Williams, Willis: Life And Death At Devils Gut [1]

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Willis Williams: Life And Death At Devils Gut

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History [2]," *News & Observer*. Published 6/13/1999. Copyrighted.
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In September of 1957, a Martin County teenager named Willis Williams had the courage to tell the truth about the death of an African-American college student named Joe Cross. His story shocked North Carolina. Six years later, it became a rallying cry for the Williamston Freedom Movement [3], one of the strongest civil rights protests in the South.

The son of sharecroppers, Williams graduated from N.C. A&T State University [4] and served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. He was a chemist in New York and California, then in 1970 moved back to Martin County, where he has become one of the most successful community activists and civil rights leaders in North Carolina.

Joe Cross was killed near Williams' boyhood home at Barbers Island, a swampy tract bordered by a Roanoke River stream known as Devils Gut.

In Willis Williams's words:

> On that day I went out to watch for Joe. He was coming to pick up my oldest brother, Charles Jr., and go back to Greensboro, to college at A&T for the school year. They were both at A&T and Charlie didn't have a car, because we were shar
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> Black people always said, "If you are going to be on the island, you had to be out before it got dark." That was one of those unwritten things. We were the only black family that stayed in that section of Barbers Island, and it was remote. Joe a
>
> I knew about what time Joe was coming. I went out on the porch and waited. I knew they would send me out to hold the dog anyway. Brownie was a good dog, but he was a vicious dog.
>
> I saw a car coming pretty fast. It's a sandy, winding road, so naturally in the summertime you get dust. As it got closer, I recognized Joe's car. Then I noticed that there was a car behind him.
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> By the time Joe pulled in the yard and started getting out, a sheriff's car had pulled in behind him. It was one of the deputies. Then another car came. Joe was trying to get in our house fast, but before he got the door open they were there. Th
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> I went in the house and I told my parents and my brother. We didn't know what had happened afterward, but it didn't leave you with an easy feeling.
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> That night, after midnight, we heard this road dragger, a Caterpillar. The man was dragging the road. The next morning, we went out there, the road had been completely smoothed down. And this was Sunday morning. We still hadn't heard a
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> According to the sheriff, they were going to keep Joe from talking to this white girl. They said he was trying to make a date with this waitress at the Breezewood Motel. They said he was hanging around the restaurant. They decided they were
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> The story in the black community was different. Maybe there was somebody calling this young lady, but it wasn't Joe. That summer Joe was working in the shipyard at Norfolk. Once they found out they got the wrong person, things probably j
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> You have to remember that in 1957 there was no mingling of white and black at all. When you were on the farm and worked together, you could play up to a certain age. But then, once you became 8, 9 or 10, for a black male you just knew y
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> We all knew it was a life and death issue. Down in Edenton they called it the Looking Dead Case. This young black man was sitting on his porch, and this white girl rode by in a car. In a car. She drove to the police station in a frightened state
>
> Well, my dad took me to the district attorney in Williamston and I told them what happened. Soon it was known that I was the one had went against the official story. People were trying to tell me that I didn't see the car, didn't see Joe get out,
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> It was getting heated. The sheriff volunteered to have me come in for protective custody. My dad didn't go for that. He told them he had done a fairly decent job of trying to keep us safe, and he'd keep on doing that. My parents were quite bra
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> Even within the minority community, some people were saying, "Something is going to happen. Is it worth it?" But my dad believed you should do what is right. If it's right to do it, then you need to stand up and do it. So I did testify to the granc
>
> People still talk about Joe Cross. The other black men that were killed here did not have the affluence or family connections Joe did. Carl Grimes worked in the logwoods. King Hyman was military, shellshocked. Button Jackson was a Weyerh

This is an excerpt from the "Listening for A Change [5]" project of the Southern Oral History Program [6] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

Carter, David C. 1999. "The Williamston Freedom Movement: Civil Rights at the Grass Roots in Eastern North Carolina, 1957-1964". *The North Carolina Historical Review* 76 (1). North Carolina Office of Archives and History: 1–42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23522168 [7].

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