

## **My Life in the Shadow of the Klan**

**By William Thompson**

My name is Bill Thompson (or “Tom” to my family in Martinsburg). I am a recovering white racist.

My family roots in Martinsburg and Berkeley County stretch back for generations. As a white person born in the late 1940's, my childhood and youth were spent in the shadow of segregation and formal discrimination against persons of color. While I lived in various places while growing up, “home” was and always has been – Martinsburg.

My paternal great-great grandfather, Samuel Jasper Thompson (1831-1914), was a soldier in the Berkeley Border Guards, a Confederate unit of the Army of Northern Virginia commanded by General Robert E. Lee. My father, William E. Thompson, was a career US Air Force officer who initially joined the military during World War II.

My mother's maiden name was Wilson. My Wilson ancestors were originally from Back Creek Valley and apparently were Unionists during the Civil War. My mother's parents moved to Martinsburg in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. My mother, sister and I lived off-and-on with my maternal (Wilson) grandparents because of the postings of my father overseas.

My earliest memories include the certain knowledge and understanding that my mother's father – Everett Stover Wilson (1899-1968) – was, or had been, a primary leader in the Ku Klux Klan in the Eastern Panhandle area.

My grandfather Wilson was always a Republican, and – as the son of apparent Unionists – his leadership of the Klan has been something of a mystery to me since the Republican Party of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was still supposedly the “party of Lincoln”. More on this later.

Why did I know my grandfather Wilson was the leader of the Klan? Because stored in plain sight in the attic of my grandparents' house on the 300 block of South Queen Street were Klan flags, banners, sheets and cone-hat uniforms, and other Klan paraphernalia. Of particular interest to me as a kid was the Rolodex that included the membership of the Klan. It was a big Rolodex that had at least a hundred or so cards on it. I remember that when I was about 10 years old I used to go up into the attic, play with the Klan stuff, and flip through the Rolodex. There were many names of people I knew, or of people who were well-known in the area. Some 65+ years later, my memory cannot recall with any degree of certainty particular names from those Rolodex cards. And, even if I could remember with certainty any of them, my purpose here is not to

“out” others who have ancestors connected with the Klan. That is for others to decide for themselves.

Not all of the Klan paraphernalia was stored in the attic. Even the desk in my grandparents’ dining room had apparently come from the Klan office.

While there was no question about the heritage of the Klan in my mother’s family – it was in plain sight – nobody talked about it. I had a weird little feeling deep in my core that nobody talked about it because they were either hiding or denying things, but I never had the courage to ask anyone. My grandfather died in 1968.

As I was growing up, both sides of my family encouraged my cousins and me to play as make-believe Confederate soldiers. I remember once setting up a pretend “checkpoint” with one of my cousins near my paternal grandparents’ house in Inwood. We closed the gate to the mill truck entrance, hoisted a Confederate flag, donned our Confederate caps, and stopped the trucks coming through until they asked for our permission to pass. All the drivers were white, and it was almost like the Lost Cause hadn’t been lost after all. Everyone involved thought this kind of behavior was great fun.

I grew up with a print of the five Confederate flags hanging on my bedroom wall. When my own son was born in the early 1980’s, my mother gifted the flags print to my wife with the instructions that she continue the tradition of hanging the flag print in my son’s bedroom. My wife and I declined.

As a kid I was taught that Black people weren’t really people like “we” are. I was taught that as long as “they” stayed in the places and roles assigned to them, the natural order of things was not being disturbed.

But there were one or two cracks in my own wall of segregation in 1950’s Martinsburg. The most important of these was Miss Queenie Williams.

When I was playing with my best friend on the 300 block of South Queen Street, Miss Queenie used to pass by on her way (I believe) to and from St. Joe’s Catholic School, which was further down the block. While I don’t know for certain, my recollection is that she was engaged in doing some work at the Catholic school.

Miss Queenie was a strikingly handsome woman, always dressed to the nines, and extremely poised. Every time she walked by, she would stop for a moment to chat with “Boy” and me. (It is perhaps the supreme irony that my white friend from 312 South Queen (Hensell Ruark Jr.) was nicknamed “Boy.”) Ms. Queenie did not fit the stereotype I was taught to expect regarding how the “colored” were supposed to behave. She treated us with love and motherly interest even though she wasn’t the maid. She was

not part of the “system.” I can even remember my grandparents speaking with respect about her.

As a 6-year-old kid, I just knew that Ms. Queenie treated Boy and me the way other warm and supportive adults in our lives did. In a childlike and innocent way, my experiences of Ms. Queenie were the germ of what ultimately became my reckoning with the Original Sin of White Supremacy.

I also remember a very old Black man (Mr. Jett?) who lived alone in a shack on Spring Street down the hill behind my grandparents’ place. Boy and I used to talk with him. I believe he had been born into slavery. He was a wonderful story-teller. We learned something about how it was for Black people before the Civil War. I can sadly no longer remember the substance of the stories he told us 6-year-olds. But there was a real emotional impact from what he told us about how it had been.

When integration started in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, my family was living in Summerville, South Carolina because my father was stationed at Charleston Air Force Base. Shortly after we moved to Summerville after living in France for three years, the Black house cleaner that my mother hired started bringing her daughter with her when she was working. Her daughter was about my age.

The maid’s daughter and I discovered that we had a shared interest in collecting stamps, and we began to trade stamps and hang around together while her mom was cleaning the house. One day while they were there, my mother returned from an errand and discovered us two 10-year-olds in my room talking about stamps. The maid was fired, and I never saw the girl again.

To this day, I wonder whether somehow I had “unlearned” or just forgotten about structural racism while living in the integrated American military community in Europe. In any event, I was again taught the line never to cross. But I knew deep in my heart that there was something wrong going on.

