

RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Slow Track to Nowhere

St. Paul's Downtown People Mover

MATT GOFF, PAGE 13

*From a Star on the
Ball Diamond to a
Star at the Minnesota
State Capitol*

Billy Williams

FRANK M. WHITE, PAGE 1



By the Numbers . . .

Historian Johannes R. Allert has written multiple articles about Ramsey County citizens who served in one way or another during World War I. Below are a few general facts to consider before you explore Allert's newest article, "*Faith, Advocacy, & Service: A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War*," which begins on page 22.

Number of men in the US Armed Forces during WWI:

4,800,000

Number of men serving in the US Army during WWI:

4,000,000

Number of Minnesotans serving in WWI:

99,116

Total deaths in the US Army in WWI:

115,660 (50,280 battle, 57,460 disease, 7,920 other)

Number of Ramsey County residents (Armed Forces and service workers) who died overseas during and shortly after WWI:

358

SOURCES: Col. Leonard Ayres, *The War With Germany: A Statistical Study* (Washington, DC: US Gov. Printing Office, 1919); Gold Star Roll Index, Minnesota Public Safety Commission; "List of WWI casualties—Memorial Hall Veterans," Ramsey County Minnesota War Memorial, <https://data.ramseycounty.us/stories/s/6r2q-8m1u>.

ON THE COVER



Billy Williams, who served as aide to fourteen Minnesota governors over fifty-two years, welcomed the press to his home on occasion of his eighty-sixth birthday in October 1963. *Photograph by William Seaman, Minneapolis Star Tribune, October 24, 1963, Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

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A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War
JOHANNES R. ALLERT

Message from the Editorial Board

This issue, we share remarkable examples of commitment and purpose by ordinary men and women from Ramsey County. Despite loss and hardship, criticism, racism, and sexism, nothing diminished their beliefs in the importance of their service.

Frank White paints a compelling picture of Billy Williams, a Black St. Paulite who juggled multiple jobs while making a name for himself playing baseball for mostly white regional teams at the turn of the twentieth century. His leadership on and off the field did not go unnoticed by John A. Johnson, who tapped Williams as his messenger when becoming Governor of Minnesota in 1905. That was the beginning of Williams' remarkable tenure at the Capitol.

During and immediately after World War I, dedicated volunteers with welfare organizations endured the deprivations of war to serve at home and abroad. Despite hardships, they prevailed in their commitment to pray for and comfort weary soldiers and tend to their basic needs. Johannes Allert scoured dozens of service records to offer a glimpse of six of these devoted souls.

Another story of commitment and purpose is an urban development and transportation concept that was, perhaps, ahead of its time. The mostly forgotten Downtown People Mover overcame many obstacles before voters put an end to the introduction of a shuttle transit system in St. Paul in 1980.

To serve a greater cause isn't always popular or successful. Yet, sometimes determined people devoted to the tasks at hand create many ripples of good—often unnoticed and often extending far into the future. *Ramsey County History* is pleased to bring you these stories of dedication this spring.

Anne Field
Chair, Editorial Board

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Billy Williams

FRANK M. WHITE

St. Paulite Billy Williams loved to play baseball, and he was good at it—so good that he *might* have had a chance at the “big” leagues—if not for the color of his skin. Instead, a different opportunity—right out of left field—would ultimately place Williams in an executive office at the Minnesota State Capitol. There, he served as the loyal aide to fourteen consecutive governors from 1905 to 1957. He was and is the longest-serving, fulltime employee at the capitol to this day.¹

Young Billy

William Frank Williams—or Billy—was born to George B. S. and Barbara Schmitt Williams on October 24, 1877. His father was African American; his mother white. Billy was the fifth of six children including Ida Louise (1867), Ella Marie (1869), Charles Ralph (1872), George Clermont (1875), and Annie Belle (1883). The family lived at 160 West Ninth Street near the newly constructed Church of the Assumption.²

Making a living was challenging. Mrs. Williams took in laundry. Mr. Williams was a janitor and, it is said, sporadically found work on a steamboat line that ran between St. Louis and St. Paul, further complicating family life when away.³

Biographer Maurice W. Britts summarized a story Billy once shared:

