

Willis Stearles (1890-1950)

Much of what we know today about Willis Stearles comes from oral history, members of the community, and friends and family that knew him. Willis Stearles was born in Bloomington, Illinois on January 21, 1890. He was one of four children born to Matthew Stearles and Mary Witherspoon Stearles. His family lived at 814 East Walnut Street in Bloomington.

His parents were very active members of the Bloomington-Normal Community. His father Matthew (like Willis would later) served in the 8th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, part of the Illinois National Guard and based out of Chicago, Illinois. His regiment was assigned to garrison duty in Cuba in 1899 during the Spanish-American War.¹ After the War, Matthew continued to serve in his regiment, (an IL National Guard unit) and was eventually elected to the rank of Captain. He was also an active Republican and served as a representative of the local African-American Republican committee to the county central Republican committee in 1900.² His mother was an active member of Wayman A.M.E. Church, the order of the Eastern Star, and Mount Olive Court of Calanthe in the Knights of Pythias.³

Willis, along with his brothers Carl and Raleigh, served in the "Eighth" like their father did. The Eighth, was a segregated all African American military unit that was formed during the Spanish American War to serve as an occupation force in Cuba. It was also the first unit of African American soldiers to be led entirely by African American officers.⁴ It is not known exactly when Stearles joined the Eighth. The first mention of him serving in Company K of the Eighth was in October 1916 when his company (made up mostly of men from Bloomington) returned to Bloomington after service in Texas.⁵

Upon the outbreak of WWI, the Eighth was federalized by President Woodrow Wilson and became part of the 370th Infantry Regiment, part of the segregated 93rd Infantry Division. The members of the regiment were sent to Peoria in July of 1917 to begin training.⁶ In October that same year the unit was sent to Houston, Texas to continue training. Racial tensions were high when the Eighth arrived in Houston. Prior to their arrival a riot had occurred between 156 African American soldiers (members of the 24th U.S. Infantry) stationed in Houston and the white civilians living in Houston over a rumor that an African American soldier had been killed by white police officers and against the racial discrimination the soldiers already suffered from. Four African American soldiers and fifteen white civilians were killed during the riot. All 156 African American soldiers were court-martialed for murder and thirteen of those convicted were hanged.⁷ Because of this incident, the white citizens were hostile towards the members of the newly arrived Eighth and tightened the already strict Jim Crow segregation laws that existed in Houston. Stearles and other members of the Eighth were not allowed to ride on streetcars and were looked down upon because they refused to respect segregated facilities. It was wise for the men of the Eighth to be careful during their stay in the Deep South so that they (and the other African American soldiers stationed there) would be able to avoid any further incidents and

¹ W. Allison Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*, (Chicago: G.G. Sapp, 1919; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970), 155, E-book
<https://archive.org/stream/historyamerican00sweegoog#page/n196/mode/2up>

² "Colored Committee" *Daily Pantagraph*, March 22, 1900

³ "Death Claims Mrs. Mary E. Stearles," *The Daily Bulletin*, November 14, 1921

⁴ Shawn SanRoman, "The Eighth Illinois Regiment," 1998, p.8

⁵ "Home from the Border," *The Pantagraph*, October 31, 1916.

⁶ "Cheer Colored Boys off to the Front," *The Pantagraph*, July 27, 1917.

⁷ James Leiker, "Houston Mutiny of 1917," <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aaw/houston-mutiny-1917>

complete their training before being sent overseas.⁸ No further incidents would occur due in fact to the very capable and disciplined African American officers who led these soldiers. Upon completion of their training in March of 1918 Stearles and his unit were sent to Virginia to prepare for the voyage to France. In a letter Willis wrote to his brother Carl he commented that the voyage to France took fifteen days and that it was “some trip!”⁹

When Willis and his unit arrived in France on April 22, 1918, the Eighth became known as Company K of the 370th United States Infantry. The 370th was part of the 93rd Division, one of the few all African-American divisions of troops sent to fight the War. Like the Eighth, the 370th had the distinction of being the only regiment in the entire U.S. Army that had all African American officers leading the unit.¹⁰ Stearles served as an officer in the unit holding the rank of Lieutenant, and was the platoon commander of his company.

Seven days after their arrival in France, Stearles and the rest of the 370th began training with French soldiers. This lasted for about six weeks. They trained side by side with the French who treated them fairly; much more so than their American Counterparts.¹¹ After training with the French, they were sent into battle in the trenches.

