



BEN WILLIAMS



Silver Circle Profile By: **Kevin Wing** (Ben & Walter Winchell)

Class of 2000

Ben Williams was inspired to become a journalist with the likes and the extraordinary talent of **Walter Winchell**. It was that fascination with the noted mid-20th century newspaper columnist and radio broadcaster that spawned an acute interest in the profession in Williams.

For more than a quarter of a century, from the mid-1960s until his retirement from San Francisco's KPIX in 1992, Williams was one of the Bay Area's most prolific television reporters. He was also the first black television reporter — male or female — in the Bay Area, paving the way for many others who would eventually follow his lead in what was then a mostly-white profession.

Williams never thought he'd get into television news. Inducted into the *Silver Circle* in 2000, he had aspirations to be a newspaper reporter, just like Winchell, the man he wanted to emulate as a journalist.

Growing up in St. Louis, Williams studied journalism at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. After graduating from there in the 1950s, he moved to California, settling in the Bay Area. He graduated from San Francisco State University in the early 1960s, then went to work for two black daily newspapers, the first being the *Bay Area Daily Record*. That was followed later by the *San Francisco Sun-Reporter*.

For those familiar with San Francisco City Hall these days, the name **Dr. Carlton Goodlett, Jr.** may come to mind. The one-block section of Polk Street — in front of City Hall and across from Civic Center Plaza — is named after him. But, back in the 1960s, Goodlett was a powerful man; he owned the *San Francisco Sun-Reporter*.

At the *Sun-Reporter*, Williams wrote a column. And then, after doing that for a while, the editors of one of San Francisco's two largest newspapers — the *San Francisco Examiner* — gave Williams a call that would change his life. The year was 1962.

"One day, I got a call from **Gale Cook**, who was the city editor at the *Examiner*," Williams said. Cook hired Williams, becoming the first black news reporter in the newspaper's history. As Williams' newspaper career took off, his work became recognized.

He received several honors during that time, winning the San Francisco Press Club Award twice, along with the **Jane Herra** Award from the San Francisco Lawyers Guild, and the **Edward McQuade** Award.

Cook placed Williams in a privileged spot in the newsroom, giving him a desk next to Pulitzer Prize winner **Ed Montgomery**, who was the big name at the paper at that time. "It was very intimidating to be sitting next to this man who won the Pulitzer, but I held my own, and I learned from him and everyone else in that newsroom," Williams recalled.

In 1965, KPIX came calling. It was the news team to beat in the Bay Area, and the newscast to watch.

"Back then, **Lou Simon**, the station manager of Channel 5, called and said he wanted to hire me," Williams says. "He'd read my work at the *Examiner*, offered to give me a \$25 a week raise over what I made at the paper, and I turned it down. Yes, it was a fantastic offer at the time, but I'd been told a lot about TV news in those days — that stations cleaned house often whenever someone new came in to run the place. And then, you'd be out of work. At the paper, as long as I was a member of (the San Francisco) Newspaper Guild, I had a job."

Simon persisted, wanting Williams even more. He made another offer to him — a \$30 a week raise over what he earned at the *Examiner*. Williams accepted, and soon, he'd begin working at a station he'd stay with for more than 25 years.

"TV was really kind of frightening," he said. "On my first day at Channel 5, they threw me in and told me to swim. My first assignment was a political convention in Fresno."

Williams' honors have included an Emmy® Award along with honors from the National Association of Black Journalists, the Society of Professional Journalists and numerous awards from civic and community organizations. Williams, who taught journalism at San Francisco State for 11 years while working at KPIX, also received an honor from his alma mater in the form of a Broadcast Media Award for his story about **Sara Jane Moore**, the woman who attempted to assassinate **President Gerald R. Ford** in San Francisco in 1975.

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Recalling his early years at KPIX, Williams speaks highly of his then-assignment editor, **Fred Zehnder** (*Silver Circle Class of 1991*), who would one day become assistant news director at KGO-TV for a short time before beginning his legendary 23-year tenure as news director at Oakland's KTVU from, 1976 to 1999.

"He had this penetrating ability to interview people, and he did it very well," remembers Zehnder, who retired from KTVU and TV news and now owns and publishes two weekly newspapers in San Leandro and Castro Valley. "Ben was a reporter through and through. He was a pro in every best sense of the word. He was really the first professional reporter KPIX had ever had. He was well-grounded, well-prepared, and he always asked the tough questions."

Besides friend and colleague Zehnder, Williams also worked in the 1960s with the likes of anchors **John Weston** and **Wanda Ramey** (*Silver Circle Class of 1989*). Eventually, **Belva Davis** (*Silver Circle Class of 1989*) joined KPIX, becoming the station's first black female anchor and reporter.

In those days, San Francisco was "not a good place for minorities," as Williams points out. "I covered the demonstrations at the Sheraton Palace Hotel, where the doors were blocked by hundreds of UC Berkeley students who were protesting the lack of minority employees at that hotel and all the city's hotels."

"Once I covered a press conference at the Fairmont Hotel," Williams said. "I go there with my cameraman, who was white. Well, the guy who called the press conference kept talking with my cameraman, who kept saying, hey, he's the reporter. Talk to him."

During most of Williams' career at KPIX, the Bay Area was what he called a "dream garden for journalists."