... one day [Billy] accompanied his father to the river front where he saw him board a steamboat. At the gangplank, the elder Williams patted his son on the head, took his small hand in his, and said goodbye. Wide-eyed Billy watched the big boat gather steam and sail down the Mississippi, its paddle-wheel shooting sprays of water on the figure of his father standing waving at him. ... After a while [Billy] shrugged his small shoulders, ‘Oh, well, he’ll be back,’ and trotted off for home.⁴

Eventually, the children realized their father wasn’t returning. The financial and emotional impact of the patriarch’s decision was difficult for the struggling family, but it made Billy determined to help his mother—most of the time. For he loved to play ball—anytime, anywhere. This often left his mother hollering from her porch for Billy to get on home.⁵

The youngest Williams’ son attended Mechanic Arts High School, where he excelled in football, basketball, and track. His favorite sport was baseball. In fact, in 1897, he led his school in hitting. He also joined a city baseball team—the Spaldings—in the mid-1890s. He and others then played for Hamm’s Exports baseball club. Billy became one of the top amateur players in St. Paul.⁶

Loss, Baseball, and a Big Decision

As a child, Billy lost both his sister, Annie Belle, and his disappeared father. In 1897, his twenty-two-year-old brother, George, died of tuberculosis. Under a year later, his mother fell ill. Before passing, she implored her son “to promise her that he would not leave his sister Ella alone but would always care for her as long as she was single.”⁷

Billy stayed by his sister’s side. Ella kept the house on Ninth Street in good shape until 1901, when the siblings moved to 264 W. Central at the corner of Jay Street to be closer to their sister, Ida; her husband, William Gardner; and what would become a family of eleven children. The Gardner’s lived at 369 Jay.⁸

During this time, Billy landed (and sometimes lost) part-time jobs, including one as a waiter at the Minnesota Club and a brief stint at the capitol in 1900 when John Lind was governor. After that, Williams worked as an attendant and coach at the St. Paul YMCA through 1904. Of course, there were the baseball gigs, but to Billy, baseball didn’t seem like a job, despite the



Despite the loss of family members, or, perhaps, because of it, Billy Williams graduated from Mechanic Arts High School in 1897 at the insistence of his sister, Ella. He was twenty. From the Gardner Family Collection.

fact that the sport helped provide much needed additional income—part of the year.⁹

Billy signed on with several regional teams: Chippewa Falls, Austin Western, Red Wing, the Prairie Leaguers, Litchfield, and others. In 1901 while playing with Litchfield, the ballplayer gave it his all at St. Paul's new Lexington Park in front of 9,270 fans in a rivalry game against the Waseca EACOS. Waseca prevailed. Still, the more Billy played, the more he was in demand. He was even hired by teams to play against the Minneapolis Millers and the St. Paul Saints.¹⁰

Teams, managers, fans, and sports writers took notice. In a 1904 article about the newly formed St. Paul Amateur Baseball Association, one journalist noted, "It is a fitting recognition of his ability for 'Billy' Williams, the only Afro-American in the association, to be chosen captain."¹¹

Over time, the regionally acclaimed slugger received offers from Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, and Iowa to play ball. Some interest came from East Coast teams, with one invite a little later in life to coach amateur athletes at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan.¹²

Billy played across the Midwest, bringing in enough money to support himself and Ella. Then came an interesting offer—in fact, two offers. One was an invitation to play for what was at that time a minor league Baltimore team called the Orioles. The other came from John A. Johnson—the newly elected governor of the State of Minnesota. Johnson was an avid baseball fan. He'd seen Billy play for several teams and was impressed with his determination and professionalism. He'd introduced himself to the ballplayer a few years earlier, and they'd become friends.¹³

Billy fully understood, because of experiences on and off the ballfield, what it meant to be a Negro in a country where people worked diligently to maintain a segregated society. He also knew a job at the capitol was quite something for a Black man at the turn of the twentieth century. Billy trusted his gut, kept the promise to his sister, and accepted Johnson's

offer to serve as his messenger. Surely, it would work out fine. After all, the governor reminded his new hire that he could still play ball on weekends and vacations.¹⁴

Into the Governor's Reception Room

John A. Johnson

As the governor's inauguration approached, Billy doubted himself.

