NARRATING ACTS OF RESISTANCE
Explorations of Untold Heroic and Horrific Battle Stories Surrounding Robert Franklin Williams's Residence in Lake County, Michigan

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The scholarship analyzing the political career of Robert F. Williams has either misinterpreted him, minimized his effect, or only provided limited information about his legacy as a Black revolutionary nationalist leader. In Tyson's biography, for instance, the treatment on Williams in Lake County, Michigan, raises much skepticism when he writes that Williams spent the last 15 years of his life in a quiet place "where he and his family could recover a life of their own." Different from Tyson's assessment, this article argues that while living in Western Michigan, Williams continued to fight for rights that the U.S. Constitution guaranteed him, his people, and his community by staging a one-man protest against the editor of the *Lake County Star* for refusing to publish a letter he requested to be printed as a paid advertisement and by fighting to eliminate prostitution, police brutality, and political corruption in the area. Williams was one of several people who were responsible for organizing the People's Association for Human Rights, a grassroots organization in Lake County dedicated to maintaining the human rights of residents.

Keywords: *Idlewild; Black resistance; Robert F. Williams; civil rights*

When the Wayne State University Robert Franklin Williams Tribute Committee published *A Legacy of Resistance: Tributes to Robert and Mabel Williams* (1996) as part of the official ceremony honoring Williams, it asserted that more research needed to be conducted to fully recognize his legacy.[1] During the memorial held on

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November 1, 1996, the committee informed its guests that it had reached an agreement with the editor of the Great Lakes Series of Wayne State University Press to reprint a second edition of Williams's book, *Negroes With Guns* (1998). The committee acknowledged that limited scholarship had been published about him as an international freedom fighter, but also that what had been told to date was either incomplete or inaccurate. This article argues that Williams has been virtually ignored in historical accounts of notable Black leaders, and that our understanding of his crusade for justice should include his activism during the last 24 years of his life in Lake County, Michigan. The article posits that Williams deserves a place in U.S. historiography because he has left an important footprint in world history. Some historians, however, have either misinterpreted the full extent of his contributions, minimized his effect, and/or studied only limited information about him as a Black revolutionary nationalist leader (Barksdale, 1984; Cohen, 1972; Cruse, 1967; Foreman, 1972; Tyson, 1999). Different from these treatments, this article critically examines Williams's political activism of later years as he championed the rights of working-class and poor African Americans living in Western Michigan.

The article argues that during the last 24 years of his life, Williams was calling attention to the many power inequities existing in Lake County between African American and White families. He fought against many illegal actions of White citizens and public officials who were responsible for violating their rights. Thus, the article illustrates how Williams fought against the many wrongs inflicted on Lake County residents of African descent by petitioning the Michigan press, local and state lawmakers, and garnering support from the Black and White citizenry in the county. This article focuses on Williams's grassroots activism and his political leadership to highlight the full extent of his contribution to Black rights in Baldwin. For example, few scholars know that Williams challenged free speech rights when he staged a one-man protest against the editor of the *Lake County Star* in 1985 for refusing to publish a letter he requested to be printed as a paid advertisement. He took the newspaper to court and won the lawsuit ("Civil Rights Complaint," 1989). His activism was also contested when he fought to

end prostitution, police brutality, and political corruption in Idlewild and Baldwin of Lake County, Michigan.

CRUSADING FOR JUSTICE

Robert Franklin Williams was born in Monroe, North Carolina, the county seat of Union County, known also as a Ku Klux Klan stronghold. This veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps returned to his southern hometown in 1955 and joined the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he was instrumental in changing the composition of the membership of the organization from mainly a middle-class to a working-class group. He was elected president of the branch in 1957 (Tyson, 1999, p. 3). As head of the Monroe Branch of the NAACP, Williams advocated peaceful demonstrations, although he was not opposed to armed self-defense as a love for justice. He fought and exposed racial injustice in the infamous Monroe "Kissing" case, staged sit-ins at lunch counters, organized and participated in boycotts of department stores, desegregated Monroe's public library, and sponsored pickets at the city-owned, Whites-only swimming pools.[2] When a 1957 Klan motorcade, which included two police cars, was shot up and stopped from attacking the homes of Black residents of Newtown in Monroe, Williams generated support from the local media. Then, during the summer of 1959, Williams was expelled from the NAACP for 6 months because he refused to apologize for certain statements made about random acts of violence and lynching to news reporters following the acquittal of a White rapist. Williams asserted that "the Negro in the South cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, and lynching with lynching."[3] Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, supported the decision to expel Williams because he continued to advocate for the rights of Black people to fight by any means necessary against the terrorism of the police and the Klan in Monroe.

In 1961, following the NAACP's Board of Directors' decision, Williams invited "Freedom Riders" representing the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) discipline to visit Monroe to test principles of nonviolence. While demonstrating in town, angry White mobs surrounded the nonviolent interracial demonstrators and attacked them, causing a race riot to erupt as shots were fired repeatedly. In response to these actions, disgruntled Black residents reacted combatively as they witnessed a middle-aged White couple traveling by car through the Black section of the town and dragged them from their car and into the Williams's home. Fearing for the couples' safety, Williams and his wife, Mabel, offered the couple shelter until the crowds calmed down. Although the couple left their home unharmed, a warrant was issued for Williams's arrest, he was threatened and charged with kidnapping, and he fled the state for New York. Pursued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Williams and his family underwent a self-imposed exile for 8½ years; they lived in Canada briefly before fleeing to Havana, Cuba, for almost 6 years.[4] Due to conflicts with certain Cuban officials, the family relocated and lived in Peking, China, for 3 years. A friend of Fidel Castro, Che Guevera, Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai, and Ho Chi Minh, according to *Detroit Free Press* writer William Serrin (1969), Williams "once urged American troops in Vietnam to turn their guns on their racist leaders" and "prophesied the black riots that swept Watts, Detroit and Newark." He also had "more first-hand knowledge of Red China than probably anyone else" before returning to the United States via Detroit to fight extradition charges to Monroe in 1969 (p. 1A). In support of Williams's constitutional and human rights, Robert F. Williams defense committees were organized in Detroit and Japan to pressure federal and state government officials to dismiss the unjust kidnapping charges as he and Mabel were in the process of settling in Lake County, Michigan, in 1972.[5]

