

A TEI Project

Interview of Neale Henderson

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

March 20, 2004

MILES

Today is Saturday, March 20th. My name is La'Tonya Rease Miles, and I'm interviewing Mr. Neale Henderson. How you doing?

HENDERSON

Fine, and you?

MILES

Good, thanks.

HENDERSON

All right.

MILES

All right. For the record, could you spell your first name for me.

HENDERSON

Okay. My name is Neale Henderson, and it's N-e-a-l-e, capital-H-en-d-e-r-s-o-n.

MILES

Do you have a middle name?

HENDERSON

No. Nickname is "Bobo."

MILES

But no middle name.

HENDERSON

Yeah. B-o-b-o.

MILES

Let's start right from the beginning. Where and when were you born?

HENDERSON

I was born in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

MILES

And what day and what year?

HENDERSON

I was born June the 24th, 1930, at 1:00 p.m. in the morning.

MILES

I want to know about your first name, because that's an unusual spelling with the E on the end. How did that happen?

HENDERSON

Well, my father, he was a Geechee, and all my life I spelled my name N-e-a-l. Well, finally, I looked at my birth certificate, and then they had an E on it. I asked my dad what was going on, and he said, "Well, when I pronounced the name, I said 'Neally,' and the doctor misspelled it and he put an E at the end of it." My dad's name is N-e-a-l. But when my birth certificate came out, the

doctor, because my dad pronounced it 'Neally,' like a Geechee would sound, and so on the birth certificate, I had come up with that E on there.

MILES

How old were you when you found this, the E on the end?

HENDERSON

At the age of nineteen.

MILES

And from then on you put the E on the end?

HENDERSON

I had to put, yeah.

MILES

You had to put the E on.

HENDERSON

Because that's the way they signed my contract when I signed with the Kansas City Monarchs in 1949.

MILES

Because they had your birth certificate.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I had to show my age.

MILES

Now, you say your father's a Geechee. What does that mean?

HENDERSON

Well, it mean "poor Geechee." [mutual laughter]

MILES

Where is he from exactly?

HENDERSON

He was born in Arkansas, but his mother and father were from North Carolina.

MILES

What about your mother; where is she from?

HENDERSON

My mother, she was born in Little Rock, Arkansas. She is part Cherokee Indian, and her father was full-blooded Cherokee. His name was Green White, and my mother's name was Rosalie White. My mother and them moved from Little Rock to Fort Smith, and that's when my dad met her. She was quite young when my dad met my mother. She was only thirteen years old.

MILES

Thirteen years old? How did they meet?

HENDERSON

Well, she was going to school and everything, and so my dad worked down at Sears and Roebucks, and she had to go past the Sears and Roebucks to get to school, and so my dad started talking to her. And back in those days, you could marry at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

MILES

Didn't matter.

HENDERSON

And so they ended up getting married and had my sister at the age of fourteen, and she had me at the age of sixteen.

MILES

Were you the second child?

HENDERSON

I was the second child, and then my brother was born in 1932. My sister was born in '28.

MILES

Was it just the three of you?

HENDERSON

Just the three of us, three children.

MILES

Was that considered a small family at that time?

HENDERSON

At that time, yeah. My grandmother, she had a total of twenty-two children, and she outlived all of them, all of them except seven.

MILES

Whose mother was that, that had the twenty-two, your father's mother?

HENDERSON

My mother's mother.

MILES

Your mother's mother had twenty-two children.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Name was Maggie White, and she stuttered. Oh, man, when she'd get to stuttering, you get ready to get a whupping.

MILES

Because she was mad then?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord, yeah. Lord, yeah.

MILES

You said your mother was thirteen. How old was your father then? How much older was he?

HENDERSON

My father was born in 1905. So you can see. My mother was born in 1913. So that's, what's that, eight years' difference?

MILES

Eight, yeah. So he was still a pretty young man, though. He was twenty-one years old when he met her.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

So that was in Little Rock where they met, right?

