

Family Album Northwest

by Kathryn H. Bogle

Here they are! Some of Portland's first Black school teachers! Seven are pictured here — there were eleven, but four were either out of the city or were unable to attend the big dance back in 1949 given by the Portland branch of the NAACP to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the national organization.

The teachers were honored guests that night and a very proud and happy throng crowded Norse hall to see them, to greet them and to join in their accomplishment. The applause was thunderous as each stepped forward to receive a bouquet in recognition of the special strength of character we knew that each had to possess to win a place in the city's public schools. We could only guess at what obstacles they had already overcome and to guess what hurdles might be later erected in their path as they pursued their profession.

Receiving flowers on stage that night in 1949 were: Willis Williams, Leota Bryant Stone who had been the very first Black woman in Portland classrooms, Tessie Price, Helen Rawlins, Emma Walker Chiles, Ruth Spencer and Josephine Grimmett. Not appearing in the picture were: Susie Patterson, Martha Jordan, Heloise Hill and Robert Ford who was the first Black male to teach in the public schools of the city.

Leota Bryant Stone, Josephine Grimmett and Tessie Price are deceased but all led productive lives and were happy to remain in their profession throughout their working careers. Nearly all the others have retired. We have talked with some of them and will share with you some pictures they have in their albums.

Willis Williams did not change his profession basically, but he did go very soon into a principalship capacity and he did change his geographic location to bring variety into his own life experience. He and his wife, Frances, who also became a teacher (changing her own profession), charted their journeys with imaginative skill ending their careers back in their old home town. Well, close to it. They have retired to a newly purchased home in Vancouver, Washington.

Willis is a graduate of Pacific University at Forest Grove. He worked hard for nine years on the Union Pacific Railway and then put himself through college, he related to us.



Portland's first public school teachers were honored by the NAACP in 1949: Willis Williams, Leota Bryant Stone, Tessie Price, Helen Rawlins, Emma Walker Chiles, Ruth Spencer, Josephine Grimmett. Not pictured: Susie Patterson, Robert Ford, Martha Jordan, and Heloise Hill.

Williams goes on with his story: "Since they had never had a Black full-time teacher in their district, the school superintendent and a principal drove 45 miles to observe my teaching. I was not aware of their intent until 20 minutes before their arrival when I was so informed by my principal. They spent an hour in my classroom and they offered me a contract before leaving. I was assigned to a sixth grade at Addison School.

"After my first year there, I passed a battery of tests at Stanford University and applied for a principalship with that district.

"I was one of 32 men applying for that single opening. I finished a lengthy interview before a group of fifteen Stanford professors and central district personnel. I came out in second place. I applied again the following year and was successful on my third try. The school I had been in as a teacher became my first assignment as a principal. It was quite a wealthy and intellectual community which afforded me opportunities for experimentation and new innovations."

Meanwhile, Frances, a graduate of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina who had worked as a social worker for Multnomah County when the family lived in Portland, decided to go back to college. She wanted to shift her profession to that of teaching. Accordingly, she entered San Jose State College and added an

elementary school teaching credential to her secondary credential, and accumulated work towards an M.A. degree in education.

So, two years after the Williams' move to California, Frances qualified and was accepted for a teaching position with the Ravenswood School District in East Palo Alto. She taught also in Menlo Park while Willis was moving into his principalship. After teaching in California for seven years, she now holds a Life Teaching Credential from that state.

day that very few, if any, white youngsters attended school for fear of attack. "Needless to say, I promptly called a lengthy 'all school' assembly. This activity ceased immediately at my school."



Willis and Frances Williams in Hawaii in 1969.

"I held several teacher workshops while there and I also conducted three-hour workshops in 'Creative Social Studies' for the convention of principals while I was there. The central administrative staff and my faculty cordially received all of my efforts and I was asked to remain there.

"Frances and I had enjoyed our year there in Hawaii but we preferred to return to California, which we did.

from the "lower 48" often had to be put back a class in transfer to catch up with their grade level. The school had its own complete Stitz planetarium, an installation especially satisfying to Willis. He had held a deep interest in

planetariums as a teaching tool since his Portland days when the efforts of Portland locals built one here.

The children of Juneau kept school hours exactly as children do in the "lower 48," though often they had to light their own way by flashlight through the season darkness. Snows were frequent and deep, so the classrooms were equipped with extra cloakroom space for the drying of wet garments. Physical education classes very normally provided instruction for skiing and for ice skating. Marie Drake had its own ice skating rink and ice hockey games, and, routinely children checked out any of the 100 pairs of skis kept at the school for this purpose.

After five years in Juneau, Williams was offered a place as the Assistant Superintendent of Schools for that district, but he turned the opportunity down. He preferred principalships. Also there had been "two difficult winters of deep snow"; four-foot layers piled on top of four-foot layers — with incessant, endless shoveling required.

The Williams' looked southward.

ANCHORAGE

The principal and the teacher applied for employment with the Anchorage School District where the winters were "less severe as far as snowfall is concerned." They were accepted. But — there was a proviso before Willis was asked to sign the contract. He had to accept the position the District most wanted to fill. It was the problem school of Anchorage. The school had had five different principals in eight years. Willis signed.

Composition of the student body was one-third white, one-third Black and one-third Indian-Eskimo. Vandalism was rampant. White parents knew of only one other Black principal in Anchorage schools (there were about fifteen Black teachers in the 63 Anchorage schools) and they had some apprehension regarding the treatment they might receive from this new Black principal.

"This was my first experience of this nature," recounted Willis, "and I accepted it with open arms. All parents soon discovered that I treated my pupils alike, regardless of color and (gradually) they joined with other parents to make the needed changes.

