

Interview with Timothy B. Tyson for Winter, 2004-2005 issue of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*

**Your memoir is in a sense a personal perspective on the history told in your earlier work, especially *Radio Free Dixie*, your 1999 study of an unjustly neglected civil rights hero of the 1950s and 60s, Robert F. Williams. How did the Wisconsin Historical Society's collections in African-American history contribute to that earlier book? And how did that earlier work inform your memoir?**

I was a fledgling assistant professor and thought I had already learned everything there was to know about Robert F. Williams, the NAACP firebrand from Monroe, North Carolina who defied KKK terrorism and NAACP timidity, and found himself chased all the way to Cuba and China and back again. But I had an undergraduate come to see me about a paper he was writing, and he looked a little sheepish, so I took him over to the Wisconsin Historical Society to show him exactly how to start his research, and while I was showing him how to look stuff up I stumbled upon a 1400-page transcript of a 1968 interview with Williams, and then photographs of "the kissing case" of 1958, and a whole trove of rich stuff I hadn't dreamed even existed, and which proved important to RADIO FREE DIXIE. This shows you not only how matchless the Society's civil rights collections are, but also the important relationship between teaching and research. If I hadn't been spending so much time doing hands-on training with my students, I might never have found the stuff.

**Can you describe the various collections of letters and papers related to African-American history and the history of civil rights that are housed here at the Society? Why are they so important?**

If you had to write a book on the civil rights movement and would only be allowed to work in one building, the Wisconsin Historical Society would be the building you would choose. These collections are the best in the country, hands down. The papers from Freedom Summer, the CORE Papers, and all sort of obscure but extraordinary newsletters from the 1960s—just check the footnotes of any of the classic works of civil rights scholarship, and you'll see that it has long been impossible to write about the movement without coming to Madison.

**How do these collections contribute to your work as a professor of Afro-American studies at UW-Madison?**

They've been decisive to my work as a scholar, but are probably even more important to my teaching, because I can give my students direct experience writing freedom movement history from scratch. Learning from books and lectures and films is great, but nothing matches learning by looking at the evidence yourself and building your own narrative of historical events. The degree of sophistication that I can easily give students simply by turning them loose in the Wisconsin Historical Society is simply amazing, and would not be possible anywhere else.

**Let's turn to your recently-published memoir, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, the story of a race-murder in oxford, North Carolina in 1970 and how it changed the community, your family, and your whole life. How did some of the larger issues of the civil rights movement play themselves out in your family's experience?**

My father was a white Methodist minister in the Jim Crow South, an “Eleanor Roosevelt liberal,” he called himself in later years, and there was no way for him to avoid the race issue and have any integrity. He was wedged between his convictions and his congregations, much of the time, and the example that he set in those years shaped my life indelibly. It wasn't simple. He tried hard to be such a good pastor in other ways that his congregations would listen to him, or at least tolerate him, when he assailed their racial fears and prejudices and resentments. He wanted to play a prophetic role and yet he also wanted to be a parish priest, and he tried to tell the truth in a spirit of love, standing up for justice while avoiding the fate of the irrelevant crusader. He knew that if there was going to be a new church and a new social order, beyond white supremacy, someone was going to have to explain it to white people, someone they respected, someone they knew loved them. It was a very, very tough role, and I thought he was heroic in his own way. — But as a historian, I have taken some pains to show that his political philosophy was also not adequate to the demands of the revolutionary moment in which he found himself. I am not uncritical, but I admire him greatly.

**Our readers appreciate the importance of local history. Would you agree that your memoir is also a model of local history? Does this reflect the increasingly local focus of numerous recent studies of the civil rights era?**

I don't think I am the person to say whether my work is a model of anything at all. I will say, however, that at every crossroads in the world, if you look hard enough, there is a story unfolding that speaks to the whole human dilemma. And I think the recent historiography of the freedom movement shows that we need these local stories before we can attempt to synthesize “the big picture.”

