

# The Williams Bequest

Philip Davis

January 1967

On a snowy Tuesday afternoon several Januaries ago, with no business around and less inspiration, I was thinking of shutting up the office and going fishing, when I got a call from the President's secretary.

"The Committee on Special Benefactions will meet tomorrow morning at ten," she informed me.

"Will Himself be there?" I said.

"Indeed he will, and he says for you to show."

"O.K. O.K. I'll cancel my trip to Washington. Or was it Delhi."

At ten the next morning, to the tune of the university carillon, I, together with Professors A through H, my co-committee members, filed into the Council Room.

Himself was already there, sitting on the throne, and shuffling papers.

"What's up, Doc," I said, meaning by this to establish a working level of shabby but genteel confidence in the boss.

It emerged from the papers that were being shuffled that a Mrs, Amy Williams, 102, the late inhabitant of that beautiful four story brick at the corner of College and Maple, had passed on without heirs and had willed the house to the University.

"The house is fine," Himself said. "In fact, I've been working on getting that house for sixteen years now. But there's a joker attached. Listen."

And he quoted from the will.

"It is my explicit wish that in taking title to the house, the University devote the house to a display of my late husband Frederic C. Williams' collection of overalls, and that this collection be maintained in perpetuity as a public museum."

"Read that again," said Professors B through H in surprised unison. Professor A, who was party to some private information, did not join in. Neither did I. I am used to the strange and the wonderful.

This time, the President paraphrased the will. "It says here that we get the house and a fairly considerable sum for its upkeep, if we take that damn collection of overalls that this nut made, put them under glass, and open the whole thing up to the public."

Looks of consternation from Professors B through H. Professor A took the floor.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, I think I can explain this to your satisfaction. It appears that Mr. Williams' father, a Mr. George W. Williams (1835-1903) worked his way up the lumber business from dinner pail to large house on the hill. Mr. Frederic C. Williams, the late husband of the late deceased Mrs. Amy Williams, and successor to his father in the lumber and contracting business, was ever mindful of his father's humble beginnings, and in honor of his father, made a collection of workmen's overalls. This collection is of considerable historical value. It extends from about 1588 to 1927. Mr. Williams left no stone unturned, no trunk unopened. He travelled around the country and in foreign parts collecting overalls. The collection is said to consist of 752 separate items, many of them in mint condition, so to speak. It is said to be the largest such collection in the world, though we have not yet had an answer from the Curator of the State Museum of the Glorious Class

Struggle in Leningrad where there is reputed to be a modest collection.

As I have already pointed out, the collection is of considerable interest to labor historians, historians of technological processes, and to art and costume historians. The collection appears to be particularly strong in Florentine overalls of the early seventeenth century, but, I'm sorry to have to report, distressingly weak in British items from about 1825-40."

"Thank you, Mr. Abercrombie," the President said. "I couldn't have put it more succinctly myself. Now the problem that we must confront directly is whether the University should accept the gift under these limiting circumstances. I'd like to have some discussion."

Professor A reiterated his appraisal of the collection and said that in his humble opinion, the University had acquired a real jewel in the Williams bequest.

Professor B observed that there was a considerable tendency to use Universities as a device for cheap immortality. He added that the late Mrs. Williams was probably too close fisted to call up the rag man.

Professor C remarked sourly that the site had already been promised to his department for the new Center for Reticulated Syndromes.

The President snapped out an answer to C: "This property has never belonged to, nor has it ever been promised to the University. If there was talk about a Center for Retarded Sinecures or what have you, it was completely informal and without weight."

Thus chastised, Professor C fell into a slump, and in his mind wrote two letters inquiring about a job at each of the two new campuses of the University of California.

Professor D said "Waaal, I just don't know. I just don't know."

Professor E made a motion that a subcommittee be formed to make an inquiry as to the suitability of accepting the Williams bequest and that it report back to the main committee promptly after the expiration of six months.

"Motion not allowed," Himself said. "Edwards, you've been spreading fly paper around this place, ever since I asked you to come aboard. Gentlemen, I expect to arrive at a decision by four o'clock."

Professor F hinted at the possibility of breaking the will. This was met by a wise observation of Professor A, who apparently had done his homework on the Williams bequest, that though there were no direct heirs to the estate, there were plenty of relatives in the 5th degree of remoteness who would be only too willing to contest in the event of non-feasance on the part of the University.

Professor G commented that while the bequest was certainly unusual, he was concerned with the image. "The image is highly ambiguous, and while I like to tell my students that ambiguity of image is the seed ground for the creative impulse, I am not so sure this observation is applicable in the present instance."

Professor H said he didn't think it was.

It was now ten to four. I saw that firm action was needed, and I spoke up.

"Mr. President, I would like to place a motion before this committee. I move that the University lawyers be instructed to contact the administrators of the Williams estate and to tell them that the University accepts with great pleasure the responsibility of the bequest and its conditions. The University feels that it is uniquely qualified to act as the guardian and interpreter of the past to the present and future generations through this collection. I move further that Professor A be named Curator of the Williams Collection, without term; that Professor A be instructed to prepare a modest arrangement on the first floor of the Williams house selecting from among the more notable

and picturesque items of the collection. I move that the remainder of the collection be transferred immediately to the cellar of the house so as to enable it to profit from dust, mildew, and backed up sewers. I move that the first floor of the Williams house thus fitted up be opened to the public as per the instructions in the will.”

I had said my say. The President looked in my direction and nodded his approval.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the Children of God.”

And that, kiddies, is what happened. A diorama was prepared by the Department of Art. It occupies the first floor of the Williams House, together with a postcard stand, and a curious little goldfish stand in the foyer. The house dates from the Gilded Age, and the poo has some interesting tile work in it. The second floor is occupied, but only temporarily, by the 1908-1921 files of the Alumni Association. They are in the throes of computerizing their fund-raising activities and should be out within four or five months. The third and fourth floor are occupied on a share and share alike basis by the unexhibited portion of the overalls collection and graduate students forming the advance legions of the new Center for Reticulated Syndromes.

This is the whole story as of now. But not quite. The Williams Collection is now mentioned in the AAA Travel Guide and is listed as a point of interest on the Texaco and Mobil Oil road maps. This brings in a small but steady trickle of tourists. The sale of postcards and historical reproductions pays for the lights. The little fish pool exacts its tribute of pennies from the passing crowd. Every month or so, with Faculty permission, the caretaker cleans out the pennies and buys himself a pint of Old Granddad.