The thought of my becoming a part of the working force of the governor's executive family with so little experience along these lines especially state and office work and my fear of the lack of higher educational training . . . overwhelmed me somewhat.¹⁵

But, when Johnson, a Democrat, became the state's sixteenth executive leader on January 4, 1905, twenty-seven-year-old Billy fell in step beside his new boss. He set up the office, kept the governor on schedule, and remained in the background, listening to understand what was needed before Johnson even asked for it. According to one oft-told story, Billy heard his boss complaining about the unorganized filing units in the vault. The resourceful aide put the drafting skills he had learned in school to work and, in six short hours, presented drawings of an improved filing system. The governor was so impressed that he spoke about Billy's efforts at a meeting of the State Educational Society. The press jumped on the story. A hyped headline in *The Appeal* even read, "Williams An Architect. Governor's Messenger Designs Vault Fixtures. . ."¹⁶

Billy—always dignified and always busy—was the first person most visitors met when they entered the stately reception room. In his papers, he noted:

I had charge of all personal mail . . . charge of executing all notarial commissions . . . charge of filing executive documents . . . I had charge of making the appointments of committees and individuals who had executive business with the chief executive . . .¹⁷

When Billy wasn't working for the government, he was on the ballfield. The papers made note:



Governor Johnson's affable, efficient and popular messenger is taking his vacation. And just to keep his hand in, is playing first base with the Chaska ball team. He left Wednesday for Long Prairie to join the club. On Tuesday, August 6, the Chaska club will play the St. Paul Gophers for a purse of \$150.00. . . .¹⁸

While Billy tried to keep his athletics separate from work, sometimes, that proved difficult,



Billy Williams in 1907 as part of the Chaska team, which lost to the St. Paul Colored Gophers that summer. The Gophers were proclaimed the National Black Champions two years later. *Courtesy of Frank M. White and Minnesota Historical Society.*



While working, Billy Williams tried never to show favoritism toward his bosses. He admitted, years later, that he was especially fond of Gov. John Johnson, who first offered him the job. Billy worked in a beautiful reception room with plush chairs, heavy curtains, and elegant chandeliers. The governor's private office is behind the door at the far back right. Billy sat at a small desk in front of the door. *Both photos courtesy of Ramsey County Historical Society.*

including in 1907, when boxer Jack Johnson came to town. The governor invited the "fellow Johnson" to the theatre as his guest and boasted about the athleticism of his aide. The next day, the soon-to-be heavyweight world champion met Billy, who was taller by a few inches at 6'3". The boxer conceded, "No doubt, Gov. Johnson, you are right, for the young man is big enough and he certainly looks the part."¹⁹

Billy's job was never dull, but less than four years into his service, the work nearly ended when the governor, who had long battled health issues, died on September 21, 1909, following surgery.²⁰ Lt. Gov. Adolph Eberhart, a Republican, stepped in for the remaining term.

Select Remembrances of Reappointments²¹

Adolph O. Eberhart

Billy would miss the man who first recognized his administrative potential, but he learned that Eberhart also appreciated Billy's character and work ethic. The new governor kept him on. Still, when Eberhart ran for and won his own term, some didn't think a former aide to a Democrat should be the right-hand man to the elected Republican. Letters of support for a past Republican aide (also African American) came from government officials, lawyers, and others. Eberhart retained Billy. Not only that, he gave him a raise.²²

The present legislature has done many things that THE APPEAL is not pleased with, but there is one thing they did that

There's More to the Story:

• To learn more about Billy Williams' baseball career and later honors, see our on-line supplements at rchs.com/publishing/catalog/ramsey-county-history-spring-2023-billywilliams.

To learn more about the governors Billy Williams served, see an additional supplement at the address above or visit our *March of the Governors* podcast at <https://rchs.com/publishing/march-of-the-governors-podcasts/>.