In Lake County, the social issues Robert F. Williams championed were somewhat similar to the pragmatic actions he took in Union County. In Baldwin, the elder freedom fighter would petition for a truer democracy in the county. Williams's position on first amendment rights was inspired by years of terrorist actions against

law-abiding Black citizens in Monroe by racist White mobs and the sanctioning of those acts by local authorities. He "knew he wouldn't benefit, but he worried about others. It was indicative of his personality," wrote Mabel. "He cared, it bothered him, and he felt he had to do something about it" (Williams, 1997, p. 4). To rid the area of the many social ills its residents faced daily, Williams used the principles of our Western democracy as a way to safeguard the growth, rights, and nature of a civic culture. He understood that the best way to achieve this objective was through citizen participation in all aspects of community life and economic development. Although busy participating in national debates concerning African American issues, Williams sought to improve police-community relations and to end the prostitution problem during the hunting season in Lake County.

DO SOMETHING OR WE WILL

Robert and Mabel Williams migrated to Lake County at a time when the area was designated the poorest in the state of Michigan. Baldwin represented the main source of the county's economy for year-round residents. Prior to 1964, the entertainment in Idlewild served an important function in the county's economy. The shows performed at the Paradise and the Flamingo Clubs were luring. However, with the national recession of 1958 and the inability of seasonal African American entrepreneurs in the mid-1960s to be competitive, Idlewild could not endure the economic decline.[6] The problem with "Idlewild, though beautiful, peaceful, and rustic, [was that it] did not represent the type of environment where many ambitious young people" would settle down:

> During the 1990s, the majority of the black residents were either members of or nearing the senior citizen category, since once early resorters retired many decided to permanently settle in Idlewild. The percentage of Idlewild's population over age sixty-five is the highest for any township in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Presently, it is one of the poorest areas in the state. (Walker & Wilson, 2002, p. 151)

Unemployment was double that of the state's average, and only 30% of the families living in the county earned more than $5,000 a year. Due to the seasonal tourism and lack of available factory and industry jobs in the area, many families chose to relocate to nearby urban centers in Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Kalamazoo, Lansing, and Detroit to make a decent living. Lake County's failing economy was dependent on seasonal residents. A 1987 Yates Township Facility and Service Plan Study indicated that many residents would rely on the fishing and hunting seasons for seasonal employment.[7]

Lakes in Idlewild and Baldwin are well known for their fishing, and the area is wonderful for hunting of deer and wild turkeys. So, as Robert and Mabel were relocating to the area, the place was overflowing with deer hunters. The couple soon learned that the hunting season not only represented an economic blessing but also a demon in disguise.

> When the Black middle-class professionals began deserting the resort, many White hunters and fishermen, gamblers, and Black pimps and their stables of prostitutes did just the opposite. They pumped a few dollars into the resort. However, most of the dollars ended in the hands of pimps and prostitutes from Detroit, Indianapolis, Battle Creek, Chicago, and other places. In the late 1960s and 1970s, it was not unusual to see ladies in red working deer-crossing areas, tributaries of the Manistee River, and many inland lakes. During the height of the deer season, some panderers brought or rented mobile homes to be used as brothels on wheels, especially if the beds were already occupied at the Eagle's Nest. Many ladies were on a first-name basis with their customers. Furthermore, some White customers felt that they had been initiated into true manhood after being with a Black woman. Occasionally, such fellows would carry more than wild game home. (Walker & Wilson, 2002, p. 169)

The hunting seasons from 1972 to 1979 left many negative feelings and memories in the minds of Idlewild residents who lived in the community year-round. Some hunters visiting Idlewild not only engaged in sexual interactions with female prostitutes from Chicago, Detroit, and elsewhere, but they also procured male and female children who had been coerced into selling their bodies for cash. To make matters worse, the negative experiences of respect-

able women in the community who had been mistaken as hookers were disturbing and upsetting.

Commenting on the deer season and the community's reaction to the behaviors of the hunters, Mabel noted:

> Well that was great for the economy. The people and the merchants were really happy to see them come. But when the deer hunters were in town, it was almost impossible for ordinary women to walk around because they felt humiliated and assaulted by the deer hunters looking for real dears. This is because there were people who were bringing prostitutes into the area. They were coming in from Chicago. They were bringing them in from Indiana, from Detroit. They would put the prostitutes up in little motels around the bars in Idlewild and they would bring motor homes with prostitutes. Inside the motor homes wasn't so bad, but it got bad as years passed by that they were turning tricks as they stayed in cars, in open sight of the community people. (M. R. Williams, personal communication, November 9, 1999)

The problem was becoming so rampant in Idlewild that when the residents reported these activities to the Lake County Sheriff's Department, their complaints were either ignored and/or dismissed. The sheriff department's refusal to end the problem inspired Williams to not only object but act succinctly in a pragmatic manner. Mabel recalled Williams's reaction to the prostitution scandal in the community:

> This one particular year, the pimps came to the community with young girls and Black children, girls and boys. They were utilizing these girls and boys as prostitutes for the hunters. It had gotten so bad that open sexual acts could be seen day and night in cars outside the bar [i.e., The Rosana] in Idlewild. You could see these children being exposed like that to these hunters. Rob got really upset about this and called the police. First, when he called the police, they said, "It's just the hunters, they're having fun, and you know there is nothing we can really do about it." (M. R. Williams, personal communication, November 9, 1999)

Convinced that something needed to be done to end the abuse, "Rob called the State Police and they had the same attitude." Then

Williams said, "Well it's children that they are using here," and he said, "Maybe if we call the FBI, they will come in and do something about it because this is awful." Determined to rid the community of the problem, Williams then called the FBI. According to Mabel,

> The FBI told him it's a local matter and you need to talk to your local police and/or the State Police. They'll have to handle the situation because it is not in our jurisdiction. And Rob asked them, "Say, don't you get involved when children are transported from one state to another. He said isn't that called White slavery when you transport children from one state to another for prostitution," and they tried to say, "But you need to go through your local authorities," and Rob said, "That's alright, don't come, I've got some boys down in Detroit. I'll call the fellas in Detroit, and they'll come up here and deal with it."

