

Shelton Williams

Washed in the Blood

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## INTRODUCTION

*by Ken Brodnax*

My name had been given to him as a person with a good memory and attention to detail. He was looking to dig up long dormant information on a four-decade-old murder case in which he had a special interest. And so a dialogue developed between me and this guy who said to just call him Shelly.

Turns out, the man was talking about a case that I had heard about since I had arrived in the flat, barren center of the Permian Basin known as Odessa, Texas.

Most of what I had heard was secondhand since the murder took place 10 years before my arrival. But what I had heard was pretty reliable since a couple of my better friends had been the defense attorney for the accused and the guy who covered the trials for the local newspaper. Oh, and I should point out that I'd spent more than 30 years writing in various capacities at that same newspaper, the Odessa American. And for all the years as a columnist, sports writer and editorial page editor, I still hadn't gotten the police reporter out of my blood. Any true crime story got my attention.

So I listened to what the guy on the other end of the phone had to say. He was now a college professor, but he had a vested interest in the story that he wanted to write.

## Shelton Williams

He had lived through the spectacular murder case and, in fact, was quite close to the victim. Said he'd been thinking about the story for a long time and was making a renewed effort to put it down in words.

At first, I was just trying to help him find sources and point him in the right direction to ferret out information. Then he offered to let me look at his manuscript. It was a nice piece of writing that really personalized the case that I had seen as a mere footnote in the sometimes-ghastly history of Odessa. In fact, if a prospective reader will just take the time to read his first chapter, I guarantee he or she will be hooked.

In the story, I saw an Odessa that made me think about the way the town was when I arrived in 1971. And it made me think of how much the place had changed from the time of the murder to when I arrived — and then again how much it had changed from 1971 until the present time. He had a tale of tragedy that would have been an inspiration to ol' Bill Shakespeare. Fittingly enough, Odessa is home to a replica of the Bard's Globe Theatre.

The second time I went back to read the piece, I realized that my newfound friend was writing about more than the death of a teenage girl. He was describing the attitudes and atmosphere of a unique community and what bearing they had on the sequence of events. From the time I came to Odessa until my dad died, he was always shaking his head and marveling about something that had happened in Odessa. "There's no place like it," he said over and over again from his home of San Angelo, a drive of two hours away.

Indeed, the place had provided me with many column ideas. There were characters galore and events that were sometimes beyond anything that you could create as fiction. Take, for instance, the time Odessa's mayor paid a late-night visit to a former girlfriend to retrieve a pistol that he had left at her house. When she wouldn't answer

## Washed in the Blood

his knocks, the honorable mayor kicked the door in. That's when he found out she already had a visitor — a college soccer player who proceeded to defend her honor with his fists. When the mayor went on television the next night to explain the situation, he appeared in profile so only the undamaged side of his face would be visible to the camera.

We gradually decided that maybe a collaboration might be in order. My professor buddy had his story to tell, but the aftermath didn't end with the conclusion of the court case. It was finally decided that I could sort of pick up where the professor left off, giving a fuller picture of what happened to some of the principals in the case and extending the description of the community where it all happened.

Odessa has always been a place where you do what you're big enough to do. And if you're not big enough, you find out pretty quick — as did the unfortunate mayor.

So I'll let him go first since he has age and chronology on his side. Then I'll take it from there and tell some of my tales about Odessa and some of the people who were central to the unhappy set of circumstances that led to the idea in the first place.

What emerges is an interesting, and all true, glimpse at an extraordinary city as it evolved during the final half of the 20th century.

*“There’s enough ignorance in Odessa  
to support an eight-year university.”*

— Warren Burnett,  
during a legislative hearing to determine  
the viability of putting an institution of  
higher learning in Odessa.

## CHAPTER I

### *The Stock Pond*

The crisp air of a West Texas night in early spring is distinctive. The breeze is gentle and not yet erratic or even dangerous as it becomes later in “tornado season.” The stars, millions of them, seem near enough to touch. It’s the smell. No matter how beautiful it is, no matter how still the breeze, the smell of crude oil is still there. You might forget what pure air smells like, but on certain nights and at certain times, that odor will hit you and remind you that things just aren’t as pure as you think. March 20, 1961, was just such a night.

Betty Williams and Mack Herring noticed the smell but neither commented on it. Might be that they didn’t really smell it but chances are they did and just didn’t say anything. They had other things to think about. Mack’s jeep sped over the oilfield roads taking every bump hard as they drove in silence to the stock pond. Betty, sitting there in her pink baby doll pajamas and duster, shivered in the cold. Now they were at the pond. The smell of cows intermingled with the crude to make the place a pungent reminder that West Texas really was out in the middle of nowhere.

Mack helped Betty from the jeep and retrieved his red football jacket with the white leather sleeves. She had

## Shelton Williams

never worn it before even when they were going together. He had not wanted anyone to know they were seeing each other secretly. She was reluctant to give it back to him now, but then she also did not want to chance ruining it. As they chatted briefly about the right spot to go, the clouds moved more quickly above, as if the gods wanted to move them just to have a little bit better view. Mack had to go back to the jeep once to get the string of wire and weights that he had gotten from the Odessa American newspaper. There was just too much to carry in one trip. Betty, usually talkative to a fault, stood silently as he made the trip. When he came back, he asked her how she was.