Billy Williams Tribute Day at the St. Paul Saints

June 10, 6 pm
pre-game program

More info at
<https://www.milb.com/st-paul/schedule/2023-06>.

is quite pleasing, viz: the raising of the salary of the very efficient and gentlemanly messenger of Governor Eberhart, Mr. "Billy" Williams from \$920 to \$1,200 per year.²³

Most of Billy's duties were routine, but when issues of race arose, the messenger took special notice, including in 1913, when the Minnesota Legislature considered a bill outlawing mixed-race marriages. The year prior, Jack Johnson was back in the news—accused of violating the Mann Act—crossing state lines with a white girlfriend, whom he later married. In response to this and other events, State Representative Frank E. Nimocks introduced a bill to ban marriage between the races. According to Britts, while Billy felt that anyone who committed a crime should be held responsible for that crime, he thought this bill unfair. He'd dealt with similar attitudes as a ballplayer and in the community, and now the legislature was considering banning interracial marriage. The bill was defeated.²⁴

Of course, occasionally, there were out-of-the-ordinary challenges. For example, once, a man armed with a Bible appeared in the reception room demanding to see the governor. Frank Peterson wanted "to gain an appropriation of \$2,000,000 for a monument to 'long suffering humanity.'" Besides the odd request, Billy noticed an odd bulge in the man's hip pocket—a gun. Billy and other aides were able to remove Peterson from the building.²⁵

Winfield S. Hammond

When Winfield Hammond took office in 1915, Williams continued as the governor's gatekeeper—to the dismay of some. One paper complained:

The governor keeps to the sanctity of his chamber. No one is allowed to enter the sacred precincts without being certified by "Billy Williams," executive messenger. It's like going to see the king. The governor is retired. He fails to enthuse.²⁶

Such criticism didn't bother Billy. It meant he was doing his job. Still, his time with Hammond didn't last, as the governor died of apoplexy at year's end while in Louisiana.²⁷

Joseph A. A. Burnquist

No one could have predicted all Joseph Burnquist would face as governor from 1915 to 1921. It was the beginning of the Great Migration, as African Americans left the South, seeking livelihoods, peace, and prosperity in the North. *That* was wishful thinking—for *all* Americans, for it wasn't long before the US joined World War I. In response, Burnquist created what would become a controversial Commission of Public Safety and an affiliated Home Guard to maintain patriotism and control. But war, politics, social unrest (strikes), and public opinion are difficult to control. Add to that an influenza pandemic that decimated thousands of Minnesotans and fires in Cloquet, Duluth, and Moose Lake that scorched 1,500 square miles and killed 450 people. Then, on June 16, 1920, Billy delivered a message to his boss that left them both stunned: a white mob had lynched three Black men in Duluth the night prior.²⁸

A circus—the Jack Robinson Show—performed in the northern city on June 14. Early the following morning, a group of Negroes employed by the circus was thrown in jail, accused of rape. That night, a massive mob forced the men from their confines, conducted a mock trial, and declared three—Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie—guilty. The men were lynched to riotous approval. Burnquist, who, incidentally, was president of the St. Paul Chapter of the NAACP (white membership and leadership were common then), ordered the National Guard to the city.²⁹

Before the trials of the other accused men began in late November, Billy wrote to an African American friend—Attorney Charles Scrutchin—expressing his concerns and those of St. Paul's Black community. The NAACP hired three attorneys to represent the defendants—F. L. Barnett of Chicago, R. C. McCullough of Duluth, and Scrutchin from Bemidji. Barnett served as the lead attorney for Max Mason. Mason was tried, convicted, and sentenced to up to thirty years in prison. William Miller's trial came next. This time, Scrutchin led the defense and ripped apart the accusations, revisiting the doctor's confirmation that there was no evidence of rape. Miller's case was dismissed, as were the remaining cases, thanks to the legal team and vocal protests of Black Americans and others throughout the state

and nation. In less than a year, members of the St. Paul and Minneapolis chapters of the NAACP had helped Duluth secure its own chapter, and the state adopted an anti-lynching bill that was signed into law on April 21, 1921. Years later, Billy remembered that this was “the greatest leap forward in the Negro’s coming of age in Minnesota.”³⁰

Jacob A. O. Preus

As Billy approached nearly twenty years as messenger to the governors, newspapers continued to make note of his reappointments, although by this time, they were expected.³¹

Now in his late forties, Billy’s days of playing ball were over, but he enjoyed his half-mile walks to and from work, especially when he could watch the neighborhood boys enjoying the sport. Billy shared pointers about hitting and throwing. Of course, he attended local games when he could, but baseball wasn’t his only love. Now, when he vacationed, he’d head north to the lakes and woods to fish and hunt. When home, gardening with his family helped him forget stressful days at work.³²

