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## *"The Last of the America We Have Known"*

### **Robert and Mabel Williams's Great Fight**

By RON JACOBS

**O**n a recent visit to Oakland, CA., I had the opportunity to meet and converse with Claude Marks of the Freedom Archives. For those readers unaware of this project, the Archives are run by a group of individuals determined to discover and maintain the history of those US residents and colonial subjects that have struggled against oppression. What this struggle has usually meant in that fair land is the struggle against individual and systemic racism. Among its projects, the [Freedom Archives](#) collaborated with documentary director Sam Green (The Weather Underground) in filming an interview with the imprisoned SDS/WUO member David Gilbert. Most recently, The Freedom Archives released (with AK Press) a CD/book combination titled [Self-Respect, Self-Defense and Self-Determination](#). This publication is a documentary of the life of African-American freedom fighters Robert and Mabel Williams.

Robert and Mabel Williams grew up in the town of Monroe, North Carolina—a small town that also happens to be the birth place of the racist former US Senator Jesse Helms. Indeed, it was after witnessing Helms' father—who also happened to be Monroe's chief of police in the 1950s and 1960s—beating a black woman that Robert Williams made a personal commitment to fight racism. This commitment would lead Williams to join the NAACP after returning home from his military service. He helped the local branch organize a series of protests whose purpose was to open the publicly-owned swimming pool in town to its black citizens. This seemingly innocent demand evolved into an armed confrontation with hundreds of Klansmen and their supporters—and all the NAACP wanted was that African-Americans be allowed to use the pool one day a week!

As related by Mabel on the CD, the struggle around the swimming pool convinced Rob once and for all that non-violent resistance to racist oppression was doomed to failure. Only when such resistance was backed up by the possibility of armed self-defense could it be effective. In retrospect, it seems quite clear that this approach played itself over and over as the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s rolled on. The Williams also understood the nature of imperialism and the place of the US black liberation struggle in the world wide struggle against Washington's ongoing war to master the planet. When the couple was forced to leave the United States after the government brought kidnapping charges against them (charges that were later dropped for lack of evidence), Robert and Mabel understood instantly that they would find asylum in the countries then seeking to establish socialism: Cuba, China, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. Williams never ceased detailing the ways that the worldwide

struggle against US imperialism and the black liberation struggle in the US were one and the same. This argument was made in their shortwave broadcasts on Radio Free Dixie and in the pages of their newspaper, *The Crusader*. The Black Panthers developed a similar analysis of this relationship, as did Malcolm X in the months before his assassination.

The Robert Williams CD/book package is a well-made piece of living history. As I write this review on the Fourth of July 2005, I can't help but think of the obvious contradictions involved. A nation conceived in a violent struggle against British colonialism that institutionalized the slavery of Africans and the genocide of the land's indigenous peoples is once again engaged in the brutal oppression of a people half a world away in the name of freedom. Meanwhile, here at home, the power elites continue to consolidate their control via ever-intensifying police state techniques and the manipulation of the economy. Racism continues to poison our daily lives-often using the very language of the past's anti-racist struggles to justify its deeds. A conspiracy of intentions no less dangerous than that which existed during the Williams' heyday continues to rule our land as conservatives and liberals alike fund imperial projects like the occupation of Iraq and their "war on terror." Justice is no nearer yet remains ours to affirm.

As Robert Williams states on the CD: "In looking at America from abroad, I see America in a state of deterioration. This is a very serious state. And I think now we are living in an era when we are seeing the last of the America that we have known. And I'd like to be here with my people when this period of transition finalizes."

**Ron Jacobs** is author of [The Way the Wind Blew: a history of the Weather Underground](#), which is just republished by Verso. Jacobs' essay on Big Bill Broonzy is featured in CounterPunch's new collection on music, art and sex, [Serpents in the Garden](#). He can be reached at: [ron05401@yahoo.com](mailto:ron05401@yahoo.com)