

Willie Ladnier – Tommy Ladnier’s mother

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This document replaces an earlier document on Willie Williams Ladnier, Tommy Ladnier’s mother. Here the complete Williams family tree is drawn, obtained from newly found material.

Tommy Ladnier’s mother Willie Williams Ladnier certainly was an important figure in Tommy’s life. In the book *Traveling Blues*¹, we have made some observations on her based on facts available at the time of publication in 2009. However, since then, new facts about Willie have emerged, and while they in no way contradict our earlier findings, they nevertheless enrich the earlier picture.

The Williams family

Tommy Ladnier’s mother, **Willa (Willie) Williams**, was born in January 1880 in Bladen Springs, Choctaw, Alabama. She had 10 siblings and she was born as number 8.

Her father was **Edward Wright Williams**, born in Choctaw, Alabama, in September 1841.² In 1861, he married **Adeline Horace**, born in 1847, and in 1870, the couple was enumerated in Choctaw, Alabama. The very strange thing about this enumeration is that *Edward Williams and his wife Adaline were enumerated twice*, first on the 14th of August and then on the 17th of August, evidently at different locations and with different neighbors. Both these enumeration forms were filled out by the same enumeration officer.

The 1870 census shows Willie’s father, Edward Williams, a Black mechanic, with his Mulatto wife Adaline, day laborer. They lived in Township 9, with post office Butler, Choctaw County, Alabama. Choctaw is situated the South-western part of Alabama but the name of Township 9 is not revealed in the census form.

In the first enumeration on 14 August, we find Edward, laborer, age 28 (1842), and Adaline, keeping home, age 23 (1847), with their girl children F, age 8 (1862), S, age 6 (1864), V, age 3 (1867), and E, age 1 (1869). Also living with the family is a girl, H Harrison, farm laborer aged 16. All of them, except Adaline, who was here stated as born in South Carolina, were born in Alabama. The Harrison girl is a farm laborer. From the data given for other households on this form, it seems this was a farming district.

In the second enumeration on 17 August and at another address in Township 9, only Edward, age 28 and Adaline, 23 are listed. This time Edward is stated as a mechanic and Adaline as a day laborer, but now stated as born in Alabama. No children were listed this time. At this address, there were also two neighboring families Harrison. From the data given on this form, it seems this location was situated in a population center with a hotel.

One can only speculate why Edward Williams was enumerated twice. One reason could be that he and the family lived in the outskirts of the town and had a business in the town. This would also explain why their children only were listed at the family home on Sunday, the 14th of August 1870 with the family at home and the 17th was a Wednesday with shops open and the children left at home or in school.

¹ Lindström, Bo and Vernhettes, Dan, *Traveling Blues*, Jazz Edit, 2009.

² The names of Willie William’s parents were revealed in her Chicago death certificate.

When the family was enumerated on 8 June, 1880, they lived in Bladon Springs (Beat 9), Choctaw. Edward was then registered as a house carpenter.³ The children then were **Susan**, 15 (1865); **Viney**, 12 (1868); **Barbara N.**, 10 (1870); **Mary V.**, 7 (1873); **Eddie**, 3 (1877); **Wright**, 2 (1878); and **Willie**, 4m. From this we can see that the oldest girl, F (Frances) had either left home or died and that the girl stated as E either had died or is Barbara N. This census shows Willie to be 4 months old, but it is also stated she was born in January 1880.

The 1900 Census shows Edward Wright as a widow, working as a mechanic and born in September 1841, now with only the three children living with him: **Mary**, 27 (1873), **Wright E.**, 22 (1878), and **Louise E.**, 12 (1895). It is not known when Adeline died; it could have been at the time the youngest child was born in 1885. Edward Wright Williams died in 1906.

From these bits and pieces we can reconstruct the Williams family and its members.

