

Williams, Cratis Dearl ^[1]

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by H. G. Jones, 1996

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Cratis Dearl Williams, [folklorist](#) ^[2], [ballad collector](#) ^[3] and singer, linguist, professor, and college administrator, rose from humble beginnings in the Caines Creek community of Big Sandy Valley in eastern Kentucky's Lawrence County to become a specialist in the culture of the region and win the sobriquet "Mr. Appalachia." Runty in body and backwoodsy in appearance and speech, young Williams endured the condescension of his more affluent classmates at Louisa, a boarding school, to become the first person from his community to earn a high school diploma. He later credited this ridicule with his early interest in the history, [folklore](#) ^[2], ballads, songs, hymns, and tales of his region. He was only seventeen when the *Louisian*, a local newspaper, on 12 Dec. 1927 published his essay titled "Why a Mountain Boy Should Be Proud." He dedicated his career to that proposition.

The principal of the school, encouraging the student to "rise above his background," helped him get work at little Cumberland College, but after a year financial considerations forced Williams to return home and teach in a one-room school while, despite the depression, simultaneously taking classes at the University of Kentucky, from which he was graduated in 1933. As teacher and principal at Blaine High School during the next four years, he took graduate courses and received an M.A. degree from the university with a thesis on the ballads and songs of eastern Kentucky. For three more years he was the English teacher and principal at Louisa High School. Fired from that job because of his openness and candor—characteristics of his upbringing—Williams held menial jobs until he was appointed English critic teacher at the Demonstration High School at Appalachian State Teachers College in 1942. Four years later he joined the faculty of the college as teacher of English, speech, folklore, and dramatics. After a dozen years as a popular professor, he became director of the graduate school, which was named for him, and for a few months he served as acting chancellor of the college, by then renamed [Appalachian State University](#) ^[4].

His parents, Curtis [*sic*] and Mona Whitt Williams, lived on a farm owned by Cratis's grandfather, David Williams, one of the last legal distillers in Kentucky. This grandfather epitomized the true spirit of the mountaineer and was often a subject of Professor Williams's stories that regaled and informed those who attended his classes and lectures, heard him on radio and television, and read about him in the press. Proud that he was descended from Indian fighters, long hunters, veterans of the [American Revolution](#) ^[5], [Tory](#) ^[6] escapees, refugees from the Whiskey Rebellion, and mountain feudists, he considered himself a "complete mountaineer" whose scholarly pursuits only reinforced his respect for the independent people often ridiculed by his elitist colleagues. Cratis Williams believed that all people, including his, should be judged within the context of their time, opportunity, good or bad fortune, and full character. Thus he fought the stereotype of mountaineers while celebrating many of their peculiarities. Although impeccable in his scholarly use of the English language, he found music in the expressions of the unschooled. "They had unique ways of saying things," he once said. "It glittered and sparkled with colorful language of all kinds. It was rich in metaphor. And yet, nowhere in the English-speaking world have 13 million people been made to feel so ashamed of their speech."

Throughout his career Williams spoke, wrote, and sang about the heritage of Appalachia. Long before the subject became fashionable in other universities, he collected materials and laid foundations for an Appalachian studies program at the Boone institution, and he was a consultant to other universities as they too began offering similar work. He helped found the Appalachian Consortium with its emphasis on publications relating to the region. He chose [New York University](#) ^[7] for his doctoral work, and his Ph.D. dissertation, "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction," was hailed as a pacesetter in the study of Appalachian literature. The 1,661-page tome was abridged and serialized in volume 3 of *Appalachian Journal*. A Founders Day citation from the university for outstanding scholarship reminded Williams of his long journey from a remote hollow in Kentucky to an academic life in New York City.

In accepting the Oliver Max Gardner Award in 1973 from the Board of Governors of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[8] for "contributions to the human race," Williams explained that a synthesis of folk culture of the mountains and humanistic traditions of Western civilization inspired him to devote most of his career to "the salvaging, perpetuation, and interpretation of the relatively neglected heritage of thirteen million Southern Highlanders whose struggle with grinding poverty, self-seeking outriders of economic exploitation, and political compromise had eroded their self-respect, made them ashamed of their heritage, subverted their ethical values, and left them only half articulate about their own history and traditions." That he succeeded is attested to by other awards, including honorary doctoral degrees from [Berea](#) ^[9] and Cumberland Colleges, Marshall University, Morehead State University, and the College of Idaho. He died one day before he was to receive still another honorary doctorate, this one from Appalachian, the university that he had served for four decades.

Williams valiantly fought the mispronunciation of the name of his native region that infiltrated through radio, television, and academicians after World War II. He pointed out that the word was derived from the Apalachee Indians, who would have

been insulted to have a syllable in their name pronounced with a long "a." The new chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission ^[10] quickly discarded the errant pronunciation when Williams courageously told him that if he wanted to maintain credibility among mountaineers whom the commission was created to help, he must first "to learn how to pronounce Appalachia and Appalachian."

He married first Sylvia Graham, who died in 1942. On 31 July 1949 his marriage to Elizabeth Lingerfelt received widespread publicity as the first wedding in the new town of Levittown on New York's Long Island. They had two children, David Cratis and Sophie. Williams's ashes were returned for burial in the Williams family cemetery in his native Caines Creek community. At a memorial service his family and friends carried out his final request, "Remember me with joy and laughter," by sharing "Cratis stories" that have become a part of the culture to which he devoted his career.

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Additional Resources:

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Subjects:

Biographies ^[15]

Culture ^[16]

Educators ^[17]

Folklore and Legends ^[18]

Music ^[19]

Musicians ^[20]

Universities and colleges ^[21]

Writers, journalists, and editors ^[22]

Authors:

Jones, H. G. ^[23]

Origin - location:

Watauga County [24]

Boone [25]

Appalachian State University [26]

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