It was this statement that finally motivated the FBI to do something. Mabel went on to say:

> When he said that, they said, oh no you wait, we'll see what we can do. Within minutes before the hunting season was over, the police had come in and arrested hunters for soliciting and I don't know if they did anything with those pimps who were bringing those children into the community, but they arrested a series of hunters that year. And they were embarrassed because they were just regular John Does when they came to Idlewild, but they were Dr. this or Mr. that when they went back home. And when they got arrested that cut way down on the kind of activities that had been going on in the past. So he was very much in the background by moving to make things happen. (M. R. Williams, personal communication, November 9, 1999)[8]

Clearly, Williams was instrumental in motivating the sheriff's department to significantly reduce the sex-for-sale problem in Idlewild.

In addition to the prostitution problem and the limited protection provided to residents by the local authorities, Black families living in Idlewild and other nearby townships in Lake County felt the effects of racial assaults. Many of them were encountering, as a result, human rights abuses, ranging from police brutality, arbitrary

arrests, and penal offence charges in which they were presumed guilty prior to receiving a public trial. Some inmates encountered incidents of cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment and punishment in and outside of the penal system. The visibility of Williams's activism, although gradual, was also illustrated throughout the 1970s and 1980s while he served as a board member of FiveCAP. At age 60, Williams petitioned the county government to change its policies as he collected, arranged, and bound a series of published newspaper articles from the *Lake County Star*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Grand Rapids Press*, *Lansing Star*, *Big Rapids Pioneer*, and *Ludington Daily News*. The articles selected covered more than 20 years of troubling times and inhumane encounters between the police and Black citizens in the area. The report, which was published in 1985 and designated an official report for county officials, the FBI, and the governor's office, enabled the FiveCAP board to systematically outline and provide a detailed description of the history of racial incidents in the county that involved police brutality, failed attempts on the part of other African American leaders to investigate existing community-police conflicts, and repeated efforts by the courts, county commissioners, and the county's Civil Rights Commission to resolve the problem. The evidence FiveCAP presented gave voice to this small population of marginalized African Americans who had been silenced by the local media and the sheriff's department. Williams acted as their spokesperson and, by bringing all the incidents together in an organized report, he illustrated that a pattern of injustice had been plaguing the county, which up until that time had been seen by the county's governance as merely a series of random and unrelated incidents.[9]

CHAMPIONING HUMAN RIGHTS

The rapid turnover of county sheriffs following the death of Sheriff Robert C. Radden in an automobile accident in 1969 caused major political repercussions that reverberated throughout the county. Sheriff Guy A. Lee, who had been elected in 1970, left office before the end of his term to relocate to Florida. His replace-

ment, Sheriff Robert Johnson, developed a major political rift with the Lake County Board of Commissioners (LCBC) in late 1974. He drove the sheriff's car to the Kent County Airport, left for Florida, and called back to tell LCBC, "If you want your car you had better send somebody to the airport to pick it up, because I will not be back."[10] Ron Voss was eventually appointed to the position.

By the mid-1970s, the Lake County Republican Party brought in Sheriff Lonnie G. Deur to control the African American communities of Baldwin and Idlewild. Under Deur's leadership, tensions between the police and the African American community came to a head following the sheriff's botched arrest attempt of Ruby Nelson, also known as Ruby Nelson Chatman, an African American widow and mother of three small children who had moved from Chicago to Baldwin in 1971 after the death of her husband. Nelson first purchased a modest home in the White section of Baldwin and immediately became the victim of the wrath of local racists. Despite numerous complaints to the sheriff's department, Nelson received no protection from the local authorities. The Ruby Nelson family eventually relocated to Idlewild, where Nelson continued to be harassed. Nelson's car tires were slashed, there was an attempt to run her over, and her children were being harassed in school. Gregory P. Kelley (1978), a reporter for the *East Lansing Star*, published an article stating,

> On one occasion, Nelson refused to answer a postal clerk's question about her social security mail. An argument ensued, ending with her handcuffed and in the custody of the sheriff's deputy. Last October, she went to the Baldwin school to investigate her son's report that a teacher's aide had choked him. An argument began with school officials, and the sheriff's department was called. Nelson was not only handcuffed but had a belt wrapped around her and was forcibly taken to Traverse City for a psychiatric examination. A psychiatrist there found her mental condition satisfactory and no treatment being required, she was released within the hour. A few weeks later, however, a local probate judge ordered another psychiatric examination. (p. 1)

Sheriff Deur set out to implement the court-ordered psychiatric examination but was shot by Nelson in the process of the arrest.[11]

Nelson was charged with intent to commit murder in connection with the shooting of the sheriff. After waiving her right to a preliminary examination on the charges before Judge Charles Wickens of the Lake County Circuit Court the next morning, Nelson was transferred to the Center for Forensic Psychiatry as an outpatient for observation on June 22, 1978.[12] As more complaints were mounting against the sheriff's department, a Ruby Nelson Legal Defense (RNLD) Fund was established to cover legal expenses. Along with Williams, the Reverend Ellis Davis, Reverend Henry Stovall, and James T. Nelson organized the People's Association for Human Rights (PAHR) and the legal defense campaign. Williams then contacted one of his long-term friends, Attorney Ernest Goodman of Detroit, to defend Nelson. Goodman served as Nelson's lead attorney, and Henry J. Dongvillo of Scottsville, Nelson's court-appointed attorney, served as his consultant (Karasienski, 1978a, p. 5).

