

Source: *Missing Stories: An Oral and Ethnic History of Minorities in Utah*
Authors: Leslie G. Kelen and Eileen Hallet Stone
Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, 2000.

Terry Lee Williams, Senator, Utah State Legislature, pgs. 120-124

"[After I got into the Utah legislature] I was not afforded the same respect and access [to the system] as others. I mean, it was like I had no business here. . . . There was a concept in this country, especially in the more conservative communities, that black people aren't capable of making decisions on behalf of the society or themselves, so whites are chosen by God to make decisions for their welfare. That's the biblical foundation for apartheid. And that existed here [in Utah].

So when I arrived, I met legislators who didn't believe a black person could walk and talk intelligently at the same time. I mean, I was speaking the same language they spoke, I was coming up with the same kinds of ideas, and they were amazed, just amazed, I could do that. . . .

Now, I first sponsored the Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday Bill in the 1985 legislature. It never saw the light of day. The powers that be up here never let it out of committee. In 1986, all I did was resubmit the bill, the same bill, but in the interim a lot of things happened. Forty other states passed the bill. President Reagan said some kind words on its behalf, and there was a renaissance [of interest] in Dr. King and the civil rights movement throughout America.

So, in my mind, we had a whole year of activities and efforts that lent themselves to the popularity of the concept and the passage

of the bill. As a result, when I reentered it, [I] naively thought it would pass. It has national precedent, and it's the right thing to do. I had absolutely no idea that the bill would create a clash of philosophies [here] or that it would receive the negative reception it did. But that's exactly what happened.

And half way through the legislative session, for all intents and purposes, the bill was dead [in committee]. It was dead in the water. . . Senators made comments like, "I'm not prejudiced. It's just that it [the new state holiday] will cost [the state] a million and a half dollars." Or, "I'm not prejudiced against Dr. King; it's just that his [civil rights] movement in America is still a secret record with the FBI. And since the records won't be revealed [in full] for fifty years, we ought to wait." Or, "Did you know Dr. King was associated with Communists?" These were ridiculous arguments. But senators came up with every possible argument to defeat the bill rather than speak their true inner feelings.

What they really felt was that they didn't like Martin Luther King, Jr. They didn't believe the civil rights movement did anything for Utah. I heard that many times [off the Senate floor]. They believed that this black minister, beginning out of Montgomery, did something good for blacks in the South. They really believed that. But that's it. They didn't know Dr. King spoke up in their behalf as well as everybody else's and that the passage of the [national] Civil Rights Act of 1964, opening public accommodations in hotels, motels, and tourism, was to their benefit, too.

We had the fortunate opportunity [at that time] to bring Mrs. Coretta Scott King in [to address both the Senate and the House], because there [was] a lot of concern about Dr. King's association

with the Communist party, his preaching treason, wanting to overthrow the government of this country or to change the constitution. With her help, we began to refute all of those arguments, so there was no question about constitutionality or his associations. . .

But I [soon] realized this wasn't what really concerned people. When it came right down to it, they didn't want to create Martin Luther King Day by displacing Columbus Day or the emancipator's [Abraham Lincoln's] holiday. That was blasphemy to them. They didn't believe this black man did anything [of that stature] for this country, much less the state of Utah. And this [maneuver] simply wasn't in keeping with their personal philosophies. They would state this to me individually in rooms like this or in the hallway or in the bathroom. But they couldn't bring themselves to say that at the microphone, before the press and the people who elected them. So we were in a tough spot.

[Finally,] after weeks of debate, we got thrown into what's called a conference committee, because the House wouldn't agree with what the Senate did and the Senate wouldn't agree with what the House did. We got four members from each body, and we met in this very room, on this very couch and these chairs. There were ten of us gathered here, including staff members, to talk about what conclusion we could come to.

Well, I knew this was the time and [this was] the place. A decision had to be made one way or the other. Either we were going to get the bill or we weren't. And I said, "Every Thursday we send these beautiful young men out of this state." That was my quintessential argument. I said, "We send these fine gentlemen out on United Airlines every Thursday morning to all parts of the world to be

missionaries [and] to proselytize for the LDS church. What do you think is going to happen to them when they go to other states in the Union?" I said, "They are going to get off their planes, and people are going to say, 'You're from that state that didn't pass the Martin Luther King Holiday, aren't you?'"

I just said that, being desperate. . . . And you could have heard a pin drop in this room. I could see the pondering thoughts on their faces, and one of the senators spoke up: "You know, I never thought about that. Senator Williams, you are absolutely right." What brought them to the brink and over was the recognition that what we do here, regardless of whether we [fully] believe in it, would affect the status of this state and how it stands in the nation. [If we didn't pass the bill] when forty-nine other states had chosen to do what the president had embraced as a national holiday, we would be singular in our denial.

So, I touched a nerve in the Mormon mentality, because I learned a long time ago that the Mormon church is proud and places itself in the public eye in the best light possible, all of the time. And this decision would have detracted from that. It would have reflected badly upon their religion. And that's when I knew I had it. I had the bill. Within four days, we came to a consensus about technical matters. Then the bill was sent to Governor Bangerter. He signed it right away.