

CLEOPHAS WILLIAMS: My Life Story in the ILWU Local 10

A BOOK REVIEW
By Gloria Verdieu

When I received this beautiful book from Delores Lemon-Thomas and Clarence Thomas, I could not wait to begin reading it.

I had the honor of meeting and talking with Sadie Williams, wife of Cleophas Williams, on two occasions. Once in Oakland at her home at the Cleophas Williams Rose Garden dedication shortly after the book “Mobilizing in Our Own Name: Million Worker March” was published and again about a year later at the ILWU Pacific Coast Pensioners Association convention in Long Beach, Calif.

Each time she was surrounded by ILWU Local 10 members engaging and embracing her presence with love and respect. I was surprised when I went to introduce myself in Long Beach, and she said, “I remember you,” and opened her arms for a hug.

In Long Beach, Delores let me glimpse some of the scanned pages of Cleophas Williams’ handwritten journal. I held it in my hand and immediately began to read it. Delores left the journal with me for a little while.

As I examined it, I was impressed with his handwriting or, more formally, his penmanship. There are a few samples of his handwriting in the book, one on page 52 at the beginning of Chapter 2, “A Longshore Worker’s Life Story.”

Delores told me about Clarence’s intention of editing and publishing Cleophas Williams’ story. The pages would have to be scanned, which required them to keep the original transcript for a while. It was hard for Mrs. Sadie Williams to part with it, even for a short time, but she could rest assured that it was in good hands. This journal is a treasure that will be valued for generations to come.

I read through the book quickly the first time and reread it, reflecting on my own life and making connections. I was also brought up in the South, and one of the many things that resonated with me was when Williams wrote about the Booker T. Washington High School that he and his sister attended. The school was “built by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which builds schools for Black Students throughout the South where there were no Black schools.”

The segregated school my eight siblings and I attended, Carver School, named after George Washington Carver, was built in 1915 using the same fund. It was renamed Carver-Hill School in 1955 after Reverend Edward Hill, who fought for well-funded schools for Black students.

There is much to be learned from this biography; the history of how Cleophas Williams was elected by popular vote the first African American president of ILWU Local 10, the most militant, progressive union in the United States, if not the world.

In the book, Cleophas explains that he was discharged from the army due to a knee injury after serving three months and 19 days. He heard a fellow “telling a barber that he was a Longshoreman; pay was good, and it had peacetime possibilities.” So he applied, followed the steps needed, and was hired with no idea that, in his words, “I was about to embark on a journey that not only brought me employment, but a place in the sun that I would have never dreamed of.”

Williams knew nothing about the ILWU when he was hired, but he was a fast learner and followed all the rules. After the 6-month probationary period, he was promoted to full union membership. Williams worked as a rank-and-file worker



Gloria Verdieu with Sadie Williams.

for 15 years, working out of the hall, attending union meetings, enrolling in the California Labor School, and just continuing to learn before deciding to run for president of ILWU.

Williams acknowledged the shoulders of those ancestors who paved the way and those that gave him much-needed support; apologized to people he hurt along the way. He took responsibility for his mistakes, not blaming his parents or the tragic experiences of growing up in the “Jim Crow” South.

Williams was a courageous working-class organizer, a fighter for social justice and the rights of workers nationally and internationally. He believed the struggle for social justice, equality, and dignity was a workers’ struggle.

I highly recommend employed, un-employed, organized, and unorganized workers read Cleophas Williams’ “My Life Story in the International Longshore & Waterhouse Union Local 10.”

The book is available through:
millionworker march.com/cleophas-williams-book

