then I had some White teachers out there--a lot of times I wanted to say something but because of resentment I couldn't say anything. When I had them in conference I would give them a talking to.

Goldie: You'd talk the talk in the conference.

Goldie: What do you consider your major problem in your principalship?

Mr. Williams: I didn't have any problem with administration or organization at the time. That was just right down my line. I can't recall any major problem as far as me operating the school. I don't recall any major problem. You couldn't get any money to do things you wanted to do with and they had a ratio that they'd give the Black and White schools anyway. I remember as principal in the county I know that we didn't get our fair share of the funds because I remember when they didn't have any buses in this county for Blacks and my father and one or two more bought some buses, bought some bread wagons as we called them. They took the racks out of them and they put seats in them and bought the gas so the students could be transferred to school, not this school but the one in the country. Finally, they were paying for the gas and my daddy went to see the superintendent at that time and told him the White folks were getting gas and why couldn't we get some gas. So the superintendent told him you can get it. Go ahead and tell the principals when your bus goes by to put some gas in it and send the ticket up here.

Goldie: So that is how you started getting the gas.

Mr. Williams: Yes, and finally we got a hand-me-down bus because we had something to turn in for a bus.

Goldie: Well, we got a lot of hand-me-downs.

Mr. Williams: Yes, and you see the books were hand-me-downs and everything was hand-me-downs.

Goldie: What do you consider the most rewarding thing about your principalship?

Mr. Williams: I don't really know what was most rewarding. It was rewarding after I got in it to be able to--it was a challenge to me after I worked there and it continued to be a challenge to be involved and participate with the students and teachers trying to make things happen.

Goldie: I guess those rewards are when you see students now.

Mr. Williams: Yes, when I see students now who come back or come home. It's rewarding to see what achievement they've made and there are some I thought would never make it and they have surprised me and come out to be lawyers and doctors and some went to jail but that is part of the segment of society. A certain segment is going to do this and a certain segment is going to do other things. But I think as a whole the most rewarding thing was to see the improvement and the accomplishments of students and teachers I worked with.

Goldie: Now you know there is just a small number of Black high school principals now and if you knew of a young Black person who wanted to be a high school principal, what advice would you give the individual?

Mr. Williams: That is a pretty good question. When you look at the polirical setting and look at those stereo-typed attitudes out there, it is hard for me to really suggest but I would suggest and recommend that that person first learn something about human relations. How to get along with people how to interact with people and that would help him to eliminate a lot of problems, a lot of stereo-type problems and stereo-type attitudes if he could learn a lot about human relations and how to deal with people and how to get along with people. That would be one of my suggestions and one of my recommendations. I think that is most important.

Goldie: Do you have any words of wisdom?

Goldie Mr. Williams has an inspirator and he has a booklet that he is going to allow me to take and make a copy of and send back because he has lot of words of wisdom in here and we could not begin to put all of it on tape so I'm going to make a copy and then sent it back. Mr. Williams, I really appreciate your taking your time today. This interview has been very informative and enlightening. You said at the beginning that you might have some problems with memory but I don't think you have and as you begin to reminisce I could see the smile on your face and you remembered being that principal and I could see the authority and all the knowledge that have coming to the forefront as you talked and I know that you have done a lot for Black boys and girls and I'm sure that as long as somebody who went to Enbordin is alive

they will remember you for what you have done for them and I appreciate you taking the time today.

Mr. Williams: I appreciate you coming for the interview and I have enjoyed it and it has sharpened my wits a little bit by you coming in. I enjoyed talking about these times and when I retired I really put that booklet together hoping it would help somebody somewhere.

Goldie: I'm hoping that this research that I'm doing will be beneficial to folk who want to understand the administrator. The Black administrator is becoming a rare breed but I have found just interviewing the principals now and then we have really strong leaders and we need that type of leadership as the country is becoming more minority. We need minority leadership. So I am hoping that this will help us to find the kinds of leaders that we need and put them in the places where they need to be because school is the place that we touch the children and our future is determined there. A lot of things are happening to our Black communities. I think that if we had more role models and men like you who held them to the point and said we don't do this or we don't do it this way because I know what you are going to face, they would be able to make it.

Mr. Williams: Well, I hope it will cause people's attitudes or minds to focus on the real issue because as you said we do have a problem with role models as far as Black males and of course there are many reasons for the Black role model being eliminated. For example, we, the Blacks, have been responsible for not having Black role models, not intentionally but by things we've said and things we've done trying to be helpful and it didn't really help. It harmed more than helped, you know.

Goldie: For instance, what do you mean?

Mr. Williams: For instance, in some instance we have said things to Black males that we shouldn't have said but we were trying to help them and they thought that we were degrading them but we had to say it the way that we knew how to say it. Sometimes we just didn't need to say it that way. It's just our parents, most parents care for their children and try to help them but sometimes they fail to help them because they do the wrong things or say the wrong things but they are not trying to harm them. We tried to interact and sometimes we interacted based on what we knew and our experiences trying to help and it didn't always help and all these other things are somewhat responsible for some of the failures of the Black males. I was talking to somebody one day and they were talking about the role model of Black males. I said, to some extent Black mothers are somewhat responsible for the Black males image. They have more to do with them than anybody else and I hear them say, "you're just like your sorry old

dad." They're trying to help but that isn't the way you do it.

Goldie: Have you thought about the situation with Black high school principals? Do you have any reason in your mind or any rationale for the reason that we don't have Black men as principals of high schools?

Mr. Williams: The only thing that I can say is the stereo-type attitude on the part of most people in the field of administration, because they are White. And they still believe that we are incompetent, that we are not capable of having control or supervising.

Goldie: I have found that the younger men say that it is absolutely necessary to have a sponsor of the other race to say that he is capable. They have to have someone to give them the assurance to the other folks that he can do it and most of them have to work for quite a few years as an assistant principal before they ever get the chance to try. They are not as lucky as you just to move on up.

Mr. Williams: Another thing I don't particularly like about this assistant principalship. I don't know that much about it I'm out of the business but I notice that most of the time they place the assistant principal, some have two or three, but when they only have one they always decide most times it is the Black assistant they always assign to all the disciplinary problems. He needs to be the instructional or the curriculum and he needs to be involved in that. He doesn't need all the discipline problems. As long as he's that he is going to have a hard time becoming a principal.

Goldie: That's right. That is one of the points that was brought out too. They get to do buses, and discipline and they never get to do budget, never get to work with the curriculum and then when they go for an interview they are unable to interview well because they haven't had those experiences.

Mr. Williams: Once I said, I'd love to be principal and have an assistant because I would put them in everything and discipline would be the farthestest thing for them to do as far as I'm concerned.

Goldie: Someone told me that was one thing they prided themselves on because they had trained men and as they trained them they were able to do everything and they were able to take principalships themselves.

Mr. Williams: I get the credit for training a lot of principals that were in this county, four or five of them came from under me. Of course you didn't have assistant principals but I would have somebody be my assistant and then

I would assign them a lot of things and sometimes he couldn't be in his class and we would improvise and teach them how to do the reports and all that kind of thing and when the time came for them they would move on into the position and didn't have a whole lot of problems as far as the job in knowing what to do. That is what I said, if I was principal now I don't care if they are White, Black or green , my assistabt would know as much about the operation of the school as I would know.

Goldie: Thank you very much, Mr. Williams. I appreciate it.

Mr. Williams: I've enjoyed it and hope it will be of some help to you and some other people and other sources.