

Williams, Mabel: Standing Up To The Klan ^[1]

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Mabel Williams: Standing Up To The Klan

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 11/14/1999. Copyrighted.
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I interviewed Mabel Williams two years after her legendary husband's death. They both grew up in Monroe at a time when lynchings were common and many things that we take for granted were marked "white only." With Mabel by his side for 49 years, Robert F. Williams became one of the most heroic and influential activists of the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks gave a eulogy at his Monroe funeral, and world leaders sent condolences.

Now North Carolina native Tim Tyson has written a nationally acclaimed new biography that underscores Williams' place in history. [Radio Free Dixie](#) ^[3] tells the dramatic story of how Williams organized the nation's most militant NAACP chapter in the late 1950s. Whenever the Ku Klux Klan tried to terrorize the Monroe black community, Williams and a corps of black veterans were waiting with M-1 rifles and machine guns.

Williams was a folk hero to many black Southerners. But his advocacy of "armed self-reliance" challenged the nonviolent philosophy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and prompted the national NAACP to repudiate Williams. In 1961 the Williams family was forced to flee to Cuba and China for eight years.

Mabel Williams was always by her husband's side. Once she even took up the family shotgun and saved his life. When I talked with her in Monroe recently, she remembered not only the heroic freedom fighter, but the man she loved.

In Mabel Williams's words:



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My sister had married Robert's best friend, so when Robert came home from the military I was there and in and out a lot.

He stood out in a crowd. He was very proud and self-assured, you know, and muscular. He was a handsome, tall, dashing young man, sweet and loving. He wrote poetry, and he read constantly. Oh, I fell madly in love with him.

Robert became president of the Monroe NAACP around '56. He recruited among just ordinary common folks in the street. After that, these white folks would call and talk to the children or Daddy John or me: "We're going to kill you or blow up By that time, Robert was going down to help protect Dr. Perry's house. Dr. Perry was vice-president of the NAACP, and the Klan threatened to "blow him away." The men organized to defend Dr. Perry's home. They dug trenches and sandbags. Our friend, Father MacAvoy, a Catholic priest, said, "You all do the shooting and I'll do the praying." He'd stay up all night and read Scripture and bring coffee to the fellows. This went on for weeks.

We knew how to use guns, but we never had to shoot anybody. We slept in shifts at home because of the telephone threats, the hate mail. People would come and sit with us. They'd take turns, sleep on the floor, sleep on the couch. And so the Klan was very strong in Union County. They had 5,000 people at one rally. They came into the neighborhood on several occasions. I remember one night the fellows got out into the street and shot above their cars. You could hear cars so we had lots of support of the neighbors because they were very proud that Robert was standing up. And he was getting the young people to stand up with him. The older fellows taught them how to shoot but also taught them that they, hopefully, everybody in the neighborhood rose to the situation, especially the old women. Robert always was a person who would go and talk with the older people and learn from them, and listen to them. They knew that. Even Mrs. Crowder, a neighbor. When Robert first got to be the president of the NAACP, some of his old classmates would cross the street uptown to keep from speaking to him. They were afraid. But the older people saw this young man that Emma Williams - one of the best I know about three attempts on his life. Once, several cars blocked him off at Hilltop. The people - it just seemed like hundreds and hundreds - were ready to lynch him that day. They were talking about "pour gasoline on the niggers, kill them. The police were just directing traffic and pretending they didn't see - until Rob stepped out with his long rifle. They came running and tried to disarm him. And he would not be disarmed. When he went to put a bullet in the chamber, the people thought, People like to blow up the fact that Robert was a violent man or believed in violence. But he didn't believe in doing violence other than in defense of his own. The powers-that-be were much more threatened by that gun than they were by the idea. Should there be a monument to Robert here in Monroe? Well, Robert liked to tell this story. A black woman is driving down Martin Luther King Avenue with her little boy, and he says, "Mama, who is Martin Luther King?" She tells him, "Well, he's dead. Then they pass Medgar Evers High School, and the boy asks, "Mama, who is Medgar Evers?" And she tells him, "Well, son, he was a black man who stood up for justice, but they killed him." And pretty soon that little boy starts to get the idea. "That is why there will never be a Robert F. Williams monument," Robert said. He had a long life, a long fruitful life. He loved his people. He struggled for people, not only in Monroe, but all over the world. Then he went home to live out his days. Rob believed that everybody is born for a purpose. Some people just eat and sleep and die. They never have any causes: maybe just to get money, have a good time, play. They have nothing that they're willing to die for. But if you take the s

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening to A Change](#) ^[4]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[5] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

Tyson, Timothy B. 1999. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the roots of Black power*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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