Frances, b. 1862, **Susan**, b. 1864, **Viney** (a.k.a. **Melvina**), b. 1868, **Barbara M.**, .b. 1870, **Mary V.**, b. 1872, **Etta Mae**, b. 1876, **Wright Edward**, b. 1878, **Willie**, b.1880, **Helen** b. 1885, and **Ethel Louise**, b. 1895.⁴

Willa's oldest sister was **Frances**, born in September, 1862. She met Washington White (1861-1940) around 1880 and they had one child, Jesse Edward White. Around 1891, she married Daniel Green (1860-) and they had three children, **Mattie** (1892), **Paul** (1898), and **Megesta** (1903). The family lived in Upper Sabine, Calcasieu, Louisiana, in 1900. In 1910, Daniel and Francis had relocated to Spring, Harris, Texas, where they had a boarding house.

Susan was born in 1864. Nothing more is known about her.

Viney most probably identical to **Melvina**, was born in 1867.⁵ Melvina married **Henry Wesley Groves**⁶, b. 20 October 1863 in Bladen Springs, Choctaw, Alabama, on 15 September, 1899. Henry Wesley worked as cotton washer and Melvina is stated as washer in the 1900 Census. The couple lived in a house next to Edward Wright in 1900. Melvina and Henry Wesley had 12 children; 7 daughters and 5 sons: **Manetta**, b. July 1888, **Juanita**, 1889 – 1961, **Berta E.** b. 1891, **Daisy** 1893 - 1920, **Mary** b. 1895, **Lena D.** 1897 - 1925, **Otis Gardner I.** b. 1899 – 1970, **Arzella** 1901 - ?, **Charles Franklin** b. 1905 – 1986, **L. V.** b. 1906 - ?, **Edgar**, b. 1907 – 1975, **Vivian Wilma** 1910 – 1986. ⁷ Melvina died on 29 March, 1953 in Mobile, Alabama.

³ The 1880 Census shows him to have been born in 1836 and Adaline in 1848.

⁴ No census record for Helen exists but her death certificate from 1939 in Houston, Texas, states she was born Helen Williams in Alabama and that her father was Ed Williams.

⁵ There are Family trees on Ancestry showing Melvina to be born 3 August 1864. However this does not comply with the 1870 census since Melvina is not recorded at all or should be identical to Susan. All census records from 1900, 1910, and 1920 show Melvina as born 1867 or 1868.

⁶ The 1880 Census gives the family name Groves but the name used in subsequent official documents is Grove.

⁷ Despite the name, Vivian Wilma is recorded as male in the 1910 and 1940 Censuses.



Melvina Williams Grove

Barbara M. was born in 1870. Nothing more is known about her, unless she is identical to Melvina.

Mary V. was born on 8 August, 1872, married gardener **Alex Peters**, born 1878, and died 19 December 1962 in Mobile, Alabama. She had at least one child, **Birdie Peters**, (1895).

Etta Mae (Ettie) was born in January 1876 and she married **Walter L Everton** (1880-1926). She died in October 1939.

On 3 June 1877, the first son, **Wright Edward**, was born. Wright William's first wife was **Dora Finley**. She was born in 1884 and was married to Wright on March 23, 1902 in Choctaw, Alabama. To this union five children were born, **Theoplus E.** (sic), **Sloan, Ruth, Reseda and Etta Mae** in Bladon Springs, Alabama. It was told that Dora died 10 days after the birth of Etta Mae in 1917. Wright Edward married **Leona Hayes**, (1889 – 1965), after Dora's death. The family lived in Oakdale, Allen Parish, Louisiana, in 1920. In 1922 the family moved to Chicago, Illinois. He was employed by the Producers Turpentine Company, the Pullman Company and Gordon's Bakery. He was also a salesman for Watkins Products for five years, an ordained minister of the Methodist Church, a member of the Woodlawn AME Church, and a member of the Holy Hour Prayer Band.⁸



Wright E. Williams

Wright Edward's daughter **Etta Mae Williams Gordon** – not to be confused with her father's sister, Aunt Etta Mae - was born on 3 March, 1917. Etta Mae attended Parker School at 32& Ellis, Burke School at 52nd and Prairie and McCosh School at 64th & Vernon in Chicago, Ill. She attended Beloit High School, Beloit, Wisconsin, while staying with her Aunt Etta in Beloit. She met and married **Bennie Gordon** in 1933 in Rockford, Ill. Six

