

The 90-Second Autobiography of Horace Randall Williams

I was born (1951) and mostly raised in Chambers County, Alabama, a place which also produced Joe Louis, one of our country's greatest black athletes, and Cotton Tom Heflin, one of our greatest racist demagogues. You figure it.

My people, on both sides of the family, were mostly dirt farmers and cotton mill hands. They married young and had big families; I have fifty first cousins.

In due time, I graduated from LaFayette High School and enrolled (1970) in Samford University, a small, conservative, Baptist institution in Birmingham, Alabama.

I married. Young. So was she. It was the thing to do.

I intended to become a lawyer but liked English and then history and then journalism and became editor of the school newspaper. A conflict with the school president over the definition of news cost me my scholarship in my senior year and it took another 37 years to graduate.

Meanwhile I became a professional journalist and worked as a reporter and editor and publisher for daily and weekly newspapers. I also freelanced; I do not recommend it as a career.

I had been raised as a racist and a religious fundamentalist but for reasons I cannot fully articulate I had abandoned both of these philosophies. I had become — yes — a liberal.

I went to work (1976) for a liberal organization, the Southern Poverty Law Center. I produced the Center's publications and investigated cases. I was almost a lawyer after all.

I had my mid-life crisis early. I divorced. I took a leave of absence from my job. I extended it. I moved to North Carolina to work with the Institute for Southern Studies.

I moved to Georgia to help start a newspaper. The newspaper went bust. I freelanced some more; I still don't recommend it.

The Southern Poverty Law Center said my leave of absence had lasted long enough. I went back and organized the Klanwatch Project (1980). I watched and wrote about racists. I was good at it. I understood them.

I could only watch racists for so long. They eventually depressed me. It would have happened to anybody. I quit my job (1986).

I went into business for myself. I wrote and edited and designed newsletters, magazines, newspapers, and books. I began a nonfiction book about contemporary racists. I also began a book of fiction about an Alabama governor. A short governor. Sometimes I still have trouble separating the two books.

Some years ago I published a book for another writer (1989). One book led to two. Then four. Then ten. I became a book editor, designer, and publisher. Sometimes I turn ink into magic. Other times I just murder trees.

More than nine hundred books later, the manuscripts keep coming. Everyone I ever met wants me to publish her book. Oprah will love it, he says.

I like my job. Deep down, I am still looking for the heart of Dixie. The search will take time. Meantime I can work any seven days of the week I choose. I intend to keep doing this till the money runs out. I tell my sons, one day this will all belong to you. They have always known to laugh when I say this. So it goes.

I still live in Alabama.