

## The Williamses return to Oklahoma — 23 years and many friends later

Times Tribune staff

Cecil and Velma Williams have lived in East Palo Alto for 23 years, but they're still Midwesterners at heart.

Velma Williams has taught in the Ravenswood City School District for 22 years and has earned a reputation as one of the best teachers in the district. Cecil Williams, a cartographer for the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park, is best known as a guitar-picking country and western singer who writes and sings tunes about black cowboys of the Old West. The couple also leads a local Boy Scout troop.

Both say they have grown attached to the community during the past two decades but, having been born and reared in Oklahoma, have decided to return home at the end of this month.

On Monday night, the City Council honored the Williamses for providing "a lasting and significant contribution to our community" and made them honorary lifetime citizens of East Palo Alto.

The council room was filled with children and adults who came to watch the couple receive their certificates of appreciation. When the presentation ended, most of the audience filed out of the room. Several said they simply came to show their gratitude.

"I get all choked up now every time I think about leaving," Velma said recently in her classroom at Brentwood Oaks Elementary school. "It's getting so close to moving time."

The second-grade instructor sat in a miniature chair usually occupied by a pint-sized student. Next to her, in another little chair, sat her husband, wearing a cowboy hat, denim jacket and jeans, complete with a big old-fashioned country belt buckle. They spoke almost as one person, taking turns explaining what "we" thought.

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"We've been very active in this community, but never in the real controversial things," Cecil said. "We do what we can without getting involved in that."

The controversies they have shunned are mostly political ones such as incorporation, annexation and rent control. They admit those battles are important for the community, just not their bailiwick.

The Williamses have instead focused their energies primarily on helping the children of the community.

Although Cecil has strummed his guitar across the state and as far away as Nigeria for the 1977 World's Fair, he most often entertains school children with country songs and stories about the American black cowboy. The subject, he said, is largely ignored in standard history lessons, but is a fascinating one nevertheless.

By his own estimate, he's performed for 60 percent of the elementary and junior high schools in the Bay Area. It all began in Velma's classroom in 1961 when she first started in Ravenswood as a substitute teacher.

Velma, who estimates she has taught at least 600 students during her stay with the Ravenswood district, said the past two decades often have been tumultuous times for the district. But, she said, "I get my satisfaction working directly with the children."

Parents often request that their children get in Velma's class years in advance. All those parents, the instructor said, know her teaching technique requires parental participation.

"The family structure seems to have broken down,"



Times Tribune staff photo by Victor J. Volta

Velma and Cecil Williams will remain in the hearts of many children on the Peninsula — and many adults they touched as children — when they leave East Palo Alto to return "home" to Oklahoma at the end of this month.

Velma said, "but we're sticking to it."

In fact, Velma and Cecil believe their family is the top priority. Referring to their work with the Boy Scouts, Velma said, "We don't feel it would be complete unless the family was involved."

They've raised three daughters, all of whom graduated from the Ravenswood district and went on to college.

In many ways, since moving to California in 1959, the Williamses have yearned to return home. Several years ago, they built a sun porch in their backyard with a tin roof so that when it rains the pelted drops remind them of rain hitting the tin roofs of Oklahoma houses.

"To go even further," Velma said, "when it hasn't rained for a long time, Cecil will go turn on the sprinklers."