The uniqueness of the Nelson case, however, ultimately illustrated the full extent of the sheriff department's dismissive attitude toward Black citizens of Lake County. The sheriffs, however, depicted Williams as merely a troublemaker, claiming he was using the Nelson incident as a publicity stunt to garner media attention. In opposition to this characterization, Williams positioned himself as a defender of the rights of Black residents. He argued that the more the residents learned from circumstances surrounding the Ruby Nelson case, the more questions they raised as many questions were left unanswered by the local authorities. As the situation intensified, many residents found it difficult to comprehend the treatment of Nelson, who was eventually found not guilty for reasons of temporary insanity on May 22.[13] Two months before the verdict was announced, however, Deur was honored during a Government Day banquet as "Rotarian of the Year." Criticizing the gesture of the Rotary International for honoring Deur, Williams (1978) published the following in a Letter to the Editor:

> Until learning of the local Club's selection of Rotarian of the Year, I labored under the misconception that those professing to possess these most noble of human qualities would be the last citizens to attempt to white-wash and glorify naked violence, brutality and terror. Local Rotarians have compromised the International, insulted

> womanhood and reduced Rotarian manhood to the level of Stone Age brutes. Naming one charged through community rumors with, among other things, breaking down the doors of a widow's home and publicly assaulting the weaker sex reflects on the moral and intellectual state of this community's business and professional elite. . . . But for the Rotarian to crown him as the best of manhood they have to offer surpasses the limits of morbid cynicism. Such sinister and spiteful acts drag Lake County to the brink of lunacy. An on how tragic a mockery it makes of Rotarian traditions while rendering such a grave disservice to this ante-bellum and deeply racist community. (p. 4)

The editorial was persuasive in questioning the integrity of the Rotary Club's decision to honor Deur (Ping, 1983). However, other residents disgruntled over the club's decision to honor Deur were Ethel Johnson (1978), who added, "If presenting the award to Mr. Deur is the final action that the Rotary takes, the citizens of Lake County must consider the Rotary's actions as a callous slap in the face from a previously significant group of county leaders" (p. 4). In addition to these public condemnations, recalls, protest meetings, grand jury investigations, and a Governor's Taskforce followed, in which several former employees of the sheriff's department told of numerous acts of violence and abuse, and significant social change resulted (Smith, 1979c, 1979d, 1979e). The citizens were told of numerous illegal, violent, and reckless acts committed by Sheriff Deur. This was followed by a major lawsuit with the federal district court of Western Michigan, which alleged that "several individuals including Lake County Sheriff Lonnie G. Deur and eight members of the department violated the constitutional rights of Frank Prince, one of the state prisoners who had been lodged at the Lake County Jail." A recall petition was circulated contesting the Sheriff's actions (1983). Between the internal discord within the Sheriff's Department, which resulted in the resignations of several key personnel, and the editorials that were written by Williams and Ethel A. Johnson, secretary of the RNLD Fund, Deur was eventually recalled and removed from office.[14]

As PAHR was becoming more influential as a group outside the establishment's social order and political structure, there was more

work to be done. With the election of Sheriff Robert Blevins, police brutality in the county increased gradually. Blevins was backed by Edward Giese, chairman of the Lake County Republican Party, and elected at a time when the atmosphere in the county was branded as an "us against them" (Smith, 1979b, p. 1). Initially, the new sheriff courted Black citizens of Yates Township and convinced Yates Township Supervisor, Audrey K. Bullett, that it would be in the best interest of the Idlewild community to incorporate the township police into the sheriff's department. In addition, there were many incidents in the county involving the sheriff's deputies and members of the African American community, such as the one involving the beating of a Black commissioner by sheriff's deputies. Although the commissioner filed a lawsuit against the county, the outcome of the suit was never disclosed. Another incident involved an automobile fire bombing of the Black director of the Lake County Ambulance Service who had underbid the sheriff for the ambulance contract. Alleged telephone threats to the ambulance director's office before and after the bombing were linked to the sheriff's department, although this information was based on circumstantial evidence. No one was ever arrested or charged in connection to the car firebombing incident. However, when the Ambulance Service did come under the sheriff department's control, residential concerns were raised about officers determining whether an ambulance was really needed to respond to certain emergency calls.

With each new development, more racial disharmony and strife occurred. Blevin's book, *The Bulldog: A True Story* (Galloway, 1994), documents a host of half-truths and fairy tales about these years. However, under his administration, tensions continued to brew and boil until James Wilson was shot to death on the side of the road by one of the sheriff's deputies. Incidents such as these continued until 1984 when the White business establishment in Baldwin felt that the economy would eventually be destroyed. These sentiments were intensified, as more White tourists felt threatened when visiting the area. As a result, White leaders of the community sat down with the Democratic and African American

leaderships to draw up a peace plan that included electing a retired Michigan State Police Officer on the Democratic ticket who would ensure fairness and help to restore racial harmony in the area.

Following these developments, a newspaper article was published about a Trout-A-Rama Tent disturbance in which an unknown Black man was arrested for possessing a gun (Smith, 1980a, p. 3). Not reported in the same article was news of off-duty drunken deputies who cursed, insulted, and pulled guns on innocent Black women and children for no apparent reason other than their skin color. The new editor of the *Lake County Star*, Denise Smith, was under pressure not to publish information about certain events concerning Black residents in the county. To make matters worse, Smith decided, against established practice, not to print a letter to the editor about the alleged cover-up. However, the sheriff's version of the event was printed (Blevins, 1983). As the situation worsened, approximately 75 Black and White county residents gathered on the steps leading to the front entrance of the Lake County Courthouse for more than 1 hour. Religious leaders and the Civil Rights Commission expressed hope that the grievances could be resolved (Smith, 1980d, p. 4). Organized by the Robert Sharber Defense Committee, the local NAACP, and religious and community leaders, the group, Citizens for a United Front, prayed and called for the end of a rash of incidents, including deputies pulling their guns on children, stopping cars for no apparent reason, and making racial and sexual insults to Black women going to and from work and school. Frances Barkley read a public statement that night that was published in another newspaper: "It is our hope, by the power of mass prayer, to arouse the conscience of the good people in this Community, with the hope of enlisting them in sincere efforts to improve race relations in Lake County and prevent the feared incidence of mass violence inspired by local people" (Smith, 1980d, p. 4). Following the publication of this letter on September 18, 1980, a letter to the editor appeared in the *Lake County Star*, which had been written anonymously by a member of the sheriff's department and signed by a number of its employees. The letter read as follows:

