

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Willie Eldon O'Ree



(October 15, 1935 –)

### “First Black National Hockey League Player”

Willie Eldon O'Ree was born October 15, 1935 in Fredericton, the capital of the Canadian province of New Brunswick. His grandparents traveled to Canada from the American South, escaping slavery through the Underground Railroad. One of 13 children, Willie learned to skate on ice when he was just three years old. At the age of five, he began playing organized hockey but grew to excel at both baseball and hockey equally, throughout his middle school years. At the age of 14, Willie's baseball team travelled to New York for a championship celebration trip. There, he met Jackie Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers legend that broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Willie later told the story that Jackie Robinson said he didn't know any black kids that played hockey; Willie was the first.

Willie's talent for baseball was also recognized with an invitation to try out for the Milwaukee Braves, but hockey was his first love. He began playing for the Kitchener Canucks of the Ontario Hockey Association (OHA) in 1955. In his very first season, he suffered a devastating injury from a hockey puck, shattering his right eye, causing 97 percent loss of sight. He went home to Fredericton to recover, telling just his sister and just one close friend about the permanent vision damage.

Although most players in the hockey league knew about Willie's injury, they assumed he was completely recovered since he never spoke about his vision loss. The very next season, Willie was invited to try out and was picked up by a minor league team called the Quebec Aces. His contribution of 22 goals in the first year, helped Quebec win the league championship. Midway through his second year, Willie was called up again, but this time he would make history. On January 18, 1958, Willie Eldon O'Ree became the first person of color to play for the National Hockey League's (NHL) Boston Bruins. Albeit temporary, playing only two games, Willie made history.

Willie was called up to the Bruins again for one season in 1960-61. One year later, he returned to the minor league, playing for the Los Angeles Blades, of the Western Hockey League (WHL). That year, he and some team members were invited to an NAACP luncheon held in honor of Jackie Robinson. After speaking with the media, Robinson was introduced to the players and recognized Willie as the young black hockey player he met years ago in Brooklyn.

Willie O'Ree played professional hockey for 21 seasons, including 13 in the NHL, before retiring in 1979. He was named the NHL's first diversity ambassador in 1996 and since then, has traveled across North America promoting NHL, youth-level events, and encouraging diversity and inclusion in the sport of hockey. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in November 2018. Overall he appeared in 45 games total, with 10 goals and 4 assists—all while being legally blind, in his right eye.