⁸ Adopted from <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=WILL&GSfn=W&GSpartial=1&GSbyrel=all&GSst=16&GSctry=4&GSsr=961&GRid=44715439&> as submitted by Gerald Gordon.

children were born to this union. She and her family were members of New Zion Baptist Church in Beloit, Wisconsin.⁹



Etta Mae Williams Gordon

Willa, born in January 1880, married **Alfred Ladnier** in St Tammany, Louisiana, on 20 January, 1898. Their son **Thomas James Ladnier** was born on 28 May, 1900. Alfred Ladnier, a railway fireman, died 11 November, 1919 and Willa and Thomas moved north to Chicago. Willa married in Chicago a second time, on 27 March, 1918, to a man from St. Louis, **Joseph Bingham Bell**.¹⁰ This marriage seems to have been short-lived as Willa stayed in Chicago and Bell stayed in St. Louis. Willa then was accidentally shot at a party in her flat on 11 March, 1923. She died on 13 March, 1923 and was buried on 16 March 1923.¹¹

After Willa, **Helen** was born in 1885. She married **Albert Hartman**, born 1875, and she died on 26 July, 1939 in Houston, Texas. They had three children, **Bernice** (1911), **Robert** (1913) and **Bessie** (1916)

Finally, **Ethel Louise** was born in 1895. Due to the extremely long time after the birth of their next to last child and considering Adeline's age (54), it is plausible that Adeline died giving birth to Ethel Louise. Ethel Louise married **Charlie Fay**, born 1878, and then subsequently married train porter **Briller Arnold Smith**. Ethel Louise died on 27 January, 1939 and Briller had then married Emma (Erma or Irma) Leola Greys Smith in 1928.

A simplified family tree is shown at the end of this document.

⁹ Adopted from <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=WILL&GSfn=W&GSpartial=1&GSbyrel=all&GSst=16&GSctry=4&GSsr=961&GRid=44715439&> as submitted by Gerald Gordon.

¹⁰ The circumstances of Alfred's death and the marriage to Bell are very strange. Tommy Ladnier claimed that Willa left Mandeville, Louisiana, after his father's death but they left before. The marriage to Bell therefore seems to have been bigamy. Another peculiarity is that Alfred perhaps was not Tommy's biological father as discussed in *Traveling Blues*.

¹¹ For a more detailed account of the life of Willa, see *Traveling Blues* and the document on the Tommy Ladnier Homepage, <http://tommyladnier.mono.net/8824/Tommy%20Ladnier%20Homepage>

The Ladner/Ladnier family.

According to a Louisiana marriage license, Willie Williams married Alfred Ladiner (sic) on January 20, 1898, in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.¹² Thomas James Ladnier was born 28 May, 1900 in Florenville near Mandeville, St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.¹³ Tommy told Hugues Panassié that he was born in Florenville, probably meaning that he was born on the James Ladnier farm just outside Mandeville. However, he is not listed in the 1900 Census at Florenville, taken on Monday, 25 June, exactly four weeks after his birth, and nor is Willie. Following the ordinary census routines, he would have appeared as “Baby” or by name, aged 1/12 in the Census form, just as in the case of baby Willie Williams in 1980. However, he is recorded neither at the farm nor in Mandeville. In fact, there is not a trace of him in any census record in St. Tammany or elsewhere for 1900 or 1910.¹⁴

Although Alfred married Willie Williams in 1898, it is strange that there are no signs of her in the 1900 Census and that Alfred is enumerated as “single” in 1900. The conditions regarding Tommy Ladnier’s birth pose an important question: Were Willie and Alfred really his biological parents? In the search for proof of the real identity of Tommy Ladnier’s parents, the following facts must be considered.