“Fine”, she said, “Fine.”

“OK,” he said, “Should I spread this blanket?”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary,” she said.

With that, he smoothed out the ground next to the pond and rid it of any rocks or mesquite twigs that might have gathered there. “Kneel down,” he said.

“No, wait, Mack. I want a kiss. You said we could kiss.”

“Yes, OK,” he said. He held her by the shoulders and tried to give her a simple kiss on the lips. She parted her lips and drew him in to a longer kiss with their tongues intermingling. He broke it off too quickly. “OK, kneel down,” he said. Slowly, sliding her hands on his jeans as she went down, she knelt. Mack picked up his 12-gauge and held it to her temple.

“Tell me when you are ready,” Mack said.

“Now,” she said. Mack then pulled the trigger of the 12-gauge and blew off the back third of Betty’s head.

## CHAPTER II

### *Baseball Practice*

Baseball is a lesser sport in West Texas. Football is King. In West Texas high school football is the King of Kings. In Odessa, kids grew up hearing stories of Byron Townsend, Carl Schlemeyer and Hayden Fry. No matter how good they were or what sacrifices they were willing to make, they would never be as good as those guys. They could never run as fast, tackle as hard, or endure as much pain as the high school legends before them. If they were to be real men, they would play football and perhaps have the opportunity to play on the same practice field as Ronnie Goodwin. They just could never be as great. Other sports—track, tennis, or baseball—were passable diversions, but they fell well below football. Even the final spring training intra-squad scrimmages drew larger audiences than championship baseball games. Baseball is a lesser sport.

But in March 1961 it was baseball season. I played and loved baseball. In a perfect world I would be big enough and have a strong enough arm to play pro ball. In the real world, I was a fairly solid hitter and an average position player, no matter which position the coach chose. As a junior, I wouldn't get to play much, but Coach Cook wanted my bat in the line-up somewhere. I had occasional

## Shelton Williams

power, and no one could remember when I had not hit at least .300. But where to put me?

In football, my second favorite sport, I was a natural middle guard in the Permian High School system. Stout, quick, disciplined and determined, I would stick my nose into anything. But in baseball, I had no natural position yet, and Cook had all-star seniors everywhere he looked—except left field. When Gary Crain, senior all-state fullback with a scholarship to the University of Texas, was scheduled to pitch, perhaps, Cook thought, I could take Crain's position in left field.

The wind blows hard in West Texas in March. No trees slow it down. No tall buildings arrest its movement. It just blows. Flight patterns of fly balls hit into the West Texas sky sometimes look like drunken bumblebees, sometimes like darts. At least that was my experience on March 22, 1961. As Cook fungoed ball after ball my way, only the occasional one accidentally hit the glove and none of them stuck. Mounting frustration made my fielding even worse. I even began to fumble ground balls. I was on the verge of tears when the strangest thing happened. My mother walked out onto the field. Frustration gave way to embarrassment as my chubby little mom in a flowered dress talked with Cook and looked toward me. I thought, Mama, what in the hell are you doin'? Cook looked my way and then gestured me in from the field. Twenty other baseball players stopped whatever drill they were doing to watch me trot in. No one could ever remember a mom on a ball field, not even a baseball field.

"Mama, what's goin' on?" I asked. She was in tears. Cook, who had not a sensitive bone in his former Marine's body, walked away so we could speak alone. But she could not speak. She was overcome by emotion. She clutched me, cried and tried to utter a word without success.

"Mama, calm down. What is it? Are you OK? Is Daddy OK?" At the mention of my father's name, she got control.

"Shelly," she said, "They have killed Betty!"

## Washed in the Blood

I couldn't take it in. My cousin went to school across town, the old school, Odessa High. Mention of her name did not belong at Permian. She had no connection to baseball.

"Betty who?" I asked. "Betty who?"

"Betty Williams," she blurted, "Betty Williams!"

"Betty's dead?" I stammered.

That could not be. Not that the thought of death and Betty were inseparable. She had mentioned it frequently. She wanted to die, she said. Dying was preferable to life, especially in West Texas, she said. She had tried to kill herself before, once with four aspirin. She was not called "Drama Mama" for just being the star in three OHS stage productions her junior year. Everything was drama with Betty. But every time she had ever talked of death with me as we sat in our family's '53 Oldsmobile out in front of his house or hers—every time—we ended up making out.

She was dead? "They" killed her? Who are "they"? She's dead because we made out, I thought. That was a natural thought, too. Betty and I were Baptists.

I can't remember going back to the locker room after mom left. I don't remember the drive back home to our small house on Patton Street. The next time I knew, I was at home — smashing the records that Betty and I often played when she came over. "Take Five," "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah," "Ray Charles Sings Country," Gogi Grant's "The Wayward Wind." That was her song:

The wayward wind was a restless wind,  
A restless wind that yearns to wander;  
Oh, I was born the next of kin,  
The next of kin to a wayward wind.