HENDERSON

No, they met in Fort Smith.

MILES

Now, what was Fort Smith like? How big was it?

HENDERSON

Fort Smith was a pretty large town. It sat at the border of Oklahoma. It was about thirty-eight miles from Muskogee, Oklahoma.

MILES

How much do you remember of it?

HENDERSON

Oh, I remember it well, yeah. I know it was— The schools was segregated at that time. I went to a school over on the south side named Dunbar. It was [Paul Laurence] Dunbar Elementary School.

MILES

Was it named after Paul Laurence Dunbar?

HENDERSON

Yeah, Paul Laurence Dunbar. And all the classes they had from the front, kindergarten all the way up to the sixth grade, in one room, one teacher, and she taught from kindergarten all the way through to the sixth grade.

MILES

Just one teacher the whole time.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

So you knew who you were going to get every year.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Who was that teacher?

HENDERSON

Mrs. Lewis.

MILES

Was she nice, or how did she treat you?

HENDERSON

She was firm. She was firm. And back then, you know, they could put some leather on you. They'd whup you.

MILES

That's what I was going to ask.

HENDERSON

There wasn't no [inaudible] in the hand. You go outside and pick a tree, and you had to get your own switch and plat it and bring it in, and that's what you got a whupping with.

MILES

What would you get a whipping for? Not you, necessarily, but what—

HENDERSON

Well, I got one every day. [laughs]

MILES

Oh, did you? Were you misbehaving?

HENDERSON

Yeah, yeah. I was being a boy. Then, you know, back then, she'd whup you. Then when you get home, your mother whup you. And, maybe your aunt and uncle, cousin, someone before you get home, you get a whupping.

MILES

Did you get one every day?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no. I got to so I was immune to whuppings.

MILES

Just had this healed over—

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

About how many students were in the classroom?

HENDERSON

Well, she had at least twenty. Yeah, she had at least twenty.

MILES

That's a good size, though, if you think about it.

HENDERSON

Yeah, back then, yeah. There was twenty childrens from the first, kindergarten all the way to the sixth grade.

MILES

Now, was that the first school you went to? Did you start at kindergarten or was there a school before that?

HENDERSON

No, that's when Dunbar was, my first school.

MILES

How old were you when you started?

HENDERSON

When I started, I was six. Well, my age, my birthday was in June, and so I was almost seven years old when I started and everything.

MILES

You started in September, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah. But being born in June, my birthday, I was six— Some kind of way it came out, because when I ended up graduating from high school, I was getting ready to turn nineteen.

MILES

That makes sense, because you would have either had to start early or a little late because of the summer birthday.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I was a little late because of being born June 14th.

MILES

June in 1930. Now, what did your sister do? What did she go on to do?

HENDERSON

My sister—

MILES

She's the oldest.

HENDERSON

She's the oldest, and she went to the same school, Dunbar, and then she went on to Lincoln Junior High School, which was on the north side. That's five miles

from where we lived at. And we didn't have buses back in those days, and we had to walk to school. And on our way to school we had to pass a white school to get to the black school. The white kids would jump on us and chase us to the black school. Then when school was over from there, then the black kids would chase us back to the white school, then the white kids would chase us all the way back to the south side.

MILES

Now, why were the black kids chasing you?

HENDERSON

Well, they—

MILES

Well, you know.

HENDERSON

Well, we wasn't doing anything. They were just being mischievous, you know, because we lived— The south side, they call us the poor folks, you know.

MILES

It had to do with what side of town you were living on.

HENDERSON

Right. We raised hogs. My dad had maybe thirty, forty head of hog, and they called us the "pig boys," you know, have to go and get slop for the hogs. And all most of the rich peoples lived on the north side of town, and we had to go on the north side of town to get the slop. And that's where all the pretty girls were, and me and my brother would hide in alleys to keep from going around to where the girls would see us.