Alfred’s father, James Mitchell Ladnier, born in Mississippi in January 1838, married Maryann Johnson, born in 1847, in 1870. They had 14 children out of which 13 were alive in 1900. Both were born in Mississippi, and lived at a farm in Mississippi in 1880. The whole family was living at a farm in Florenville outside of Mandeville, St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, in 1900. According to family legend, they were forced to relocate after one of the boys had impregnated a white girl. There is no information when this relocation took place, but one of James Mitchell’s nephews, Calvin G. Ladner married in St. Tammany in August 1898 and land records dated August 1900 for Calvin exists. Knowing that land registration often took years, it is plausible that he had relocated already before 1898. Therefore, this could have helped James Mitchell in his decision to move with his family to Florenville. The land he had owned in Mississippi was prosperous and beautiful and the land in Florenville was mainly forest and not very fertile. It is therefore not very likely that this relocation was done entirely by free will.

With this background, it is possible that Tommy Ladnier was the baby causing the family relocation. Although he always claimed that Willie was his mother and Alfred was his father, there is a slight chance that Tommy was brought up by Willie and Alfred. There are further indications that this was the case. When Willie and Tommy left Mandeville in May 1917, as Tommy told Hugues Panassié in 1938, this was after his father had died.

*After his father’s death, Tommy left with his mother for Chicago. They arrived there 5 May 1917.*¹⁵

However, we know from his death certificate that Alfred died 11 November 1919.¹⁶ His brother Jesse, however, born in April 1877, died on 16 October 1916.¹⁷ This would indicate Jesse being the boy impregnating a white girl, leaving his baby Tommy to Alfred and Willie.

¹² Louisiana Marriage Index 1718-1925. Although the original family name was Ladner, James Mitchell used the name Ladnier but his children used both Ladner and Ladnier. One frequent misspelling of Ladnier was Ladiner or even Ladinier. This spelling was sometimes used in Chicago.

¹³ This is the place and date always stated. However, Tommy Ladnier claimed he was born in New Orleans but this could have been something he wanted to state since he thought that being a “real” New Orleanean was more worthy for a musician than being born in Mandeville.

¹⁴ The 1910 Census seems to have missed a lot of people, at least in St. Tammany.

¹⁵ Panassié, Hugues, *Tommy Ladnier*, Bulletin du Hot Club de France, No. 88 et 89, 1959.

However, all this is just speculation based on rumors albeit with some intriguing facts. What we know for sure is that Tommy Ladnier considered Alfred and Willie his parents and that he loved his mother Willie. His father Alfred, working as a railroad conductor, seems to have been mostly away from home, leaving Willie to work as a washerwoman.

Willie's second marriage

After leaving Mandeville in 1917, Willie and Tommy came to Chicago. In some way, Willie met a man from St. Louis, one Joseph Bingham Bell. They were married on 27 March 1918 in Chicago.¹⁸ There are no reports that her marriage to Alfred was terminated by then, so she perhaps was a bigamist. Joseph Bingham Bell was born on 3 June, 1872 or 1873 as he stated on his Draft Registration card 12 September, 1918.¹⁹ In this registration card, Bell states Willa (sic) Bell as his wife but living in Chicago. At that time Bell was living at 2904 Pine Street in St. Louis and his profession was Express man working in his own business at 3210 Pine Street. He was described as tall and slender.

REGISTRATION CARD

SERIAL NUMBER: 1037 ORDER NUMBER: 1011

1 *Joseph Bingham Bell*

2 *2904 Pine St. Louis Mo.*

3 *15th June not certain as to year 1872 or 1873*

4 *Mo.*

5 *not certain as to year*

6 *1872 or 1873*

7 *Mo.*

8 *Chicago Ill.*

9 *Ill.*

10 *Joseph Bingham Bell*

11 *Express Man*

12 *2904 Pine St. Louis Mo.*

13 *Mo.*

14 *Chicago Ill.*

15 *Ill.*

16 *Ill.*

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There are no evident traces at all of Joseph Bingham Bell in Census records before or after this marriage license.²⁰ Searching the household owners of the St. Louis City Directories 1917 to 1919 reveals that 2904 Pine belonged to one Lemuel Martin. Moreover, 3210 Pine is not listed at all; only showing 3209 and 3211.²¹ In the 1920 Census for St. Louis, Lemuel Martin, 46 (1874), born in South Carolina, and his wife Gertrude, 36 (1884), born in Georgia, were living at 2904 Pine.²² They have

¹⁶ Louisiana, Statewide Death Index, 1900-1949

¹⁷ Louisiana, Statewide Death Index, 1900-1949

¹⁸ Cook County Marriage Index 1914-1942, p 5739.