> We know that in these troubled times that you are very busy and perhaps you haven't had the time to spend on the citizens of Lake County who believe they are above the law. Please Lord, direct the members of this Department when they make traffic stops to protect all the people from the few who disregard the safety of others in Lake County, as you usually do, so with this in mind we offer this prayer: Lord, please direct and guide all the members of this Department, give them the strength to stand up under the pressure of a few people. Please Lord, be with each member of this Department when they are told that everything they do stems from hate instead of duty. (Smith, 1980d, p. 4)

The letter sought to appeal to the anger and resentment of the citizenry of the county. News coverage of the event ultimately motivated the sheriff to respond, claiming,

> I feel hurt, because I feel it's the duty of the only newspaper we have in Lake County to report the news and the facts, commonly called the truth. . . . I felt angry when one man, a county commissioner uses his elected office to agitate a situation and in fact, attends a rally for the purpose of, in his words, bringing the people one step closer to a North Carolina and two steps from a Miami.[15]

As a gesture to end the conflict, meetings between the community and Sheriff Blevins were held and mediated by the Civil Rights Commission. The outcome was published in the February 5, 1981, issue of the *Lake County Star.* However, no efforts to live up to the terms of the agreement were carried out by Sheriff Blevins.

The community was incensed by the continued attitude of mixed indifference involving yet another racial incident. Residents complained when concerns about evidence of the Ku Klux Klan in Lake County, as illustrated by a swastika on the water tower, became the amusement of local officials. To make matters worse, when the editor of the *Lake County Star* refused to report the incident, Eric Sharp, a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, was asked by Williams to investigate the incident. An article was published in the paper on May 5, 1980, questioning the incident (Sharp, 1980, p. B3). In the days to follow, the *Lake County Star* published a letter to the editor written by Ada May Day (1980), a long-time Baldwin resident,

who wrote: "Will someone explain why the KKK are painted on the water tower? We black people know what that group has done and are still doing to black people in other parts of our country. It is my hope that the city fathers will not allow anything like that to happen here. We know this is a free country. Everyone has rights" (p. 4). Days later, the editor published an article, stating that "the incident was blown out of proportion by drawing the states largest newspaper in on it, particularly in light of the fact that by the time the Free Press reporter arrived here" two 15-year-old Baldwin High School students confessed to "being responsible for painting what some local black leaders termed racist symbols on the Baldwin water tower two weeks ago" (Smith, 1980c, p. 4). The editor claimed that this act of resistance was in effect a publicity stunt used to garner citizen support. However, when Baldwin refused to repaint the symbols, Williams requested that his letter to the editor be published in the paper (Smith, 1980c, p. 4). The editor refused to publish Williams's account of the incident. Williams then requested to have the letter published as a paid advertisement (Trucks, 1980, p. 4). When the editor refused to accept the paid advertisement, Williams did two things. First, he picketed and staged a one-man demonstration outside the newspaper's office. Second, he filed a lawsuit against the newspaper due to the editor's actions.

Although Williams knew that he would win the lawsuit because a newspaper cannot refuse to print a paid advertisement, he created a large picket sign, which he called "The Town Crier," and staged an one-man social protest. The ideological slogans he invented for the peaceful protest questioned the legitimacy of the newspaper establishment. The slogans used, which were written on large signs and in big and bold print, posed a challenge to the editorship of the paper. In black screen and white letters, Williams's slogans stated, "The right to know is negated by the *LCS*," "Star spoon feeds information to public," and "George Dechow: Self-styled Czar of local information." In addition to wearing a large electric sandwich board, he used a battery pack with a light bulb on the top of the helmet he wore, and he marched back and forward in front of the *Lake County Star* office door speaking and playing a cassette recorder.

The recorder played songs such as "John Brown's Body," "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and "Before I Be a Slave I Will Be in a Grave." As citizens passed him by, Mabel recalled, there were "people coming up to him wanting to join in." Williams remarked, however, "No, this is a one person demonstration, and I want people to know that one person can make a difference and have an impact." Although the incident turned out to be an act of youth vandalism, the fact remains that several village leaders, including the editor of the *Lake County Star*, attempted to minimize the issue as they talked more about "the expense of repainting and the danger of the work" (Williams, 1989). By protesting the newspaper, Williams won the lawsuit against the *Lake County Star*, and as part of the settlement, The Pioneer Press "had to pay him $1,500.00 and print his letter" (M. R. Williams, personal communication, November 9, 1999). Williams donated the $1,500 settlement to PAHR. By the second day of the protest, the water tower was repainted. In response to this aesthetic change, some residents ascribed a heroic identity to Williams, believing that as a result of his persistent demand that something be done, he went down there in the night and painted over the markings.

By 1982, reports of mistreatment by deputies toward Black inmates in the county jail became a frequent occurrence, and Williams was asked to get involved. One inmate, Irshaad Toles, wrote a letter to Williams requesting that he "come to the county jail to talk with" him. The letter stated that "they [Blevins] won't allow you to come here to talk, they don't want you to talk with us because they are afraid of what you might say [truth]. But you can come and visit 2 or 3 inmates at a time on Thurs. or Sundays from 1 to 8pm." As Totes continued to make his plea for Williams's help, he added,

> On Tuesday May 11, 1982 they jumped on an inmate from Jackson Prison, Sgt. Dan Rose and CO Ken Smith. They immediately took him (Steve Neal #140076) to Jackson without any medical treatment he was bleeding in the head, and face area from the kicking, hitting by both the officers. Some of the black inmates did not like what happened and Sheriff Blevins asked them if they wanted to go back to Jackson and 5 immediately went.

Toles went on to note, "I filed a civil complaint against the Lake County Jail for the double standard etc. that they have for black inmates here as you probably know. Hopefully you will find the time to come and talk with me."[16] Williams not only responded to Toles's request, but he also helped to publicize and end the mistreatment of Black inmates.

