

No one alive knows the full story of native Ocracoke islander, Charles Irvin Williams, born 1898, the son of Tilmon L. Williams and Elizabeth Scarborough Williams.

From the moment of his birth, Charles' mother considered him a girl, called him Vera and dressed him in feminine clothes.

For twenty-one years Vera pursued conventional female activities, grew long curly tresses, attended school as a girl, and presented herself everywhere as female. No one suspected that she might actually be a male.

Vera's neighbors, teachers, and siblings all thought she was a girl. Vera learned to cook and sew at her mother's side, played house with other young girls, and tended to babies in her teenage years. She entertained suitors, once nearly accepting an offer of engagement. No one may have known the truth.

In 1919 Vera Williams ordered a suit of clothes and assorted other items from the catalog of a New York City enterprise, The Charles William Stores, an early twentieth century mail order competitor to Montgomery Ward and Sears & Roebuck. Vera adopted a new name, borrowed from the cover of the catalog - Charles Williams.

The next morning, with a few dollars in his pocket, his hair cut short, and attired in his new wardrobe, Charles Williams boarded the daily mailboat bound for the mainland. So complete was his transformation, that fellow passenger, cousin Stacy Howard, did not recognize him.

From North Carolina Charles traveled by bus to Baltimore. He easily found employment in a restaurant. For more than a year Charlie Irvin Williams, as he was now called, remained in Baltimore. He rented a room in a boarding house, and slowly adapted to city life. Before long he was dating young ladies.

But, like so many young men who left home to work far away, Charlie Irvin was homesick for his beloved island and the simple joys of his tiny, isolated community. Unsure how he would be treated at home, however, he hesitated to return. After careful consideration, he finally decided to travel back to Ocracoke to visit his family.

As it turned out, islanders demonstrated their charitable natures and accepted Charlie Irvin for the man he had become. For the next few decades he worked in various cities along the eastern seaboard, both in restaurants and on the water. Charlie Irvin married and fathered two children, Isabelle and Charles.

Charlie Irvin returned to Ocracoke frequently. On several occasions he remained on the

island for extended periods. In the late 1930s he rented a small cottage on Howard Street with his wife and small daughter. They stayed for the summer, and Charlie secured a job cooking at the Pamlico Inn.

Sometime after WWII Charlie Irvin worked as a crew member on a vessel on its way to Norfolk, Virginia when a storm overtook them. The vessel broke apart, and Charlie Irvin drowned.

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Charlie Irvin Williams' story is one of confusion, uncertainty, and difficult decisions. It is also the story of determination, resoluteness, and the triumph of tolerance over prejudice. There is some oral Ocracoke Island tradition which suggests that Charlie Irvin was hermaphroditic (intersexed). According to Alice Dreger in her 1998 book, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, "The appearance of the genitals might...change over the course of the lifetime. Change in sexual anatomy...is the rule for most of us, but in some hermaphrodites, genitalia have been observed to undergo unusual transformations from a more female-like to a more male-like conformation, and vice versa." Dreger mentions in particular a major type of male pseudohermaphroditism known as 5-alpha-reductase (5-AR) deficiency, which "results in an apparent female-to-male transformation at puberty."

Following are several independent accounts of the Charlie Irvin Williams story. Several of these stories claim that his mother deliberately deceived him and the community into thinking that he was female. The truth might be that Charlie's mother and the attending midwife were unsure of Charlie's gender...or truly believed he was a girl.

This first account is a transcript of a 1968 interview with Ms. Bessie Howard, wife of Ocracoke's long-time postmaster, Mr. Tom Wallace Howard. She tells the story as she knew it.

— "A young man was born on Ocracoke. He lived [as] a girl for 21 years, and sent off and ordered a suit of clothes, shoes, and everything, and his mother cut his hair. He was wearing long hair. His mother cut his hair, and he left next morning on the mailboat. He'd already procured him a job in Baltimore to go there to work. So his cousin was on the mailboat and didn't even know who he was. And his cousin asked him where he was from. He said "Ocracoke." He [the cousin] said, "Well you look like some of my folks." [The young man] said, "I may be, for all you know." So his cousin didn't know who he was till he [the cousin - Stacy Howard] got a letter from his wife after he got to Norfolk telling him Charlie Irvin, that Vera, had left home and gone off dressed as a man. He'd changed to a

man, and changed her name to Charlie Irvin.

“He went to Baltimore and worked in a job there. ‘Twas during the First World War, for a year or more, and he came back. And he told his mother when he left, if everybody thought it was such a disgrace to him that he’d never come back again, but if they didn’t, why he might come back to see her sometime. So, of course, people didn’t think it was so bad, so he came back to visit her.