¹⁹ According to his Draft Registration card from 12 September, 1918, St. Louis. At this time, Bell was not sure of his birth year.

²⁰ One strange finding is that men named Joseph B Bell married three different women in Chicago on 1915, 1918 and 1920. The birth years for these men varies from 1872, 1878 and 1880. There is no proof that this is the same man but no other Joseph B Bell has been found in Chicago or in Missouri. Should this be the same man one can suspect some foul play, especially since Willie stayed in Chicago and never used the name Bell.

²¹ Pine Street is running from the Mississippi parallel to and a few blocks from the railway. Today, Pine Street is cut short at 2800, giving space for new buildings.

²² U.S. Census for the city of St. Louis, Missouri, 7 January, 1920. The enumerator has written something like "Limt" but the address and wife Gertude clearly shows this to be the same Lemuel Martin in the City Directories.

daughter aged 12. Lemuel is employed as a chauffeur at a hauling company. This is an interesting link to Joseph Bell, but even more interesting is that Lemuel has a lodger, one Mac White, 42, employed as fireman at railroad. This shows that Martins had lodgers and that Joseph Bell very well could have been a previous lodger. The connection “hauling chauffeur” and “express man” is worth noting. The City Directories lists some 9-10 express enterprises and one hauling firm on Pine Street, none of them at or near 3210 Pine. So the question is what kind of Express enterprise really Bell managed, since 3210 Pine was non-existent. All this only adds to the confusion about Willie’s second husband Joseph Bell.

Since she was known as Willie Ladnier at her death, it is very probable that the marriage to Joseph Bell was short. Joseph Bell might even have died before 1920 – the Spanish flue ended many marriages. In any case, Willie evidently reassumed the Ladnier surname. It is worth noting that Tommy on his draft registration from 12 September, 1918 stated Willa (sic) Ladnier as his closest relative.

The link to Joseph Bell and St. Louis is very interesting from another point of view. It has been alleged within the Ladnier family that Willie and Tommy spent some time in St. Louis on their way from Mandeville to Chicago. It has also been said that Willie married another man. We now have an indication that Willie and Thomas probably did go to St. Louis first and that Willie perhaps met Joseph there. The St. Louis link is also interesting since Tommy spent some time in that city, as a professional musician, around 1921-1922.

Willie lived at different addresses in Chicago; on 3223 Indiana Avenue in September 1918 and at 748 E 45th Street in 1923.

Willie’s death

As reported in the Chicago Defender, Willie Ladiner, 38 (sic) was accidentally shot at a party in her home, 748 E 45th Street on 11 March, 1923.²³ She was brought to a hospital but died of her injuries on 13 March, and was buried on 16 March. In her death certificate, Edward Williams and Adaline Williams were stated as her parents.²⁴

At the trial following her death, Julius Avery, a white man, was sentenced to prison at Joliet, Stateville, on 14 June, 1923.²⁵ Tommy Ladnier grieved his mother immensely; in fact this has been one of the reasons said to have made him an alcoholic. Another burden was his marriage to Hazel B. Mathews (Hazel “Daisy” Ladnier), described elsewhere in a document on his marriage.²⁶

Willie Williams Ladnier family tree

With the obtained information, it is possible to draw the Willie Williams Ladnier family tree.

²³ Chicago Defender, 17 March, 1923.

²⁴ Illinois, Deaths and Stillbirths Index, 1916-1947

²⁵ Court case number 6457, <http://homicide.northwestern.edu/database>

²⁶ Bo Lindström: *Tommy Ladnier’s wife Hazel B. Ladnier*