Between refusing prisoners food, medical treatment, poor ventilation, and watering prisoners down during the winter months and then opening the windows, the stories told by inmates and employees to Williams, who visited them regularly, were clearly examples of human rights violations and abuses. In addition, he observed that there were poor security practices under Blevins, which resulted in three or four escapes from the county jail. However, the most disturbing incident to occur was a reported rape of a Black female prisoner by a White male prisoner. The sheriff's response to the incident was that she wanted it. However, as Williams and the Black community continued to question the safety of women in the county jail, Idlewild resident Debra Webb eventually told the *Star* that it was "a ploy intended to get something on the county in hopes of getting a lighter sentence" (O'Connor, 1982b, p. 1). Webb used race as an excuse to further condemn the White power structure in Baldwin. Williams's persistence to do the right thing paid off. Ultimately, the changes he enacted helped to improve the living conditions for African Americans, and this was made clear with the election of Robert Hilts. Sheriff Hilts operated in an honorable manner, acting quickly when problems occurred and in a manner responsive to all races.

HONORING A LEGACY

By the early 1990s, scores of Black and White community organizations and residents worked together and eventually obtained significant financial support for economic developments in their communities. The county turned its attention away from small building projects to focus on the renovation of existing township properties. The federal government, through a pilot rural policy ini-

tiative, served as a first step in fostering the collaborative partnership between business, government, grassroots organizations, and established community agencies. The government designated the county as an Enterprising Community in 1994. Two important economic development projects resulted from this initiative to revitalize Lake County: a new countywide sewage system and the creation of Mich-Con gas connections. In addition to improving the infrastructure, the Lake County Merry Makers received support for an application with the Enterprise Committee for Enterprise Funds to develop an Idlewild Historical Museum and Cultural Center (IHMCC) to preserve the historic value of Idlewild. And in September 1999, the Board of Directors of FiveCAP voted to dedicate its new Head Start building in memory of Williams. *Lake County Star* editor, Buck VandelMeer (1999b), reported that the Robert Franklin Williams Community and Family Service Center, coupled with IHMCC, were "two of the most visible accomplishments of the Enterprise Community's $3.5 million 10 year economic development plan for southern Lake County" (p. 1).

The Lake County Enterprise Board, the Lake County Board of Commissioners, Yates Township Board, and several community-based organizations and agencies voted to dedicate the $470,000 building in honor of Williams. However, the decision to actualize the project was being questioned and mocked by VandelMeer, who attempted to mobilize the White power structure against the future dedication ceremony. In the December 23, 1999, issue of the *Lake County Star*, he published an article with a caption that read, "Bucky's list of top twenty outrages of the year," in which amidst a host of other issues, he designated "The Robert F. Williams Center" outrage number three. The insertion read as follows:

> The new Five CAP family development center was named in honor of Robert Williams. Williams was a black militant who advocated armed violence as a solution to America's civil rights problems of the 1960s. After being charged with kidnapping he fled the United States for Cuba where he was a confident of Fidel Castro. From Cuba he broadcast black militant messages to the southern states. He left Cuba for North Vietnam where he gave aid and comfort to the enemy by broadcasting propaganda to African American sol-

> diers in the field. Although a hero to a small collection of Idlewild supporters, Williams is not an appropriate role model for Lake County children. Naming a day care after him is an insult to American soldiers who gave their lives in Vietnam, black or white. (1999a, p. 4)

On the bottom of page six of the same issue, an editor's note references an article that was written months earlier, claiming:

> In the Oct. 21 edition of the *Star* published the following paragraph in a summary of the life of Robert Williams. In 1964 Williams persuaded Fidel Castro to let him visit North Vietnam where he became acquainted with Hi-Chin Minz and wrote anti-war propaganda aimed at African American soldiers serving in the Vietnam War. The fact that Williams produced propaganda has not been disputed or justified. If he, in fact, did not write propaganda for North Vietnamese, I owe you and everyone else an apology. (VandelMeer, 1999a, p. 6)

Even after Williams's passing, a battle was being waged against him. VandelMeer appropriated himself as the official spokesperson for the dominant White power structure in Baldwin. In response to VandelMeer's assertions, accusations, and historical inaccuracies, three highly respected African American members of the Lake County community had letters to the editor published in the January 6, 2000, issue of the *Lake County Star.* First, Audrey Kathryn Bullett (2000), a former Yates Township Supervisor and respected community leader, wrote the following:

> I take exception to your statement. "Although a hero to a small collection of Idlewild supporters," Robert F. Williams was more than a hero to anyone, he was a leader who was not afraid to lead in the face of danger. . . . Williams contributed to the America we know today and that alone is enough to make him a role model for all youth, not only Lake County youth. I commend the FiveCAP Board and executive director in their progressiveness in naming this building after him. I hope you and others will take time to know more about him than the FBI textbook definition you presented in your outrage. (p. 5)

Robert L. Watkins, former president of the Lake County/ Newaygo County NAACP, also engaged in the ideological warfare against the editor, offering a strong testimonial about the community's hero. Excerpts from Watkins's (2000) letter state:

> Your outrage No. 3, Mr. VandelMeer was outrageous in its misinformation and omissions on the life of Robert F. Williams. Mr. Williams was an outspoken representative of the Black community in Monroe County, North Carolina, and president of the County National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was a militant because the pleas of the Black community for justice and protection from the KKK and the White Citizen's Council went unheeded. The Monroe County Black community desperately needed racial abuse, KKK knightriders, and transgression against Blacks to cease. When the brutal suppression of minority rights continued, the Black community was advised to follow an old American tradition of self-defense. Indeed, Mr. Williams did not advocate violence; he advised self-defense. Defending one's self is an act in response to external physical provocations: in the case of Robert Williams, the KKK. . . . Your comments on Mr. Williams regarding the naming of the FiveCAP Development Family Center are not applicable to his life and are inflammatory. Mr. Williams was a freedom fighter against injustice in the U.S.A. When Robert F. Williams passed away, he was a member in good standing with the national and local chapters of the NAACP. His passion for truth, justice, and equality make him an appropriate role model for youths and adults. (p. 5)

The conflict over free speech rights was further contested. Of the three letters, the one carrying a strong religious and secular argument came from Reverend Stanley Sims (2000a), of the oldest African American church in the community. The pastor of Idlewild's Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church used what social movement critics Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1994) defined as the strategy of transcendence to counter the position of the editor. In addition to addressing the pro- and anti-Williams rhetoric, the Reverend Sims (2000b) articulated a vision of hope that would arouse truth, a sense of community, human values, and moral character in the county:

> While I respect your right to express your opinion with regard to your likes and dislikes of political and community activities of Lake County, I now take time to ask you to become a responsible journalist. When one makes accusations and innuendo with regard to the integrity of individuals, the writer ought to follow one basic principle. "Get the facts right!" . . . You have the right to dislike and to state your dislikes; however, to state unequivocally, that Robert William's name should not be placed on a public building such as the new FiveCAP facility is indeed outrageous. And to say that Williams is not an appropriate role model is itself an insult to the community of Lake County. You ought take another look at the facts of the cause for which Robert Williams took his stand. His legacy to Black boys and girls and humankind is that if you are not willing to stand for that which you believe, then you will fall for anything. More than that, he was an outstanding community member who gave counsel to many. (p. 6)

It was clear following these letters that VandelMeer's language choices were unsuccessful in garnering support for his position. The "us" versus "them" discourse that he espoused transformed many negative community perceptions of Williams. This was conveyed through the voices of the common people who mobilized to increase Williams's credibility, causing VandelMeer to reverse his earlier position (VandelMeer, 2000a, p. 3; 2000b, p. 1).[17]

During the day of the celebration, letters poured in from across the country, which were read. From Beijing, China, Yu Shilian stated,

> Robert was a staunch fighter and leader of the American Black people in their struggle for civil rights and freedom and one of the most respected dear old friends of the Chinese people and particular of mine. . . . He will live forever in the heart of the Chinese people and all his friends in China and my friendship with Robert's family will last forever.[18]

Another letter read from Timothy Tyson stated,

> He always opposed white supremacy in a loud and uncompromising voice. And yet he was a gentleman who held no animus toward

> white people as a category. Robert Williams believed in democracy, and he knew that social progress always required struggle. To the very end of his life, he was a prophetic voice for freedom and dignity for all. Baldwin should be proud.[19]

In yet another letter, the Reverend John E. Simpson of First Baptist Church of Idlewild, noted,

> We further congratulate you on selecting Robert F. Williams' name to place on this facility. His contributions to this community and his dedication to basis human rights for all people will long be remembered and hopefully emulated by the youth who receive educational services in the facility.[20]

CONCLUSION

Robert Williams's experiences in Lake County are not only related to local history but also to this country's national identity and the treatment of African people in world history. He and his wife, Mabel, shared nearly 50 years of struggle. Together they built an inspiring partnership of love, respect, and resistance as they traveled throughout the United States, Canada, Cuba, China, and East Africa. While fighting against extradition to North Carolina and working to minimize a campaign of slanders, lies, innuendoes, and rumors about him, Robert and Mabel Williams settled in Baldwin, Michigan, where "they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited those in prison, spoke out for justice, and earned the respect of residents in Lake County, Michigan" (Tyson, 1999, p. 24). Leaving a footprint in Lake County history during the last 24 years of his life, Williams and other members of PAHR called for peaceful demonstrations on issues of equality, freedom, and justice, which were frequently met with violence, intimidation, and death threats. Like Malcolm X and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert F. Williams will be remembered in many circles as a propagandist, a folk legend, and a cultural hero because he fought a good fight and achieved much.

NOTES

1. The Robert Williams Tribute Committee consisted of General Baker, Jr., Grace Lee Boggs, Clyde Giles, Mike Hamlin, Gloria House, Marion J. Kramer-Baker, Ron Scott, Charles E. Simmons, Ken Snodgrass, John C. Williams, and Jim Wheeler. Some tributes in the booklet were addressed to Williams personally, whereas others were memorials. Before the publication of the booklet, the committee received three extended biographical essays, one by Muhammad Ahmed (i.e., Max Stanford), the leader of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), who worked closely with Rob Williams in the 1960s; one by Charles Simmons, member of the Republic of New Africa; and one written by Timothy Tyson, Assistant Professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and author of *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (1999).

2. The infamous "Kissing" case involved two African-American boys, aged 7 and 9, who were charged with rape because a 7-year-old White girl had kissed the 9-year-old Black boy on the cheek. The incident occurred when James Hanover Thompson, the 7-year-old, and David "Fuzzy" Simpson, the 9-year-old, joined a group of White boys to play cowboys while three young White girls of the same age group watched the boys from the sidelines. When the game ended, one of the White girls proposed playing house during which time Hanover was kissed. Later that afternoon, according to James Forman, the girl related the story to her mother, who was furious. Weeks later Hanover and Simpson were arrested. After a brief hearing, Juvenile Court Judge J. Hampton Price found the boys guilty and sentenced them to indefinite terms in reform school. The boys were released 6 months later without conditions or explanation (see Cohen, 1972; Foreman, 1985, pp. 173-174).

3. See Such (1975, p. 1). For details concerning Williams's expulsion, see Wilkins with Mathews (1982), which explains why Wilkins felt he had to suspend Williams from the Monroe branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for 6 months. He wrote,

> Like Williams, I believe in self-defense. While I admire Reverend King's theories of overwhelming enemies with love, I don't think I could have put those theories into practice myself. But there is a difference between self-defense and murder, and I had no intention of getting the N.A.A.C.P. into the lynching business. So I made our principle stick—and lost a passionate member. Years later he would come back to haunt me. On days like that my job was a sad one. (p. 265)

4. For details surrounding Williams's call for nonviolence, armed self-defense, and his exile, see Nelson (1968). See also Williams (1998) for more details about Williams's visits to Cuba. To leave Monroe, Williams and his wife moved through several different underground hideouts in New York, as well as in Toronto and Montreal, Canada. After Canada, the family migrated to Cuba safely and separately.

