

The Billy Williams Story

EXTENSION OF REMARKS
OF
HON. ROY W. WIER
OF MINNESOTA
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Monday, July 8, 1957

MR. WIER., Mr. Speaker, under permission to extend my remarks in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, I include an editorial from the June 21 edition of the *Minneapolis Spokesman*, of Minneapolis, Minn., entitled, "The Billy Williams Story."¹

The editorial follows:

THE BILLY WILLIAMS STORY

Billy Williams for years has been a living [Minnesota] legend. First as messenger and later as executive aide, he served 14 of the State's 29 governors. Williams' retirement from State service on June 30 has been announced. His retirement will bring back many memories to him and others of the momentous occurrences and events of which every State chief executive and his office are the vortex.

Having served State chiefs since the opening of the present State capitol in 1905, Williams has stored in his memory thousands of incidents which ought to make excellent history of the times and individuals who have led the political life of the State most of the 20th century.

While Billy Williams has always seemed to shy away from the spotlight, there is little doubt that he has played an important part in State government circles, both in the executive and in the legislative branches.

The most astute and influential legislators during the past 52 years have been proud to call Billy Williams a friend and it is impossible to estimate how much Williams has been able to do for others by his close friendship with senators and State representatives who have served in our legislature.

His great ability for friendship, and the respect he has earned can be seen by the fact that despite his important ushering in and out, the various callers on the various governors he served, a job where an aide could be charged with favoritism, and his quiet influence on certain types of legislation, there has never been any public or private criticism of Billy Williams that this newspaper has heard.

In the past 20 years as the Minnesota Negro became more aggressive and articulate there were a number of suggestions that Williams in his long key place in State government could have been more active on behalf of the Negro-American cause in Minnesota.

Such criticism died aborning because there were those who recognized that Williams, while appearing to be aloof from the struggle against job discrimination, discrimination in public facilities, etc., actually carried on a subtle campaign at high level to gain converts for racial equality at all levels.

The fact is that Williams' high place, close to the chief executives of the State, was a good example of the ability of persons of Negro ancestry, if given a chance for responsibility. Hundreds of rural legislators discussed the race question with Williams through the years and by what he said in his quiet way and by the manner in which he carried himself, the Minnesota Negro gained converts to his side in high places which could not have been gained in any other manner.

Williams, who looks more like an American Indian than a person of African ancestry, chose to take his stand on race before he became a government employee. An accomplished baseball player, he played first base for a number of independent teams throughout the Northwest. He was such a star that Ned Hanlon, owner of the world-famed big league Baltimore Orioles, sent him a contract. Williams, only a young man, refused to sign the contract because Hanlon insisted that he would have to masquerade as a Cuban. Because he was proud to be an American Negro, Williams turned down what early sports writers believed would have been a career of national fame and fortune.² This was enough answer to this newspaper for the few critics who felt Williams was not interested in the advance and progress of his people.

All during the period in which a newer younger leadership among the Minnesota Negro population has been emerging, Williams has continued to encourage, advise, and boost it. His wide acquaintance through the State has been used well and he has used every opportunity to indicate to the friends he has made that his people were making progress that entitled them to encouragement and consideration in all areas of State life.

This newspaper had hoped that "the Billy Williams Story" would have been written long ago. It is a story, equal to the best talents of the best historian available, for Williams' intimate exposure to the current of events which whirl around, and through a statehouse and a governor's office should provide a wealth of information about a half century of Minnesota government and politics, and the individuals who played the important roles.

The great esteem with which the State regards Billy Williams was evidenced in 1955 when the State legislature unanimously, and without dissenting voice, granted him a guaranteed income for life of \$300 per month.

Billy Williams, at 79, looks, walks and acts like a man in his late fifties. This newspaper hopes he will have plenty of time to fish, and hunt with the many cronies and friends he made during his long service to the State and its people.

NOTES

1. Hon. Roy W. Wier, Remarks to the House of Representatives, *US Congressional Record*, Appendix A5384, July 8, 1957.
2. "1903 Baltimore Orioles Roster," StatsCrew, <https://www.statscrew.com/minorbaseball/roster/t-bo10300/y-1903>; Bob LeMoine, "Orioles return to Baltimore after 52 years," Society for American Baseball Research, <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/april-15-1954-orioles-return-to-baltimore-after-52-years/>; Mike Klingaman, "In the rough-and-tumble baseball of the 1890s, Baltimore rose to the top with skill and guile," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 1996. A professional Baltimore Orioles team did exist in the late nineteenth century and competed on and off in various leagues between 1882 and 1899. The team, under Ned Hanlon, was especially successful between 1894 through 1897. Between 1899 and 1901, amid league changes, the team moved to New York, eventually becoming the Yankees. A minor league team, also named the Baltimore Orioles, formed in 1903, as part of the Eastern League (and, in 1911, the International League). A professional Baltimore Orioles team returned to the state in 1954. Some news articles and books about Billy Williams suggest Ned Hanlon of the professional Baltimore Orioles sent a contract to Williams in 1903 encouraging the Black ballplayer pass himself off as an American Indian (or as this article says, Cuban). As of this printing, RCHS is unable to corroborate this story. It is more likely Williams received an offer (contingent on hiding his race) from the minor league Orioles, and the story has morphed into an urban legend over the last 120 years.