**What were the special pleasures and challenges of researching this history in your childhood home and in your own family?**

I am a human being like anybody else, eager for love and acceptance, and yet in some ways writing this book made me feel like “The Nasty Girl,” if you know that movie, which is about a young girl who starts to research the history of the Nazi period in her own hometown in Germany. It wasn't what she had been taught, of course, and that was what I found, too. And people didn't necessarily appreciate her insights, either, and I got some of that. But on the other hand, the African American community really took me in their arms and helped me all they could and buoyed my spirits when I started to sag. And you'd be amazed at how many sweet and tender letters I have gotten from white folks in Oxford, too. One of the really great other things was to learn so much about my own family, some of it from my parents' diaries, for example, which I hadn't even known existed, and some of it from other people who saw them in a different light.

**Your work sheds a new light on two endlessly fascinating wars. The hero of *Radio Free Dixie* fought in World War II, while many of the men you interviewed for *Blood Done Sign My Name* fought in Vietnam. How did the experience of fighting in these wars affect two different generations of African-American men?**

Black men who put their lives on the line for their country have long come back to the U.S. and expected and demanded to be treated as full citizens. The Vietnam generation was a special case, in that they really lost faith in this country, at least in its ability to change peacefully. The murder of Dr. King spoke more clearly to them than his message. The country was lucky things didn't get even worse than they did. And we're still living in a spirit of full-blown denial about what happened.

**What role did Christian faith—what you call in your memoir “the many faces of Jesus that haunt the South”—play on both sides of the civil rights struggle?**

Both the Ku Klan Klan and the black freedom movements claimed the blessing of God and the mantle of the Bible. So many of the motifs of the struggle are biblical—crucifixion, redemption, forgiveness, sacrifice, community, atonement, and so on. And yet we can overdo that, I think. This was a political struggle, and inevitably took place in the church, in the courts, in the streets, and in our souls, but sometimes I think we are eager to make it a morality play in which African Americans issued a call on America's conscience, which America answered. That is a fantasy.

**Americans, perhaps especially outside the South, cherish a certain image of the civil rights movement. How do both your books challenge this image?**

The federal government, which was the only pile of guns and money big enough to do the job, intervened on behalf of the movement, did so very reluctantly and then only because America's racial problem had become a critical challenge to our position in the world, and because the country was becoming ungovernable due to the chaos in the streets and the challenges to our basic social institutions. But we should never forget that the federal government also intervened against the movement; the FBI plotting to push Dr. King to commit suicide, for example, and to crush him as a person; the COINTELPRO operation seeking to destroy the movement in a hundred different ways; and the Republican Party building a whole new base in the white South and in the “white ethnic” suburbs of the North because of the white backlash vote. Most white Christians did not see, at least not until much later, that the black freedom movement's call for justice was a legitimate challenge to their faith.

**One of the rich if painful relationships you explore in *Blood Done Sign My Name* is your graduate-school friendship with Herman Bennett, an African-American originally from Milwaukee. Does his story suggest that your books are just as relevant to Wisconsin as to the South?**

His father, an American soldier stationed in Germany, met his mother there, a German woman whom we would call “white.” After they married in the early 1960s, they moved to Wadesboro, North Carolina briefly, where they predictably had a hard time. And so they moved to Milwaukee when Herman was a little boy and his sister was an infant. And someone who disapproved of their family's racial makeup and the neighborhood they had chosen threw a firebomb into their home, which killed Herman's little sister in her crib. One reason I tell this story is to underline what people really ought to know already, which is that the American race problem is not a Southern problem in particular. Milwaukee is still more segregated, in my opinion, than the Jim Crow South I grew up in. But I also tell Herman's story, and I am grateful to his family for letting me tell it, which was not easy for them, because I had known Herman for years, had talked to him about very intimate matters, and I still did not know this story. So much of what divides us remains unspoken, even when we love each other and think we know each other.