Trench warfare was the predominant method of fighting during WWI. Most soldiers who fought in the War fought in the trenches. Typical trenches were designed in a system of two to four parallel lines. All of these trenches were connected by communication trenches which not only relayed communication but also passed supplies as well. The trenches were lined with sandbags at the top and wooden planks at the bottom. At the front of the trenches were barbed wire fences and machine gun nests in concealed locations. Opposing sides would use the trenches to attack and defend with an area in between often called “no man’s land.” This land was called this because it belonged to neither side, was open to frequent artillery barrages, and was a site where many soldiers were killed.¹² Life in the trenches was by no means pleasant. The trenches were cramped, muddy, and often times filled with water. Machine gunfire, mortar, and gas attacks were common place. Stearles wrote home to his brother Carl about what life was like on the front lines. He stated that he had already “been in the trenches two times” and admitted that by the time the letter was received by his brother, he would be in the trenches again.¹³ Willis also stated that if he did not hear canon every five minutes, he would walk out “to no-man’s land, to see what was the matter.”¹⁴

The 370th first fought near Regionville and then was sent to Vraincourt. After demonstrating their fighting ability and loyalty, they were then sent to Verdun on August 16, 1918. Less than a month later they were sent to the front lines where they saw heavy action and were “subjected to heavy shell fire and gas attacks.”¹⁵ They endured these harsh fighting conditions and fought fiercely against enemy forces.

⁸ Jim Hill, “The 370th Infantry, Chicago’s 8th Illinois National Guard in WWI,” *The Western Front Association*, <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-on-land/75-other-war-theatres/55-370-infantry.html>

⁹ “Lieut. Stearles Writes Brother,” *The Daily Bulletin*, August 8, 1918

¹⁰ E.J. Scott, “The American Negro in the World War,” <http://www.gwpda.org/>

¹¹ SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment” p. 27-28

¹² Tony Ashworth. *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918, The Live and Let Live System.* (London: Pan Books, 2nd edition 2000) p. 2-14

¹³ “Lieut. Stearles Writes Brother”

¹⁴ “Lieut. Stearles Writes Brother”

¹⁵ E.E. Pierson and J.L. Hasbrouck, ed. *McLean County Illinois and the World War 1917-1918.* (Bloomington: McLean County War Publishing Co., ca. 1920) p.202-203

In a later battle towards the end of the War, Stearles and his unit were stationed near the Hindenburg Line on November 6, 1918. The line, constructed by the Germans, stretched across Northeastern France from Lens to beyond Verdun.¹⁶ They were ordered to engage the Germans who were heavily entrenched. Despite “facing a hail of machine gun fire, the men of the 370th advanced and even engaged in hand to hand combat.”¹⁷

The 370th's time at the front lines earned them the nickname of “The Black Devils” by German troops. Not only did the German forces refer to them in this way because of the obvious color of their skin, but because of their fierce fighting in battle.¹⁸ The French on the other hand, referred to the men of the 370th as “Partridges” because of their cockiness and pride in battle.¹⁹ Whatever nickname they went by, they clearly demonstrated their abilities as soldiers and fought valiantly in battle up until the very last day of the War.

When the War ended on November 11, 1918, the 370th was in pursuit of the Germans having pushed them back to Belgium from France. For their distinguishable service, many men in the 370th received medals and awards from both the French and Americans. All totaled, the unit received almost 100 medals including 21 American Distinguished Service Crosses, several Croix de Guerre (France's highest honor), 68 French War Crosses, and one French Distinguished Service Medal. Many of those men who were decorated for their service gave their lives as well. Twenty percent, or 96 men, were killed in the 370th.²⁰ In December of 1918 upon the 370th leaving France to return to America, French General Vincendon issued a statement about the bravery of the 370th. In that statement, he said that the evidence was clear of how much the French appreciated the 370th and how they held the unit in high regard. Vincendon thanked the 370th for their service and praised them for the valor. He also stated that “the blood of your comrade's fell on the soil of France mixed with the blood of our soldiers, renders indissoluble the bonds of affection that unite us. We have besides, the pride of having worked together at a magnificent task, the pride of bearing on our foreheads the ray of a common grandeur.”²¹