MILES

You didn't want them to see you?

HENDERSON

Oh no. Oh no.

MILES

How were you dressed at that time?

HENDERSON

Well, we were in overalls, you know, with the bib.

MILES

Then what did the north side, how were they dressing?

HENDERSON

Oh, they dressed in regular jeans and regular little what they call corduroy pants.

MILES

Now, when you went, did you go to Lincoln?

HENDERSON

No. I went to Howard [Elementary School] up until the fifth grade, because we moved to California just before the war in nineteen— We came out here just before the war.

MILES

Which war?

HENDERSON

We came out here in '40, and the war started in December 7, 1941.

MILES

Okay. So the Second [World] War, then.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Let's back up, then. Let's talk about what your father was doing for a living. You said that he was a farmer.

HENDERSON

My father, he was a minister. Yeah, he was a preacher, and also he worked at Sears and Roebucks. And we had everything that anybody else would have. My dad, he was a hardworking man, and on the weekends he would play baseball and he also was a boxer. He boxed. Then he was a preacher on Sunday, and we had to stay in church 24/24. [mutual laughter]

MILES

There was no 24/7.

HENDERSON

No, no, no, no, no. So I swore when after I grew up, I said, "I'm going to have to leave church alone for a little while."

MILES

Was that true? Did that happen?

HENDERSON

It happened for a little while, but I got back on cue.

MILES

Now, what was the name of his church?

HENDERSON

St. James Baptist Church.

MILES

Was that an old church or did it—

HENDERSON

Oh yeah, it was old.

MILES

And what happened, did he just take it over? How did he become the minister?

HENDERSON

He became a minister because his dad was the minister.

MILES

Was your grandfather a minister where? He wasn't in Arkansas, was he?

HENDERSON

No, no. He had passed away by the time that my dad had told me that he was a minister also.

MILES

Where was he a minister, though? Are you saying North Carolina?

HENDERSON

North Carolina.

MILES

So he was a minister. How long was he the pastor of that church?

HENDERSON

My dad?

MILES

Your dad, yeah.

HENDERSON

Oh, Dad was pastor eight years, about eight years at St. James. I know I can remember his name being in the stone outside the church there.

MILES

Actually, you're a junior, then, because he was a Neal also.

HENDERSON

Yeah. But you know how it is when you don't—Everybody call you "Junior." You don't want to be junior, so I dropped my name. But it was on my birth certificate.

MILES

You dropped it and became what?

HENDERSON

Just Neale Henderson. And my son, I named my son Neale the fifth, and he done even drop the fifth. He don't even— He just go Neale just like I did, Neale Henderson.

MILES

So you're the fourth, then? You're the fourth Neale?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Oh, okay. So it really is a family name, then.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

I thought you were just a junior. You're number four.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Well, that's the way. But the name on my birth certificate, it was junior. But going down the road after my son, they checked it out and everything. I named my son Neale the fourth, and somehow they did it, the government or whoever, put the fifth.

MILES

Put the fifth on there.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

That's interesting. They changed it for you.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

How did you get the nickname Bobo?

HENDERSON

Oh, the lady across the street, she was white, and when I was born, she came over and she looked at me and she said, "Oh, he look just like Bobo the Clown."

MILES

Now, hold on. Wait a second. This was when you were just born?

HENDERSON

Just born, yeah. You know back then they had midwife brought us into the world, which her name was Aunt Jo. We called her Aunt Jo, and she dipped that snuff.

MILES

And she was a white woman?

HENDERSON

No, she was black.

MILES

The midwife was black, okay.

HENDERSON

The midwife, yeah. But the lady across the street, Mrs. Flippant, I think her name was, she came over when my mother had me, and she said, "Ooh, he look just like Bobo the Clown."

MILES

How did your parents take that, as a joke?

HENDERSON

She, my mother, evidently she liked it, because it's still hanging on me. It's still hanging. I was Bobo.