“And he came to our house, and my husband’s sister was there, and my husband’s mother, and nobody knew him when he came in. My husband met him to the door and talked to him. It was Charlie Irvin. And in the meantime [she means “years ago”], while my second son was born, and he [Vera/Charlie Irvin] lived with me and took care of the baby, and waited on me while the baby was little. And that was while he was wearing dresses and doing all of the housework and all. And so it seemed odd to me to see him being there dressed as a man.

“So his [Ms. Bessie’s husband’s] sister said to him, said, “Charlie Irvin,” said, “how did you get along while you were gone?” He said, “I never made a mistake from the time I left here till I come back, except the night I was leaving Baltimore I got on the wrong streetcar with my girl.” Sissie said, “Whoopee, I’ll go home after that, ‘cause he might want to go home with me.”

“And this was.... He lived 21 years as a girl, and had changed to a man, and went away, and that is hard for people to believe, but I know it to be the truth. And he’s come back to Ocracoke several times, cooked in the Coast Guard Station several times, and last year he was drowned off of a tugboat out in...., near Norfolk somewhere.”

— On July 27, 1921 the following report ran in *The Wilmington [NC] Morning Star*:

#### “BOUGHT PANTS AND THINGS

“Washington, July 26 - Verification has been had here of the story of Charles, alias Vera, Williams. Born a husky boy [I think this is speculation on the part of the reporter; at birth Charlie may have appeared to be a girl, or of ambiguous gender], Charles Williams was dressed as a girl. His mother, an Ocracoke woman, had hoped for a daughter. Charles grew up and reached the age of 21. He was courted by island youths. Tired of the life he was living, he wrote a mail order house for a suit of clothes. He left the island one morning, a stranger youth nobody had seen arrive. He went to Baltimore and sought employment. He remained there some time. Now Charles Williams has returned to Ocracoke. He is a fine

looking young man. The novelty of his career will not wear off.”

This account appeared in *The Morning Oregonian* [Portland, Oregon], Thursday, September 22, 1921. (Although much is accurate, we do not know that his mother deceived him (she may simply have been confused about his gender), and oral tradition on Ocracoke does not support the assertion that when Charlie Irvin returned home he reverted to living as a girl. Also, the geographic description of the island is mistaken, and it is certain that Charlie Irvin Williams did not row a small boat 25 miles to the mainland.):

“GIRL FINDS SHE IS YOUTH, DECEIVED BY MOTHER RETURNS TO NATIVE ISLE.

“Simple Life on lonely Ocracoke Island Appeals to Man Who Thought He Was Woman.

“NORFOLK, Va., Sept. 21. (Special.)

“Charles C. Williams, who spent 21 years on the island of Ocracoke as a girl, has just returned from the outside world as a man. He says he prefers to don dresses and remain at Ocracoke rather than battle with life and temptations among the people of big cities.

“When Williams was born his mother was so disappointed because he was not a girl she put dresses on him. He was named Vera, and to his girl playmates, what few there were on the island, he was known as Vera Williams. He had light hair, inclined to curl, and his features were fair.

“As Vera Williams he wore dresses for 21 years. Nobody knew his sex but his mother, and nobody doubted but that Vera was a girl. He grew into a decidedly good-looking ‘girl,’ too; attended church and took part in outdoor meetings on the island. Vera acted just like any other girl would act.

“Ocracoke Is. one of the strangest of all islands in America, and perhaps anywhere else. There are about 500 inhabitants. The island has the Atlantic ocean on the north and west side and Ocracoke inlet on the east. The island is separated from the mainland by the Inlet, which is about ten miles wide. A boat from the mainland stops at Ocracoke once a week. Three-fourths of the population of the island has never been to the mainland. Vera Williams, until he was 21 years old, was one of those who had never seen any other town, city or hamlet but Ocracoke.