When the 370th returned to Chicago on February 17, 1919 they went to the Coliseum where some citizens of Chicago had arranged a reception for the regiment. After the reception, members of the 370th then paraded through the “Loop” district of Chicago before returning to Camp Grant near Rockford, IL where they began the demobilization process of the regiment. Stearles had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant by the end of his service in France.²²

After mustering out of service, Stearles and other members of the “Old Eighth IL” returned to Bloomington by way of Peoria. On February 27, 1919 the citizens of Bloomington (both black and white) held a public reception and organized a day of festivities to honor the “Black Devils.” The day's celebrations began with a reception at the train station followed by a banquet at Wayman A.M.E. church and then a parade. The day's activities concluded that evening with a large reception at the Bloomington Coliseum. The Coliseum was filled to capacity. Mayor E.E. Jones gave an opening address welcoming the brave soldiers home. The Honorable Adelbert Roberts, an African-American state representative from Chicago (who in 1924 he became the first black state senator in Illinois), also gave a moving speech about the

¹⁶ “Absolute Astronomy,” http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Hindenburg_Line

¹⁷ SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” 29

¹⁸ SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” 29

¹⁹ Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*

²⁰ Scott, “The American Negro in the World War”

²¹ Sweeney, *History of the American Negro in the Great World War*

²² “Lieut. Willis Stearles A Speaker in Decatur,” *The Pantagraph*, April 11, 1919.

courage and valor of the men of the 370th. He stated that he was glad to see the “best white people join the best black people of the city in a welcome for those ‘Black Devils.’” In addition, he hoped that the part these men “played in the War would help put an end” to the violence and discrimination towards African Americans, especially in Illinois. Following the speeches the seats were cleared for an evening filled with dancing to honor the men.²³

Despite this warm welcome home to Bloomington and their distinguished service to the U.S. and the world, these soldiers were still discriminated against and their service was belittled by the American military. They were even barred from joining “white” veteran organizations such as the American Legion.²⁴ Because of this, Stearles and other African American veterans formed their own “black” American Legion post, the Redd-Williams Post #163. Named after two of their fallen comrades during WWI, John Redd and Gus Williams, the Redd-Williams post of the American Legion was founded in about 1922 by twenty African-American men (including Stearles) who had served during WWI, most of whom were members of the 370th regiment. Willis served as assistant Sergeant at Arms in the post as well as Sergeant at Arms in McLean County, Sergeant at Arms for their district and division, and even Asst. State Sergeant at Arms. He was not only well respected in the Legion locally, but state wide and nationally as well. Another member of the local African American community, Oscar Waddell (who was a mentee of Stearles) called Stearles “Mr. Legionnaire” because of how active he was in the organization.²⁵ Willis came from a very patriotic family. This is clear not only because of his military service but also because of his lifelong patriotism. Aside from being a very active and lifelong member of the American Legion, friends recalled his show of American pride in the community in general. Waddell recalled that during Labor Day picnics at the Skinner family’s home on Livingston Street, Stearles would take down the American flag at 5p.m, drape it across him and tell Waddell and other children that “there had never been a black man that was a traitor to the American flag.”²⁶ He then proudly walked with the flag draped around him.

After living in Peoria for one year after the War (where he worked as a janitor) he returned to Bloomington where he also worked as a janitor. It was in Bloomington that he met and married Kathryn Williams on June 8, 1921. They resided at 1502 N. Fell Avenue in Bloomington. The house had been previously owned by Kathryn’s father. Although the couple never had any children, they opened their house to African-American female students who attended Illinois State Normal University.²⁷ At that time, ISNU did not allow African-Americans to live on campus forcing those students to seek other options. Many African Americans who lived near ISNU took in those students as boarders. It was a livelihood for the Stearles and it also helped these students who would not have been able to attend ISNU without a place to live.²⁸

Willis was also a father figure to many young men, black and white, in the Bloomington-Normal Community. Oscar Waddell called himself one of “Stearles boys” and stated that he was brought up from his youth under Stearles’ guidance. Waddell recalled that Stearles showed him and other boys how to get along with “your fellow man,” how to conduct yourself, and how they should behave as Americans. He greatly respected and admired Willis and would remain friends

²³ “Bloomington Honors Black Devils,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 28, 1919

²⁴ SanRoman, “The Eighth Illinois Regiment,” p. 30

²⁵ Transcript of Oscar Waddell interviewed by Jean McCrossin, August 13, 1988

²⁶ Transcript of Oscar Waddell interviewed by Jean McCrossin, August 13, 1988

²⁷ Transcript of Jean and Dean McCrossin interviewed by Dr. Mildred Pratt, late 1980s

²⁸ Transcript of Oscar Waddell interviewed by Jean McCrossin, August 13, 1988

with him until the day Stearles died. Waddell also credited Stearles with convincing him to join the military and serve his country. Waddell would also later join the Redd-Williams Post of the American Legion which Stearles belonged to.

