

Willis Stearles (1890-1956)

Like Doctor Doolittle, Willis Stearles had a special relationship with animals. He loved them, and they loved him in return. At least, it seemed that way. When city officials sought to fire him from his job as zookeeper at Miller Park Zoo, the animals went on a hunger strike until he had gotten his job back.

Willis Stearles was born in Bloomington on January 21, 1890. His family had a tradition of patriotism and civic involvement. His father, Matthew Stearles, served with the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry in Cuba during the Spanish American War and continued in the National Guard upon his return home. The Eighth was an all African-American army unit led entirely by African-American officers.

Like their father, Willis, along with his brothers, Carl and Raleigh, served in the “Eighth”. With the outbreak of World War I, the unit was called up by President Woodrow Wilson. The Eighth was sent first to Peoria, then to Texas, and Virginia for training prior to their voyage to France. After arriving in Europe, the unit was known as Company K of the 370th Infantry. The 370th was part of the 93rd Division, one of the few all African-American divisions of troops sent to fight in the War. As in the Spanish-American War, they continued to be led by all black officers. Willis held the rank of Lieutenant and was platoon commander of his company.

After six weeks of training with French soldiers, the 370th were sent into battle. For Willis and his unit, this meant they went into the trenches. Trench warfare was the predominant fighting strategy of WWI. Opposing armies dug deep trenches at the front lines facing each other across a “no man’s land.” This land was called this because it belonged to neither side, but was the land over which the battle was currently being fought. The tops of the trenches were lined with sandbags and faced a front line of barbed wire fences and machine gun nests. The trenches were cramped, muddy, and often times filled with rain water. Willis wrote to his brother, Carl, about life in the trenches. He said that if he didn’t hear canon fire every five minutes, he needed to see what was the matter.

Near the end of the War, the 370th were stationed near the Hindenburg Line, the German front line of defense. They were ordered to engage the Germans who were heavily dig into their trenches. Despite facing a hail of machine gun fire, the men of the 370th advanced and engaged in hand to hand combat. They endured such harsh fighting conditions throughout the War and fought so fiercely that they earned the nickname “the Black Devils” by the German troops. The French called them “the Partridges” because of their cockiness and pride in battle.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918. By then, the 370th had pushed the Germans into Belgium from France. For their distinguished service, many men in the unit received medals and awards from both the French and American governments. Many of those decorated had given their lives in battle. Twenty percent, or 96 men, of the 370th were killed. As they left France, the French General gave them a special thanks and praised them for their valor and courage.

Coming home, the 370th was given a reception at the Chicago Coliseum and a parade through the Chicago Loop. When they reached their final destination of Bloomington, citizens here held a public reception and a day of festivities to honor the “Black Devils”. The day began with a public reception at the train station followed by a banquet at the Wayman A.M.E. Church and then a parade. That evening a reception at the Bloomington Coliseum was filled to capacity. The mayor spoke of the pride Bloomington citizens felt in welcoming these men home. The

Honorable Adelbert Roberts, African American Senator from Chicago, also gave a moving speech about the courage and valor of the men of the 370th and expressed his hope the role these men played during the War, would help end violence and discrimination against African-Americans in Illinois. Finally the day ended with a dance honoring the men.

Unfortunately, discrimination continued in many local organizations, including veterans' groups. Because of this, Willis helped form the local black American legion post, the Redd-Williams Post #163, named after two of their fallen comrades from WWI. Willis held a number of offices in the local, state and even national legion. His friend, Oscar Waddell, called him Mr. Legionnaire. Willis, like the rest of his family, was very patriotic. His friend also remembered that Willis flew the flag proudly on national holidays and once told local children that "there had never been a black man who was a traitor to the American flag."

After the War, Willis lived in Peoria for a year and then returned to Bloomington where he met and married Kathryn Williams in 1921. They lived at 1502 N. Fell in Bloomington. They never had children, but became parent figures to many young men and women attending Illinois State Normal University and in the Bloomington/Normal communities. As there was no housing provided for black students at ISNU, the Stearles took in female boarders. Willis also mentored many young men who were called "Stearles boys," teaching them "how to get along with their fellow man, conduct themselves and how to behave as Americans."

Willis came to be best known for his work at Miller Park. When he first returned from the War, he worked as a janitor. By 1925, he had taken a job as an animal feeder at Miller Park. He began reading as many books about animals as he could. Through his experiences working with animals for 33 years, he gained considerable knowledge and a strong bond with his charges. Other zoos would call Stearles and ask him for advice on their animals when one of them was acting strangely. He was well liked and respected by all.

Willis had gotten his job initially as a patronage job, that is, he was appointed to it by the Republican local government because he was an active Republican. When the Republicans lost control of the local government, Willis and head Zookeeper Charlie Poll lost their jobs. Many people in the community were unhappy about this, but most importantly, the animals of Miller Park Zoo were unhappy too. So unhappy, in fact, that they refused to eat. The city council met and decided the only thing to do was to give the men their jobs back. Stearles and Poll were rehired, the animals began to eat, and everyone was happy.

The two men continued to work together for many years at Miller Park. Stearles, who was black, and Poll, who was white, were coworkers and friends. When Poll retired, Stearles was appointed to be his successor. Willis then became head zookeeper, a position he held until shortly before his death in 1956.

At the age of 66, Willis Stearles passed away at Brokaw Hospital on April 2, 1956 after suffering a heart attack. His funeral was held at the Wayman A.M.E. Church where he had been a lifelong member and trustee. To this day he is remembered for his patriotism, intelligence, kindness and service to the community.

Discussion Question: Tell how these qualities (see above) for which Stearles is remembered are demonstrated in the two main events of his life: WWI and as a Zookeeper.

Bullets for Willis Searles

- *Born in Bloomington, January of 1890; died in Normal 1956.
- *Like his father before him, Willis served in the 8th Illinois Infantry, fighting in France in WWI.
- *Married Kathryn Williams in 1921. Served as mentor for many young men and women of the Bloomington/Normal, ISU communities.
- *Best remembered for work as animal feeder then caretaker at Miller Park Zoo. Animals saved his job by hunger strike when city officials tried to take his job.
- *Family tradition of patriotism. Became known as “Mr. Legionaire” for work with the Redd-Williams Post #163 of American Legion.