“Vera was taken over to the mainland a few months ago by his mother, dressed like a young woman. Vera saw things that opened his eyes. Vera had been taught to read and he bought a magazine. He saw an advertisement of a mail order house. He sent away for a suit of

men's clothes. When they arrived he concealed them in his room. He made alterations. He had learned to sew well and had made money making seines and repairing clothes for the fishermen, who are the chief inhabitants of the island. He cut off his hair and left the house before daybreak. He covered the distance between the mainland and Ocracoke island in a row boat. Vera could handle a boat like a veteran sailor. When Vera reached the mainland he wrote his mother declaring he had learned something about the world and was tired of being a girl

"Then Mrs. Williams wrote her son that his name was Charles E. Williams and not Vera. She told him why she had tried to make a girl out of him. She warned him to be careful of the outside world, and now that he had learned he was a man to be a real man. Charles E. Williams set out to earn his living in the outside world. He found it very hard. He got a job in a restaurant in Baltimore. He worked there two months. Charles Williams is back at Ocracoke now. He says he thinks he will stay there. He likes the place, because people there live the simple life. They go barefooted to camp meetings, they have their own laws and they know little about the outside world. Charles says he saw enough in one city to make him love Ocracoke more than he ever loved it, even when he was known as Vera Williams and had girls for his playmates."

— On Tuesday, October 25, 1921 *The Pittsburgh [PA] Press* ran the following story. (Again, oral tradition on Ocracoke does not support the assertion that when Charlie Irvin returned home he reverted to living as a girl.):

"'Vera,' Boy Raised as Daughter, Goes Back to his Sewing

"Norfolk, Va., Oct. 25, — A strange story of a boy raised to manhood as a girl without anyone but his mother suspecting his real sex comes from the isolated island of Ocracoke. Charles C. Williams, according to the accounts, has found after a brief struggle with the world he would prefer life at home as a girl to the struggles and temptations of a youth in the city

"When Williams was born his mother was so disappointed that he was not a girl that she called him 'Vera,' and dressed him as a girl. 'Vera' had light hair, was of fair complexion and as 'she' grew up developed into a decidedly good looking 'girl.' For the first 21 years of his life Williams lived on his island without ever having crossed the waters to the mainland.

"Ocracoke supports about 500 persons, most of whom live all their lives on the island, but it is said none of them except Mrs. Williams knew that 'Vera' was a boy. Williams himself was perfectly satisfied with his lot until, when he was 21, his mother took him, dressed as a

young woman, to the mainland.

“There, according to the story, he bought a magazine and from it and his observations of city folk learned that Ocracoke was, after all, only a little place.

“In the magazine was the advertisement of a mail order house, and when he got home Williams sent to it for an outfit of men’s clothing. When it arrived he cut his hair, took the money he had earned by sewing and rowed to the mainland in a small boat. From here he wrote his mother telling her he was ‘tired’ of being a girl. In return, Mrs. Williams told him that his real name was Charles.

“Baltimore was selected by Williams as a starting place for his life as a man, but after two months of it he is back at Ocracoke, and glad to be there. During his absence he worked in a restaurant, and while he was there, he says, he saw enough to make him return to the island and his skirts.

“Girls for companions, sewing and the other domestic virtues for occupations and the name of ‘Vera,’ all these Charles will accept gladly if he can have with them the simple life of Ocracoke’s fisher folk. “

— Several other newspapers eventually picked up the story. The following account appeared in the *The Wapanucka Press* [Wapanucka, Okla.], Friday, June 9, 1922; *The North Platte* [Neb.] *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, June 16, 1922; *The South Jersey Republican* [Hammonton, N.J.], Saturday, June 17, 1922; and *The Clyde* [NY] *Herald*, June 21, 1922:

“Raised as Girl, Boy Runs Away

“Mother Wanted a Girl and Concealed Sex from ‘Vera’ for Twenty-One Years.

“Ocracoke, N.C. - Charles Williams of Ocracoke, who lived the first twenty-one years of his life as a girl on isolated Ocracoke Island and then fled from his first contact with the cruel, cold world, has disappeared again. It is thought he may have become a sailor and gone on a foreign cruise.

“When Charles was born his mother was so disappointed that he was not a girl she decided to bring him up as one. So under the name of Vera he grew up in the little community of fishermen which constitutes Ocracoke island.

“He was a popular ‘girl.’ He learned the domestic arts; he even had sweethearts, for he is pretty.

“Then about a year ago, shortly after his twenty-first birthday, it was made known that he was a man. He wrote to a young man in New York, a former resident of Ocracoke, to whom he was almost engaged, that he could not continue their correspondence because it wasn't ‘manly.’ The next step was to provide himself with man's attire and go out into the world.

“In Baltimore he got a job, but soon he became homesick and in a few months went home. He followed the only occupation possible on Ocracoke and became a fisherman, but in many other ways his home island was changed. His friends, who had so long regarded him as a girl, could not treat him as they had before, and Williams became restless

‘He recently told friends he would like to become a sailor and see the world, and they believe he has done so. But they say they like him and want him to come home again.’”