And there was stress. Despite the adoption of the anti-lynching bill, the Klan remained ever present. During Preus’s term, the Ku Klux Klan was finally addressed. Many states were adopting anti-Klan legislation. Minnesota was no different. In 1923, a bill made it a misdemeanor to wear masks and regalia in public view. Still, this did little to stop member recruitment and the addition of new chapter charters (including in St. Paul) through most of the remaining decade.³³

During this time, reports in Black-owned papers and even in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* suggested Billy and the other longtime messenger, George Hoage, were asked their opinions by the governors on issues concerning race. They likely were. Likewise, members of the community, including newspaper editors, made it clear *they* expected the messengers to share *their* concerns with the governors. Both men had to walk a fine line.³⁴

Theodore Christianson

Over his years in office, Republican Gov. Theodore Christianson restructured state government, reduced expenditures, and controlled taxes. This was important given that Minnesota



found itself in the midst of a Great Depression, which led to the Wall Street Crash in October 1929.

Pressure from community and work must have been a tremendous burden to Billy. In fact, on April 21, nearly six months after the crash, he had had it. Billy returned from the capitol and told Ella he wanted to be left alone—no company, no phone calls, no messages. She followed his instructions, unwittingly turning away a dear friend—Helmer Engstrom from Minneapolis—who paid a visit to the house. Upon learning that Engstrom had been dismissed, Billy penned an apology:

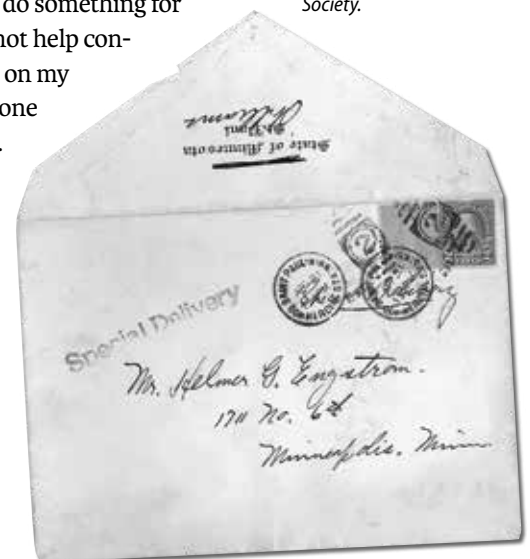
I am heartbroken to-day my “Pal” and here is the reason.

After 12 oclock yesterday I had one caller after another and each one of them with one exception was up against it, and without work and wanted me to do something for them and Helmer I cannot help confess to you that they got on my nerve and after the last one left I said to my sister . . .

I am not going to be home even if my boss calls . . . I certainly did not mean this for you my Pal . . . Please Helmer do not feel badly or unkindly toward me—only feel sorry for me—for a situation I am not in the least to blame for.³⁵

After the move to Central Avenue, Billy Williams and his sister, Ella, shared a large garden with their sister Ida’s family—the Gardner’s. Here, (L-R) Ida Lucia Gardner (Ida’s daughter), Ida Gardner, Ella Williams, and Billy Williams harvested vegetables for a family gathering. *From the Gardner Family Collection.*

Under pressure at his job and in his community in the throes of the Great Depression, Billy Williams sent a special delivery apology to friend Helmer Engstrom, who had paid a visit and had been sent away. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*





One of Billy Williams' tasks was to schedule interviews between family members and the Minnesota Board of Pardon. Board members in 1932 included (L-R): Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Samuel B. Wilson, Gov. Floyd B. Olson, and Attorney General Henry Benson, along with an unidentified secretary. Billy stands behind the group. The board met multiple times a year to hear from family members whose loved ones were incarcerated. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

