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Prisoner turned actor seeks closure

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Published: Saturday, February 6, 2010 8:31 PM CST

From chopping cotton at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman to acting in movies alongside Harrison Ford and Morgan Freeman, Willie C. Williams has come a long way in his 63 years.

But for now he'd just like the chance to return to his native Minter City without looking over his shoulder.

Williams was convicted of burglarizing a house in 1963 at the age of 16.

Today a youth convicted of the same offense could get sentences ranging between probation and a curfew to 90 days in the Juvenile Detention Center, depending on mitigating or aggravating circumstances, according to Leflore County Youth Court Judge Kevin Adams.

In the harsh justice of Williams' era, especially for blacks, the 16-year-old with no previous criminal record received a 15-year sentence to Parchman. He was also indicted for attempted rape, but that charge was dropped when Williams pleaded guilty to the burglary.

After five years at Parchman — then a notorious work farm where prisoners guarded other prisoners — Williams was paroled.

He soon fled to Chicago after he says he was mistreated at a Kilmichael dairy farm. Leaving the state was a violation of Williams' parole.

In Chicago, Williams married, had four children and went on to a steady career with a vending machine company. He also took on a sideline as an actor under the stage name Afram Bill Williams.

He started taking acting classes in his 30s and began his professional career with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre.

Williams has acted in stage shows on Broadway and in London and garnered small parts in several Hollywood blockbusters. He played a store clerk who sold Harrison Ford some clothes in 1993's "The Fugitive," and he had a speaking role in "Flatliners" starring Kiefer Sutherland, Julia Roberts and Kevin Bacon.

He was also in "Chain Reaction" with fellow Mississippian Morgan Freeman in 1996.

Throughout it all, though, the long ago parole violation has hung over William's head.

"You kind of want to know what it's like to be free again," Williams said in a telephone interview last week from his home in Chicago.

He has visited Mississippi a few times over the years but says he tries to keep a low profile.

However, Williams might not have anything to worry about.

Neither the Mississippi Department of Corrections nor the state Parole Board could find any record of Williams' incarceration or parole when contacted last week.

Williams said he called about his status in the late 1970s and was told his case was still on file but the state was

not actively looking for him. He said he'd like to get a pardon from the governor.

His prison record hasn't really impeded Williams' career, he said, but the experience at Parchman did shape his life.

"At 16, it was kind of scary," he said. "When I first went there, they were still whipping guys. They had the lash."

Williams spent his first two summers working in the fields and the winters teaching other inmates to read at the prison's school. He spent his last three years as a trusty and did work as a cook and house boy.

During his time at Parchman, Williams said he learned how to live with people and compares it to working in an ensemble cast in a play.

When he first began his acting training, Williams said he was painfully shy. He used drama as a form of therapy.

"I had to dig down, really find out a lot of stuff about who I was," he said.

Williams has written a play, named "Down by the Tallahatchie," about life in Minter City.

It has been performed at several churches in Chicago. He'd like to bring it to Greenwood if he can get his parole violation worked out.

He said he's sorry for what happened in his youth and wasn't a criminal. He was just angry and alienated from the society he grew up in.

"I feel lucky to have found myself and to love myself," Williams said.

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