"Everything started here in the Bay Area — the Black Panther Party started here. I became close to **Huey Newton** and **Bobby Seale**. I did every trial Newton was involved with, covered every altercation," he recalls. "The free speech movement started at Berkeley. The anti-war movement started here. And all of this swept across the country. The

women's liberation movement started here in the Bay Area. **Patty Hearst** was kidnapped here. There was just a lot going on during those years."

Are today's TV reporters anything close to **Indiana Jones**? As a reporter for KPIX, Williams was covering the anti-war movement on the Berkeley campus. To get into Wheeler Hall to interview student protesters barricaded inside, Williams climbed up a rope to get through the windows. Then he ran downstairs and opened the door for his cameraman.

In 1971, a man named **Juan Corona** became a headline after he killed 27 migrant farm workers who he hired to work in the orchards of Yuba City. Corona was a labor negotiator. He buried all of the bodies in a peach orchard.

"I covered all of Corona's trials," Williams said. "It was a big story in the early 70s."

In 1974, when newspaper heiress Patty Hearst was kidnapped from her Berkeley apartment by members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, Williams was already in Berkeley, so his producers put him on the story. "I was at the Berkeley Police Department when the announcement came down. I went to her apartment, the cops were just taking **Steven Weed** (Hearst's boyfriend at the time) to the hospital — he'd been hit over the head with bottles. We interviewed the neighbors. I followed that story forever, including the food giveaway by Hearst's father, **Randolph Hearst**, who had been ordered by the SLA to give away food to the homeless and needy in exchange for the return of his daughter. Of course, we know what would happen after that, and the rest is history."

Several years before this, Williams just happened to be in the right place at the right time for a journalist. In June of 1968, KPIX sent him to Los Angeles to report on **Max Rafferty**, a man who was running to be California's next superintendent of schools. Rafferty was campaigning in a conference room at the Ambassador Hotel, directly next door to the ballroom where **Sen. Robert Kennedy** was campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination.

"All of a sudden, there was a commotion in the hallway, just as I was about to interview Rafferty," Williams said. "Everyone filed out into the hallway to see what was going on, and then someone said

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Kennedy had been shot. I said, oh my God, called to my cameraman, and we started to head for the kitchen. But, by then, a guard had already been posted there. He said we couldn't go in there. And I told him, "man, a team of wild horses couldn't keep me out of there," and we went in. But, by then, Kennedy had been taken out another doorway. But, I saw **Sirhan Sirhan** being held up against the wall by **Roosevelt Grier** to prevent people from killing Sirhan. We ended up doing a live shot in the hallway outside the kitchen. Then later, we held vigil outside the hospital where Bobby Kennedy would die the next day."

Williams says his 25-plus years at KPIX are "very memorable." During that time, he also served nine years as the station's East Bay Bureau chief based in Oakland.

"I'd done thousands of stories there, and every one of them was memorable to me," he said.

"Ben was a dream to work with," Zehnder said. "He's one of the best people I've ever worked with. The quality of his work was something special."

After retiring, Williams and his wife, **Vivian**, traveled the world, visiting Africa and China twice and to the Caribbean several times. They have been married 55 years, and raised three sons.

"My career was so much fun," Williams said. "I was so fortunate."



Kevin Wing pens Silver & Gold Circle profiles every month for Off Camera. He is a news writer at KNTV/NBC Bay Area in San Jose and hosts a travel series, Catch a Wave.

Rabbit Ears

By David Sarno
Los Angeles Times

Southland viewers are finding they can get nearly three times as many channels as they once could with an antenna. And best of all, they're free.

On a recent winter night, while neighbors strung their Baldwin Park homes with Christmas lights, the Lams and their three children sat in front of a television set with rabbit ears sprouting out of the top.

Wait a second — rabbit ears? Is this 1950?

No, it's 2010, and the Lams are a modern Los Angeles family that, like many in the region, are rediscovering the convenience — and economics — of the old-fashioned TV antenna.

In the wake of the transition to digital television, Southland viewers are finding they can get nearly three times as many channels as they once could with an antenna. And rather than the erratic, fuzzy reception of yesteryear, today's rabbit ears are capable of delivering a surprisingly clear high-definition picture.

"Best of all, it's free," said **Nancy Lam**, the mother of the family.

"I've saved a lot of money by getting rid of cable," Lam said. "We only had to purchase the antenna one time, and now we have it forever, instead of paying every single month."

In these penny-pinching times, watching TV over the airwaves is becoming an increasingly attractive option for many households, particularly among the Los Angeles region's minority communities.

Although the number of households with antennas in the U.S. fell slightly in the last year, nearly 20,000 Asian American homes in the region began using rabbit ears, and 8,000 African Americans switched to over-the-air TV, according to the media research firm Nielsen Co.

Nearly a quarter of Latino households with televisions, or about 440,000 homes, already tune in with an antenna — the most of any demographic group in the area.

About 11% of U.S. households — or about 13 million homes — watch over-the-air broadcasts.

But watching TV over the airwaves has begun to appeal to a broader audience.

"It's the best-kept secret around here," said **Mike Mahan**, who recently installed a pair of antennas in the attic of his Ladera Ranch home and dropped his cable subscription. "I just got tired of paying for hundreds of channels I don't watch."



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