5. Williams had heard sometime in 1960 about Fidel Castro ordering the Cuban embassies throughout the world to provide whatever assistance he needed, including asylum. Williams had visited Cuba as part of a Fair Play for Cuba Committee delegation in 1960 and 1961. After arriving in Havana permanently in 1961, Williams aligned himself with Che Guevara and others as he advanced the Black freedom struggle through *The Crusader* and *Radio Free Dixie*. However, Williams became agitated with certain Cuban officials and members of the Communist Party USA (for more details, see James, 1969; Reitan, 1999). Williams left Havana in 1966 for Peking, China. Not only did Chairman Mao Tse-tung release a "statement supporting the American Negroes in their just struggle against racial

discrimination by U.S. imperialism" on August 8, 1963, but he also personally welcomed the Williams family when they arrived in China. After living in China for 3 years and returning to the United States, Williams wrote in an article that appeared in *The Detroit News* (1970),

> To be held in such high esteem by honorable people from all parts of the world and to know that all who met and conversed with me were convinced that I was anything but a criminal, while the power structure in America preferred to condemn me rather than to evaluate my case on the basis of fact and impartiality, was a constant source of irritation and frustration. It was a source of continual anger to know that my only crime consisted of the fact that as a black man functioning as chairman of the local branch of the NAACP I had incurred the wrath of the Ku Klux Klan and its racist contemporaries. Every minute of my exile, I resented having been forced from my native land by bigots who moved might and main to destroy me because of my insistence that black Americans, too, were entitled to constitutional and human rights. (p. 1E)

However, when Williams returned to the United States, several campaigns were mobilized to protest his extradition to North Carolina. The Committee to Aid the Defense of Robert F. Williams in Detroit, the Robert F. Williams Legal Defense Fund at the University of Michigan, and the Japanese Committee for the Defense of the Life and Fundamental Human Rights of Robert F. Williams were established (see Yoriko, 1989, pp. 319-365).

6. Idlewild is a Black rural town in Yates Township of Lake County, Michigan, that was founded in 1912 by three White businessmen and their wives from Chicago and White Cloud, Michigan, who organized the Idlewild Resort Company (see De Zutter & De Zutter, 1993, p. 14; Stephens, 2001; Walker & Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 1991).

7. The 1987 Yates Township Facility and Services Plan, Lake County, Michigan.

8. Following my interview with Mabel, I conducted a telephone interview with Lake County Under Sheriff Mike Deremyer, who reported that prior to 1979, incidents involving prostitution were listed as suspensions with no arrests. However, in 1979, there were a total of 26 arrests between November 15 and November 30, during deer hunting season. According to Dermeyer, that stopped the problem.

9. The Lake County Report, which is located in box 11 of the Robert F. Williams Papers at the Bentley Historical Library in Ann Arbor, was produced by FiveCAP. The report consists of correspondence, clippings, and reports regarding Williams's community activism in the county. FiveCAP is a nonprofit agency that serves some of the economic needs of low-income residents and senior citizens of Mason, Lake, and Newaygo counties. FiveCAP works to improve the housing, nutritional, and health care needs of its clients by providing budget management workshops, small loans, and other kinds of assistance to them in need. Mary L. Trucks is executive director of FiveCAP.

10. See *Lake County Star*, 1977, p. 3.

11. See transcript from *The People of the State of Michigan vs. Ruby Nelson*, a.k.a. Ruby Chatman Fuller, Lake County Circuit Court, May 22, 1979.

12. Department of Mental Health, Center for Forensic Psychiatry Summary Report, addressed to the Honorable Judge Charles A. Wickens, Lake County Circuit Court, July 17, 1978, filed July 21, 1978, pp. 1-2. See also Karasienski (1978b, p. 1). Nelson's court-appointed attorney, Henry J. Dongvillo of Scottville, Michigan, had requested that his client be sent to the Forensic Center for observation rather than make any plea. With no objections from Edward Duckworth, the lead prosecutor assigned to the case, Judge Wickens, ordered "Mrs. Nelson to undergo observation there for 60 days and then to reappear in court for arraignment." Prior to the date of the incident, a petition had been filed with Lake County

Probate Court Judge Richard Cooper, alleging that Nelson "was a dangerous person in the community and requested treatment for her." The petition came after Nelson "allegedly set fire to some items in her home and threatened to kill someone." A doctor from Traverse City State Hospital who had met with Nelson 2 weeks before the shooting stated that "there was nothing wrong with her."

13. According to the transcripts of the nonjury trial in the Lake County Circuit Court, Judge Wickens's decision concerning the *People of the State of Michigan vs. Ruby Nelson*, a.k.a. Ruby Chatman Fuller, ruled that the defendant was not guilty because of the defense of temporary insanity. Judge Wickens's opinion was determined on May 22, 1979.

14. Letters to the editor were published as citizen complaints about the sheriff (see Hamrick, 1978, p. 4; Piper, 1978, p. 5; Smith, 1979a, p. 4; 1978a, p. 1; 1978b, p. 1; 1978c, p. 1).

15. Sheriff Blevins. Don't believe all the trash you read. *Lake County Star*, September 27, 1983, p. 4.

16. Irshaad Toles, personal letter to Robert F. Williams, Jackson, Michigan, dated May 12, 1982. See also Smith (1978d, p. 1).

17. In covering the dedication ceremony, VandelMeer acknowledged the presence of more than 150 Lake County supporters who attended the event. He stated that "many dignitaries, including State Rep. Mike Pumford, R-Newaygo, Jerry Kooiman field director for U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland, and Donald Hare, state director of USDA Rural Development took part in the ceremony." Finally, he cited lengthy public testimonies that came from Father Joe Fix of St. Ann's Catholic Church, Charles Young, chairman of the Lake County Board of Commissioners (LCBC), Mabel R. Williams, widow of Robert F. Williams, Deborah Smith-Olson, president of the Lake County Osceola State Bank and chair of the Lake County Enterprise Community, Newaygo Circuit Court Judge Terrence Thomas, and Mary Trucks, executive director of FiveCAP. He also toured the facilities of the new Robert F. Williams Family Development Center.

18. Letter, Robert F. Williams Center Dedication c/o FiveCAP, Inc., Yu Shilian, Beijing, China, April 30, 2000, in box 11 (Letters of condolence) of the Robert F. Williams Papers at the Bentley Historical Library.

19. Letter, Dedication of the Robert F. Williams Family and Community Center, Dr. Timothy Tyson, April 30, 2000, in box 11 (Letters of condolence) of the Robert F. Williams Papers at the Bentley Historical Library.

20. Letter of Congratulations, Reverend John E. Simpson, Pastor, First Baptist Church of Idlewild, April 30, 2000, in box 11 of the Robert F. Williams Papers at the Bentley Historical Library.

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