Floyd B. Olson, Hjalmar Petersen, and Elmer A. Benson

In the early 1920s, a newly formed political party in Minnesota—Farmer-Labor—gained interest and traction, especially from farmers, laborers, and union members. Theirs was a rocky start. Occasionally, members were elected to local, state, and even national office. And then, in 1936, Minnesota celebrated the first of three Farmer-Labor governors, starting with Floyd B. Olson, who had his hands full as the Great Depression barreled on. It was an era of desperation, local kidnappings by gangsters, and hope—with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Olson, for his part, improved employment benefits, helped settle a number of strikes, and established public relief programs. He was fairly popular—liked by the state's citizens (for the most part)—and his right-hand man Billy Williams. He died in office in 1936 after battling cancer.³⁶

Lt. Gov. Hjalmar Petersen completed Olson's term, but the Farmer-Labor Party did not endorse him for his own term. Instead, another Farmer-Labor politician, Elmer Benson, took control at the capitol.³⁷

Benson and Billy got along—two gentlemen who loved baseball and bonded over sports. Benson had played for a time in his hometown of Appleton, Minnesota. Both were thrilled when, in 1937, boxer Joe Louis visited the capitol and the legislature, but an editorial in *The Minneapolis Journal* accused lawmakers of “wasting half an hour of good time on a sports figure.”³⁸ The *St. Paul Recorder* hit back:

... The Minneapolis Journal's editorial criticism of the legislature recessing for the

Louis visit . . . comes with poor grace. We . . . believe that the Journal would not have criticized the legislature had the color of the boxer honored been of different hue.³⁹

Billy, like most African Americans, kept a watchful eye on race relations in the US, including when it was revealed that President Roosevelt had been unaware that his US Supreme Court nominee—Hugo L. Black—had been a member of the KKK years earlier.⁴⁰ Back in Minnesota, according to a diary entry, Billy felt the new governor was paying closer attention.

Some 20 colored pastors called on the governor today re: more employment for colored people in state work. Governor Benson encouraged them by saying that he would gladly look into this matter and see what could be done.⁴¹

Harold E. Stassen

In 1939, Harold E. Stassen became the state's youngest governor at thirty-one. He cleaned house, retaining just two members of the previous administration—Billy Williams and George Hoage.⁴²

Stassen was a hard-working, energetic, down-to-business leader, but he would meet visitors in the reception room when he could. Stassen signed the Minnesota Labor Relations Act; created a mediation structure to reduce strikes; and promoted tourism. After the US Congress declared war on Japan in 1941, President Roosevelt desegregated war production plants and began to focus on fair employment practices. In Minnesota, Cecil E. Newman, the outspoken editor of the *Minneapolis Spokesman* and *St. Paul Recorder*, who often had plenty to say about the state's governors, was named director of Negro personnel at the Twin Cities Ordnance Plant. He and Ethel Maxwell Williams helped integrate nearly 1,000 Black workers at the facility. As war continued and Minnesotans stepped up to do their part, Stassen felt called to do his. He resigned as governor on April 27, 1943, and soon joined the US Navy.⁴³

As if all that came with politics and war was not enough, Billy lost his two dear sisters. Ida passed in 1937, and Ella, with whom he'd lived all his life, died five years later. Billy said that,

at times, it was a toss-up as to who was taking care of whom. Ella's absence left a void in his life. Soon, Billy accepted an invitation from his niece, Ida Hanna, to share her house at 520 Western Avenue.⁴⁴

Edward J. Thye

Upon resignation, Governor Stassen passed the reins to Lt. Gov. Edward J. Thye, who retained all staff. Billy continued to assist the State Parole Board when it met. During one meeting, Billy informed the governor of a soldier waiting in the reception room. He had no appointment but had shared his grievance with Billy, who felt it pertinent to inform the board. The soldier met the board and left with "a pardon extra-ordinary for a juvenile crime conviction." The pardon made all the difference, and according to a letter Gov. Thye wrote to Britts, the soldier later earned a "distinguished military record with decorations."⁴⁵

Early on, the governor met with Black and Jewish Minnesotans and others to better understand employment, housing, civil rights, and education concerns. History demonstrated that racial tensions escalated following World War I, and even before the end of the second war, issues and incidents continued to simmer, or, in some places, explode—including in Detroit in summer 1943. By December, Thye established an Interracial Commission tasked with strengthening the work of agencies across the state, supporting soldiers and their families returning from war, focusing on economic and business discrimination, and fighting against racial injustice by opening lines of communication between newspapers, organizations, and everyday citizens.⁴⁶