After 7<sup>th</sup> grade in the local South Carolina public school, I was sent in 1960 to an all-white academy called Pinewood School where I attended 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades.

When my parents were moving back to Martinsburg in about 1963 after my father retired from military service, my grandfather Wilson (who was not a wealthy man) offered to pay for me to board at the Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania. No one ever said that my schooling after 7<sup>th</sup> grade was about avoiding integration, but I believe that was one primary purpose, particularly on my grandfather Wilson’s part.

Fast-forward to about 1966. I was a college student. I told my parents and grandparents that I wanted to get a summer job working as an intern in Congress on

Capitol Hill. My grandfather looked me straight in the eye, and said with great certainty: "Ok." I could not figure out why he seemed to have this absolute confidence that I would get a job.

A short time later, my grandfather told me to contact Joe Owens, who was an assistant to Senator Robert F. Byrd of West Virginia. I made the call and was told that I had a position in the Senate Print Shop and would also be doing some work in Byrd's office. Again, no one said how that all happened, but I knew that my grandfather had a connection with Senator Byrd because my father told me that Byrd was also active in the Klan before World War II. So, my first job was a direct result, not of any competitive process or determination of merit, but rather because I was a beneficiary of the Klan network. I went to Capitol Hill and met Senator Byrd shortly after reporting for work.

In 1968, by the time my grandfather died, I had begun to reject the obvious indicia of racism and decided to retrieve the Klan stuff from my grandparents' attic and donate all of it to an anti-Klan museum which at the time I believe existed in Alabama. I made the mistake of telling my mother my intentions. When I got home for summer break, everything related to the Klan in my grandparents' home had disappeared. I had lost an opportunity to make an important contribution to documenting the history of the Klan in Eastern West Virginia.

And, as for the curious fact that my grandfather was a Republican Klan leader in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, I have been greatly aided by the research of Connie Park Rice, Ph. D., of WVU, whose dissertation on the life and legacy of Martinsburg civil rights pioneer J. R. Clifford ("For men and measures: the life and legacy of civil rights pioneer J.R. Clifford" (2007) <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/3953>) explains very clearly how by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Republican Party in the Eastern Panhandle had reverted to racism and White Supremacy and was practically indistinguishable from the Southern Democrats in that regard. Anyone who wants to learn more about the struggle for Black people's rights in Martinsburg and Berkeley County between the Civil War and World War II should read Dr. Rice's work.

After college, I never have lived in Martinsburg. For the past 35 years or so, my wife and I and our children and grandchildren have lived in the D.C. area.

On February 17, 2024 the Martinsburg – Berkeley County NAACP held the premiere of the documentary on the Sumner-Ramer School. While we were waiting for the film to begin, I had the opportunity to speak with Leonard Harris. Leonard revealed to me that Paul B. "Buck" Martin, who was the editor of the *Martinsburg Journal* during the 1960's, confided in Leonard that he had been a member of the Klan. Martin is a

relative on my father's side of the family. So, as I have suspected, my Klan roots are even deeper and wider than I knew growing up.

At the documentary premiere I was asked to be part of the panel that answered questions on stage after the film had been shown. It was at that time that I was given the opportunity to share for the first time publicly the facts regarding my family's involvement in the Klan. It was a privilege as well as scary to be given the opportunity by the leadership of the NAACP to speak the Truth to our community.

There are many forms of bondage and enslavement. One of them that afflicts white people is the curse of racism and White Supremacy. While white people generally do not see ourselves as "victims" of racism, the fact is that we are.

Our victimhood is nothing like the daily humiliation that we have visited on people of color for the past 400 years in North America, but it is bondage just the same. Our own humanity is lessened as a direct result of our absolutely illogical and unsupported belief, whether it be conscious or unconscious, that "we" are "better" than "they" are. Most of us whites are held firmly in the shackles of prejudice.

As any person in recovery, I need three things. First, I need to confront my problem. Second, I need the help and guidance of others. Third, I need the support of a caring and intentional community. That is why I joined the Martinsburg – Berkeley County NAACP.

I cannot and will not disown my family of origin. There was much love in our family. Denying that truth would be as disingenuous as denying the Truth that my family was also committed to White Supremacy and shamefully mistreated African Americans and other persons of color for generations.

That is also why I hope that this community can learn the truth of the history of the existence and activities of the local Ku Klux Klan, particularly during segregation and structural White Supremacy.

Racism and White Supremacy are the Original Sins of American society. Telling the Truth and being vulnerable to the reality of the terrible consequences of that Truth for African Americans and other people of color is the only way to break the cycle of hatred, discrimination and mistrust that descends through the generations.

If we are to continue to make progress in realizing the promise of true tolerance and democracy, white people have to face squarely the reality and the consequences of 400 years of subjugation of Black and Brown peoples in this society.

There is a better future for our children and grandchildren if we are brave enough to grasp it. That starts with acceptance of the facts of what has happened, and what continues to happen. If we do not understand the full Truth of that history, we may well be condemned to repeat it.

I hope others, particularly white people, are moved to tell the Truth about the Ku Klux Klan and other aspects of racism and White Supremacy in this community. Speaking the Truth is a healing experience for white people, but also for the entire community.

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Note: The Martinsburg-Berkeley County NAACP, Branch 3242 invites you to contribute to the work of our project entitled: "SEEKING TRUTH: White Supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia since World War I."

If you have any information about the Ku Klux Klan in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia and would like to share it with the committee, please send an email to: [seekingtruthepwv@gmail.com](mailto:seekingtruthepwv@gmail.com).