What Willis would come to be most well known for was his work at Miller Park Zoo. It is not known when exactly he began working there, but he is first listed as an animal feeder in the Bloomington-Normal City Directory in 1925. At the same time, he was also reported to have been the lifeguard at the “colored beach” at Miller Park Lake.²⁹ Stearles did not know much about animals when he first began working at Miller Park Zoo but he was ready and eager to learn. When Oscar Waddell was a boy, he asked Stearles once how he knew so much about the animals at the zoo. Stearles stated that he “got books” and began reading as many as he could. He also said he learned about the animals through experience working at the zoo. Over the course of his 33-year career, he developed knowledge for handling the animals and also formed a strong bond with them. Waddell recalled that other zoos would call Stearles and ask him for advice on their animals, for instance if a lion was acting strange. Waddell stated that Stearles would tell them how he had handled similar situations and about remedies that worked. He was a well-liked and well-respected zookeeper.³⁰ On top of his duties as a zoo attendant, Willis also patrolled the grounds of the zoo at night. As told by Waddell, Willis would walk around at night with a stick, guarding the park. If a car was parked suspiciously, he would tell the occupants to break it up. In all, he never had any trouble by anyone. He was respected by all.³¹ Stearles was also easy to recognize even by the animals, or so they say. He could always be seen dressed in striped overalls and an engineer’s cap.

According to several members of the community who knew Stearles well, he got his job at the zoo as a “patronage” job, meaning that he was appointed by the political party in control of the local government at the time which was most likely Republican since Stearles was a lifelong Republican. Sometime in the 1930s (although the exact date is not known) the administration of the city changed to Democratic. It is possible this occurred around 1934 because the Republican mayor, Ben Rhodes, was replaced by Democrat L.F. Wellmerling. Because Stearles had a politically appointed job, he and the head zookeeper Charlie Poll, lost their jobs. Many people in the community were unhappy with this. He was well liked and many people felt that he and Poll losing their jobs was unfair. It was also said that the animals which Stearles and Poll cared for seemed to think it was unfair as well. According to Jean McCrossin and Oscar Waddell, the animals became so upset that they stopped eating and the new zookeeper could not get the animals to eat. The city council met to figure out what to do. Their only choice was for them to hire Stearles and Poll back for “what good is a zoo if you do not have any animals?” When Poll and Stearles were hired back, everyone was delighted and the animals began to eat again.³²

Stearles and Poll continued working together at the zoo for many years. To Poll, (who was white) it made no difference that Stearles was black. They worked together very well and they never had an argument. Their partnership came to an end in 1952 after 29 years of working together when Poll retired. Stearles was the obvious choice for his successor to become head zookeeper. Poll stated that Willis was a friend to everyone who ever walked in to the animal house. He also stated upon his retirement that “if he had to work with anyone again for 29 years,

²⁹ “Carp Weighing 27 Pounds Taken from Miller Park Lake,” *The Pantagraph*, July 14, 1925.

³⁰ Transcript of Oscar Waddell interviewed by Jean McCrossin, August 13, 1988

³¹ Transcript of Oscar Waddell interviewed by Jean McCrossin, August 13, 1988

³² Transcript of Jean and Dean McCrossin interviewed by Dr. Pratt, late 1980s

I'd choose Willis." On April 1, 1952, Stearles was appointed head zookeeper and remained in that position until shortly before his death in 1956.

At the age of 66, Willis Stearles passed away on April 2, 1956 at Brokaw Hospital after suffering a heart attack a few weeks prior. His funeral was held at Wayman A.M.E. Church in Bloomington where he was a member and trustee. He was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington. Even to this day, Stearles is remembered for his patriotism, intelligence, kindness and service to the community.

By: Emily Swartz, 2010