In 1945, the committee presented the governor with *The Negro Worker in Minnesota*, a sixty-two page report that documented the history of African Americans in the state, the current population, and the urgent need to continue to address housing, civil rights, and employment. It identified roadblocks among employers, citizens, press, and government entities, and suggested solutions.⁴⁷

The Later Years

Luther Youngdahl

As Thye predicted, war ended in 1945. Minnesota's twenty-sixth governor moved on to the

US Senate in 1947. Luther Youngdahl took his place. Shortly thereafter, George Hoage retired at seventy-one. He, with Billy, had served twelve governors.⁴⁸

As 1947 continued, Jackie Robinson made sports history, becoming the first African American in the twentieth century to play Major League Baseball—nearly forty-five years after Billy had once dreamed of doing the same. Of course, Robinson's journey—along with the journey of all African Americans would not be easy. The national fight for civil rights and justice marched on.

The Interracial Commission, which began under Gov. Thye, continued its work under Gov. Youngdahl and presented two additional reports—*The Negro and His Home in Minnesota* (1947) and *The Negro Worker's Progress in Minnesota* (1949).

In 1948, Youngdahl appealed to President Harry S. Truman, seeking permission to integrate the Minnesota National Guard. Youngdahl's was a long political fight with both state and federal government entities, and he often grew frustrated. Billy encouraged the governor to keep fighting. Finally, in November 1949, Youngdahl announced that the Minnesota National Guard would no longer be segregated.⁴⁹

Other successes during his term included increasing funding for public education and sanctioning a mental health act. In 1950, Minnesota voters returned Youngdahl to office for a third term. He continued to fight for fair employment practices and against racial bigotry. Youngdahl's term ended early, however, with his resignation after President Truman appointed him to the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.⁵⁰



Gov. Luther Youngdahl finalized his executive order opening the Minnesota National Guard to all. He was joined by (L-R): Major Samuel L. Ransom, who served on the governor's Interracial Commission; Brig. Gen. J. E. Nelson; Billy Williams; and Clifford Rucker. *In the St. Paul Recorder, November 25, 1949, 1.*

C. Elmer Anderson and Orville Freeman

Between 1951 and 1957, Billy served two more governors, beginning with C. Elmer Anderson, who worked to reform mental health, law enforcement, and the penal system. In 1953, Dwight Eisenhower became president. That same year, US Senator from Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy exacerbated the nation by amping up more “Red Scare” subversion and espionage charges. On a happier note, in 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Also, Billy marked fifty years as executive aide. Of course, Minnesotans knew of Billy’s devoted work, but the milestone brought national recognition, including a mention in *Ebony* magazine. That fall, prior to elections, Billy learned from Secretary of State Virginia Paul Holm that the upcoming *Minnesota Legislative Manual* would be co-dedicated to Billy.⁵¹

In January 1955, Orville Freeman took charge. The twenty-ninth governor—the state’s first Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader—signed the Minnesota Fair Employment Practices Law, something that Gov. Youngdahl had pushed for but couldn’t make happen. Billy was pleased. He was even more pleased when the legislature passed a bill that gave him a \$300 monthly pension for life.⁵²

Still, some believed Billy deserved more. In fact, the *St. Paul Recorder* noted as much as early as 1945 when people applauded the efforts of Billy and his colleague, George Hoage:

We smile and agree with the merited praise. . . . Their outstanding records as confidential and receptionist messengers and later as executive clerks have won them state-wide reputations for efficiency, tact, and good sense. Had the two men been white, we believe they would long ago have been elevated to important posts in the state government.⁵³

Years later, in reflecting specifically on Billy, Gov. Benson agreed:

. . . if it were not for the prejudice and ignorance of too many of us toward colored people, Mr. Williams would have been able to make a much greater contribution

to the state and the nation than he did.