No more. She's dead. Who did it? How? Why? The last question I would never completely answer.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Rack*

Daddy set off for work at the car wash every morning by at least 7:00. It didn't matter what he'd done the night before, drinking 'til 3:00, playing poker at the American Legion or visiting his main girlfriend, Dallas (I swear that was her name). He was always there, at the rack.

I admired his fortitude as much as I resented his desire to "teach me the value of a dollar" by making me go to work with him every Saturday. Still, he believed that eight years old was good a time to learn life's hard lessons, so I went.

Looking back, I realize that I didn't really have to work too hard. Once the cars came out the end of the rack, right after they had passed through the blowers and got an initial rubdown, someone would drive them off the rack, make a sharp U turn, and pull them out front to the gas pumps for a final rubdown. My job, once they got out front, was to polish the hubcaps.

Daddy bought the car wash just the year before, in 1952. He had been driving through Odessa on his way back to California from picking up a couple of new cars from Detroit. He had driven all the way through Odessa and was having a beer and a burger at the Nip and Sip on Second Street when he figured that he should go back

## Washed in the Blood

into town and clean off those cars before getting back to Fresno.

As luck would have it, the Odessa rack was nearly identical to the one he worked for in Fresno. It even had Chem Therm equipment. The place didn't have much business and it was obviously badly managed — nobody smiled at him when he drove in and his door panels were never touched — but Daddy thought it was a nice rack anyway.

When he got home, he called back to the place and discovered that it was for sale for \$12,000. That was an impossibly high price, but the Scotts who owned it (along with the three movie theaters in town) agreed to loan Daddy the full amount at 2 percent interest.

So, we packed up Suziebell, our 1947 Plymouth, drove across the Rockies, and moved to Texas. I still remember walking down the strip in Las Vegas on our way, but what impressed me even more were the lights of Odessa shining through the desert night as we drove into town somewhere near midnight on Nov. 13, 1952.

We damned near starved in Odessa the first two years. Even though the town was growing, the car wash had been run into the ground and nothing Daddy did seemed to attract customers. The rack had costs whether or not we had customers — the mortgage payment, the electricity and most of all the help. In the early '50s, car washes were labor intensive and most of the labor was black. Daddy paid everyone \$1 an hour, which was standard, but he didn't hire and fire quite as ruthlessly as some racks did. That was because of the "Boys." The "Boys" had followed Daddy from Oberlin, Louisiana, to Fresno, California, to Odessa, Texas. They were all male, all black and all Cajun. Why they liked to work for Daddy, I'll never know for sure, but they were loyal to him and he was, more or less, loyal to them. Reflecting their Louisiana roots, they called Daddy, King Fish; my Mom, Mama Fish; while I was, of course, Baby Fish. In a real

## Shelton Williams

sense the King Fish was taking care of our family plus five rambunctious, young and hard-working black families as well.

One day, Daddy got an idea. I would not be going to the car wash to work that Saturday. Instead I should ask Joe Bob Chapman and Dale Everett, neighborhood kids, if they'd like to make a little spending money passing out leaflets that weekend. They said yes, so we were off and running. Daddy found a printer in town to produce a thousand single-page leaflets of various colors — red, orange, yellow and green. On each of these was printed the following message along with the address of Bill's Car Wash:

### STARTING NEXT SATURDAY

59-Cent Car Wash!

with 18 or more gal. of gas

\$1.25            15-18 gal.

\$1.50            10-15 gal.

\$1.75 all others

It was a crude leaflet and a simple message. The three of us walked all over town passing them out. We hit houses, parking lots and even pedestrians. The following Saturday morning Daddy decided to leave for the rack even earlier than usual. We pulled into the lot at 6:45. Even Daddy didn't know how to explain what we saw. Cars were lined up both ways around the block waiting for the 8 a.m. opening. I did not wipe down hubcaps that day. Instead I stood at the juncture of the lines feeding into the entrance and helped sort out who was next in line to have his car vacuumed. I have often thought back to that morning as the beginning of my eventual diplomatic career. It was also the beginning of my family's move up to the lower-middle class. From that day on, business boomed and the Williams' family could leave behind duplexes on unpaved roads and baloney sandwiches for

## Washed in the Blood

dinner.

For his innovative marketing idea, Daddy was asked to become the president of the Car Wash Association of America. Discounting car washes for the amount of gas sold became a national practice. He was proud of the honor and he put the CWA certificate with his name on it up on the office wall, but he declined to attend the association's meetings. He hated meetings and he would go nowhere that might expect him to wear a suit and tie.

He did, however, get on the phone to Southern Illinois to tell his brother Joe to come to Texas. What he said was blunt. "Joe, you won't have your precious god-damned carpenter's union down here, but at least, by God, you'll find work." Joe didn't like that sort of language and he sure didn't like the rough and tumble nature of an oil boomtown in the middle of the West Texas desert. But a man has to feed his family. Within weeks he packed up his wife and three girls and moved to Odessa. They moved in right next door to us on Muskingum Street.



Betty Williams,  
Odessa High School Yearbook,  
1959

Football was Shelly's  
second favorite sport.