"I reorganized a number of PTA methods, and the student body methods. The pupils took on a new pride in their school and had much to say through their student council on the running of their school. When I



1953 basketball team and cheer leaders at Portland's Failing Elementary School, where Willis Williams headed the athletic department.

"In September of 1948," Williams began, "I was placed in a teaching position in the eighth grade at Joseph Failing School here in Portland. Being the only male person on the faculty (other than the principal), I was put in charge of a number of in-school assignments such as head of the athletics department, the milk program, the safety squad, and after three years, in charge of the building in the absence of the principal.

"I spent five years at this school and during that time I took on some outside elected positions. I became president of the Southwest Social Council, Director of the Department of Classroom Teachers for District 10 (Portland) of the Oregon Education Association, and became a member of the Board of Directors of the Portland Grade Teachers Association. I also was a board member of the Urban League."

Along the way, Willis also picked up a M.A. degree in School Administration from the University of Oregon in 1953.

Soon the Williams family decided on a move to sunny California. They settled in Richmond, California where Willis taught sixth grade for a year until he could get his bearings to select community and housing in a more permanent location. They found an attractive location at Palo Alto and Willis applied for a teaching position there.

elementary school teaching credential to her secondary credential, and accumulated work towards an M.A. degree in education.

So, two years after the Williams' move to California, Frances qualified and was accepted for a teaching position with the Ravenswood School District in East Palo Alto. She taught also in Menlo Park while Willis was moving into his principalship. After teaching in California for seven years, she now holds a Life Teaching Credential from that state.

HAWAII

The couple heard the call of Hawaii. Willis applied and received a one year exchange principalship to Hawaii with his salary paid by the California district.

"I became the first Black principal in the Hawaiian Islands," he said. "My assignment was at Monawili School about nine miles from Honolulu at Kailua. My school was a 710 pupil school, kindergarten through sixth grades. It was composed of pupils from a number of ethnic groups from generally middle to high middle income families.

"I found the challenge oddly reversed to discover that here the white child and his family were the brunt of considerable ill will. It was dramatically demonstrated on their annual 'Kill Hoale' day. This was a



Eskimo students paint wall mural in Anchorage school.

ALASKA

Within two or three years, in 1964, the Williams teaching team heeded the "call" again, this time it was the "call of the Yukon" they heard. Positions for Willis as a principal, and for Frances as a teacher, were awaiting their arrival in Juneau.

They drove their car from Palo Alto to Prince Rupert, took their car aboard a ship at Prince Rupert and when the ship docked in Juneau, Juneau's first Black teacher and Juneau's first Black principal had arrived.

The Juneau experience was a rewarding one, the couple agree enthusiastically, Willis was principal at different times at two different elementary schools and spent three happy years at the newly built junior high school called the "Marie Drake."

What made "Marie Drake" so special in Willis' album? The curriculum for one thing. The basic 3 R's were stressed here and children

left there a few years later," Willis reflected quietly, "the vandalism rate at that school was the lowest in the entire city."

Frances has seen to it that vacation periods afforded this couple a chance for "enrichment as teachers, and for some earned self-gratification." Foreign travel has been their outlet. The Williams' have spent summer vacation days in Italy, Greece, Israel and the more northern parts of Europe. They have also touched down in Mexico and have made an aloha trip to Hawaii.

Retirement for Willis means serving on the language arts committee of the Evergreen School District in

Vancouver, Washington, being a member of the Citizen's Bond and Levy Committee. He makes "many tracks" to Portland attending meetings of the Royal Esquire Club and is their corresponding secretary. Willis also is running for a seat on the board of directors for the Alaska State Retirement System.

In retirement Frances seems content to decorate and settle the family into their new home and to brush up on the bridge game with old friends.

What other visions of "enrichment" are taking shape as these teaching partners currently deal the cards and play their hands? Even a kibitzer must guess.

© Family Album Northwest 1978

ROSE VILLA CLEANERS
SERVICE & QUALITY MAKE OUR REPUTATION
WE DO ALTERATIONS
DRAPERY CLEANING SPECIALISTS
FAST — QUALITY DRY CLEANING & LAUNDRY SERVICE.
8525 N.E. FREMONT
Mon-Fri 9:30-5:30 — Sat. 9-1

MARIE'S KITCHEN
Tues-Thurs 6:30 am-6 pm — Fri-Sat 6:30 am-3:30 am — Sun 6:30 am-3:30 pm
CLOSED MONDAY



BREAKFAST AT ANYTIME
SPECIAL CHITTLINGS DAILY
5246 N.E. UNION
287-9363
PORTLAND, ORE.

School Washings MADE EASY! **SMITH'S** home furnishings

WASHERS AND DRYERS

2-SPEED WASHER

GE proven dependability with two wash and two spin speeds, plus two wash cycles for versatile family-style washing. Filter-Flo system helps eliminate lint. Famous GE Activator Agitator for thorough but gentle cleaning. Porcelain-enameled lid, top, wash basket and tub.

LIMITED QUANTITY
\$198
with trade

Stock No. 14-211

BUDGET DRYER

Standard capacity dryer with more features than you'd expect. 140-Minute timed cycle. Removable up-front lint filter. Porcelain enameled finish clothes drum. Green Dot quality tested throughout to give you years of satisfaction.

\$168
with trade

Stock No. 15-200

we give you more . . .

SMITH'S
home furnishings

EASY TERMS

30th and S.E. Division 234-9351
Shop 9 to 9 Tuesday thru Friday Saturday 9 to 6
(Closed Sunday and Monday)