He was a very remarkable and fine human being.⁵⁴

Paying Tribute

When Billy finally resigned in 1957, Gov. Freeman was not surprised. After all, Billy had worked well into his retirement years—on the job for over a half century. He’d backed fourteen executives, knowing what they needed and when. He’d handled routine office work, watched for would-be instigators, and, proudly served the citizens of Minnesota with small kindnesses—like when he sent a certified bottle of Minnesota soil to a soldier overseas to remember a home so far away. Over the years, Billy invited delighted students to twirl in his desk chair, brought capitol tours to life with animated stories, introduced dignitaries, including Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and actress and North Minneapolis native Hilda Simms during the Anderson administration, and, in his quiet way, likely helped advance civil rights in Minnesota when he was asked occasionally for his perspective on difficult matters. Certainly, much had improved, although he knew there was a long way to go.⁵⁵

On Billy’s last day of work, Gov. Freeman and his young son, Mike, presented Billy with a fishing pole and a personal and official introduction letter “To Whom It May Concern” that the new retiree could use on an upcoming fishing trip to Canada. In addition, the governor promised Billy that if the Milwaukee Braves won the pennant, “you and I are going to see the World Series.” That they did. When the Braves played the Yankees at Milwaukee County Stadium on October 6, the governor and Billy were in the stands for Game 4. Also that year, Billy was honored with speaking engagements, a portrait ceremony, and recognition in the *US Congressional Record*.⁵⁶

Several years later on October 23, 1963, Gov. Karl Rolvaag, with *Minneapolis Star* journalists in tow, visited Billy at his home on the occasion of the local legend’s eighty-sixth birthday (the following day). While a photographer snapped photos of Billy surrounded by walls lined with black-framed memories—images of Billy with governors, US presidents, movie and sports stars, and world leaders—Billy held tight to his



In late 1957, Billy Williams' family members, friends, and colleagues gathered for the unveiling of a portrait of Billy by Theodore Sohner, who also painted the official portraits of Gov. Thye and Gov. Youngdahl. Family in attendance included (L-R): William Hannah, Rosella Gardner Limon, William Gardner Jr., Ida Lucia Hannah, Keyah Dorothy Davis, Marie Louise Gardner Rhodes, Billy Williams, Manly Rhodes, Mildred Jones, Ralph Gardner, William Gardner III, Manly Rhodes Sr., Agnes Bailey, Evelyn Gardner Hill, and Marionne Williams. *From the Gardner Family Collection.*



Six Minnesota governors (L-R)—Edward J. Thye, Elmer L. Andersen (who served after Billy Williams retired), C. Elmer Anderson, Elmer A. Benson, Sitting Gov. Karl Rolvaag, and Luther W. Youngdahl—celebrated the life of their colleague on a chilly November day at Willwerscheid and Peters Mortuary. Former Gov. Hjalmar Petersen also attended, although he is not pictured here. *Photo by Dwight Miller, Minneapolis Star Tribune, November 17, 1963, courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*

signature cigar and happily shared stories with those who were there to celebrate with him. Three weeks later on November 13, Billy died in his sleep.⁵⁷

The tributes were many then and, remarkably, continue seventy years after Billy's death. This one by former Minnesota Attorney General Miles Lords in 2005 sums up the aide's work well, "He was the most important person at the state Capitol . . . the personification of state government. Gracious, welcom[ing], courteous, and ebullient."⁵⁸

William F. "Billy" Williams was a true star—on the ballfield and at the Minnesota State Capitol, and it seems he'll never be forgotten.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Billy Williams' family members who helped with this story: Rosella Limon, Evelyn Hill, and Dr. Joe Gothard. Thanks, also, to Mary Britts.

Frank M. White is a Rondo neighborhood elder and historian, a retired City of Richfield recreation manager, and a high school and college sports official. He serves as the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) coordinator for the Minnesota Twins. White is a former governor-appointed board member of the Minnesota State High School League and the author of They Played for the Love of the Game: Untold Stories of Black Baseball in Minnesota (2016).

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Faith, Advocacy, & Service

A Snapshot of Ramsey County's Welfare Workers in the Great War

JOHANNES R. ALLERT, PAGE 22



Recognizing the growing crises for struggling and, sometimes, unhoused veterans following World War I, Adj. Charles Nelson and his wife, Adj. Anna Nelson, spearheaded the effort to open a local Salvation Army hostel at 317 Robert Street in 1919. They were among thousands of welfare workers who shared faith and hope with the nation's brave warriors through prayer, music, and service. *Courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society.*