

Private Gus Williams (1892-1918)

Augustus “Gus” Williams was born in Jacksonville, Illinois on September 22nd, 1892. He was the son of Moses and Suthenie “Thenie” (Smith) Williams, who were married on December 24, 1890 in Morgan County, IL.¹ Moses and Thenie had six other children: Eugene, Harold, Howard, Melvin, Corrine, and Ruth.² Gus’s father was born on February 18, 1865 in Virden, Illinois.³ His mother was born in Jacksonville, Illinois in about 1871.⁴

Gus and his family moved to Bloomington in about 1900 and first resided at 209 West Grove Street.⁵ A few years later the family moved to 704 South Mason Street which became their permanent residence.⁶ As a young man, Gus worked a couple of different jobs though he did not have many possibilities for work during the early 20th century due to local racial discrimination. In 1907 he was listed in the Bloomington-Normal City Directory as working at the Continental Pork Packing Plant. By 1909 he was working as a cook at the Illinois House hotel, the finest hotel in town. The Illinois House hotel was located at 201-213 West Jefferson Street.⁷ According to Bill Bacon who was another black cook at the Illinois House hotel, this was a good place to work.⁸ At the Illinois House hotel, the kitchen staff was mixed but all other hotel staff, including waiters and maids, were white. Williams would not have been allowed to even enter the dining room area. He worked there for seven years until he enlisted in the Eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry in 1917 and served during World War I.

The Eighth Illinois Infantry was made up of African American men mostly from Bloomington; however, others were added from Pontiac, Clinton, and other nearby towns. It was also the first unit of African American soldiers to be led entirely by African American officers.⁹ Upon the outbreak of WWI, the Eighth was federalized by President Woodrow Wilson and became part of the 370th United States Infantry. The 370th U.S. Infantry was an all black regiment. Williams served as a private and was part of Company H. They left Bloomington for Peoria in July of 1917. They remained in Peoria for ten weeks before going to Camp Logan in Houston, Texas on October 12th, 1917.

Racial tensions were high when the unit arrived in Houston. Prior to their arrival a riot had occurred between 156 African American soldiers (members of the 24th U.S. Infantry) stationed in Houston and the white civilians living in Houston over a rumor that an African American soldier had been killed by white police officers and against the racial discrimination the soldiers already suffered from. Four African American soldiers and fifteen white civilians were killed during the riot. All 156 African Americans soldiers were court-martialed for murder and thirteen of those convicted were hanged.¹⁰ Because of this incident, the white citizens were hostile towards the members of the newly arrived Eighth and tightened the already strict Jim Crow segregation laws that existed in Houston. The members of the Eighth were not allowed to

Marriage Index, Illinois Regional Archives Depository,
<http://www.ilsos.gov/GenealogyMWeb/MarriageSearchServlet>

E.E. Pierson and J.L. Hasbrouck. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*. (Bloomington: McLean County War Publishing Co., 1919) 107

The Pantagraph

The Pantagraph

1900 United States Census

⁶ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1904-1917*

⁷ *Bloomington and Normal City Directory, 1911*, 335

⁸ Interview with Billy Bacon by Reginald Whittaker, 1999

Shawn SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” 1998, p.8

James Leiker, “Houston Mutiny of 1917,” <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/houston-mutiny-1917>

ride in streetcars and were looked down upon because they refused to respect segregated facilities. It was wise for the men of the Eighth to be careful during their stay in the Deep South so that they (and the other African American soldiers stationed there) would be able to avoid any further incidents and complete their training before being sent overseas.¹¹ No further incidents would occur due in fact to the very capable and disciplined African American officers that lead these soldiers. In March of 1918 the 370th Infantry went to Newport News, Virginia. They were then shipped overseas and arrived in France on April 22nd, 1918.¹²

The 370th was part of the 93rd Division, one of two all African-American divisions of troops sent to fight during the War 5 Td(ght)-2 (dght)-2ht tapthg ther-0.008 Tw 8.04 -0 0 8.04 340.92 630.6 T57

“Partridges” because of their cockiness and pride in battle.²⁰ Whatever nickname they went by, they clearly demonstrated their abilities as soldiers and fought valiantly in battle up until the very last day of the War.

Because of their bravery during combat, the 370th Infantry was highly praised by General Eugène Mittlhouser, the commander of the 36th division of the French Army.²¹ Many men in the 370th received medals and awards from both the French and Americans for their distinguishable service as well. All totaled, the unit received almost 100 medals including 21 American Distinguished Service Crosses, several Croix de Guerre (France’s highest honor), 68 French War Crosses, and one French Distinguished Service Medal. Many of those men who were decorated for their service gave their lives as well. Twenty percent, or 96 men, were killed in the 370th.²²

Around 1922 the American Legion post for African-American veterans was founded in Bloomington by several members of the 370th. Because of racial discrimination, African Americans were barred from joining “white” American Legion posts so they formed their own post. In honor of Gus Williams and John Redd, (another fellow soldier from the 370th U.S. Infantry who died in France), the African American Legion post named their post the Redd-Williams Post No. 163.

By: Lisa Dretske, 2009

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²⁰ Allison Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, August 26, 2005

²¹ Pierson and Hasbrouch. *McLean County and The World War, 1917-1918*, 203