MILES

What was that woman's name?

HENDERSON

I think her last name was Mrs. Flippant.

MILES

Do you know how to spell that?

HENDERSON

F-l-i-p-p-

MILES

Probably a-n-t.

HENDERSON

-l-n-g, something like that, Flipping.

MILES

What did she mean by that?

HENDERSON

That's what I'd like to know. I never did figure it out, but I know that it hung on to me, and I never got teased about it or nothing.

MILES

No? People just—

HENDERSON

No, not nobody ever teased me, and I never had no fights behind it.

MILES

Okay, that's good.

HENDERSON

And it hung. My brother and my sister, they called me Bobo before they called me Neale.

MILES

Do most people call you Bobo instead of Neale?

HENDERSON

In California they mostly called me Neale, but down in Arkansas everybody called me Bobo. But out here, everybody, you know, call me Neale.

MILES

Do you have a preference?

HENDERSON

No, it doesn't matter. I answer to both of them.

MILES

Now, what did your mother do?

HENDERSON

My mother, she was—

MILES

She was young, first of all.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. But back then, my mother took in laundry and everything, and she, back then, washed and ironed all day for twenty-five cents. I can remember like it was yesterday. But twenty-five cents would go a long ways back then. But I used to feel sorry for my mother out there washing and ironing, and all she was getting was— Now look back at it and say a quarter. But back then, go to the movies for a nickel, and they used to give us fifteen cents to go to the movie, and we'd buy popcorn and get in the movie and get candy and stop at Cress's Kress's and get cookies and everything else, you know.

MILES

So twenty-five cents seemed like a lot, probably.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Did most of her money go towards just the family expenses?

HENDERSON

Yeah. It bought food. You'd go to the store and get a nickel worth of this and a nickel worth of that. But I'll tell you a story. We had a dog, name was Tarzan. Yeah, we named him Tarzan, and he was German Shephard. And this dog, we would give him a note and tell him to go to the store, and he would go to the store and jump on the counter, and the man fill out the note, put a basket on him, and bring it on back home.

MILES

He was that smart?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I can remember one year I slipped and fell on the ice and I broke my collarbone, and I laid there and I hollered and hollered, and how I must have laid out there for maybe an hour or so. And my dog evidently heard my voice and the dog came to where I was at, and I told my dog to go home and get my mother. And he goes to the house and bring my mother back.

MILES

You just talked to him like you talking to a person? "Tarzan, go home and get Mama."

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

And he did it?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

I wonder how your mother knew.

HENDERSON

He would grab her. He would grab her by her dress and pull her.

MILES

And pull her, okay. That's a smart dog.

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, Tarzan.

MILES

How long did you keep him?

HENDERSON

Oh, we kept Tarzan about ten, twelve years.

MILES

Did he come to California with you?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no, no. My dad ended up having to shoot him because— I'm talking now broken English, "shoot him." But my dad shot him because Mr. Piggy, he used to come around the house and flirt with my mother and everything, and the dog didn't like him. So one night, he come through there and the dog got after him, and he split him open, cut him open. And my dad told us that—

MILES

He bit him? What did he do, jump on him?

HENDERSON

He lunged at the man, and the man hit him with a straight razor and laid his breast open.

MILES

Oh, he cut Tarzan.

HENDERSON

Yeah. And my dad told us he was going to take him to the doctor, but he ended up taking him out in the woods and shot him.

MILES

Who was this man that was flirting with your mother?

HENDERSON

Shelly Piggy. I remember him real well. He was a heck of a ballplayer, too. He played baseball with my dad back in the old days.

MILES

He was just a neighbor?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. But it was a funny thing. My dad was a jealous man, you know, and he used to— I don't know if you ever heard the story, but about somebody sweeping they footprint? My dad would take the broom back then. We didn't have no grass; we had to keep dirt clean. And my dad would sweep his footprint out all the way to the street and get on his bicycle and ride to work. So the dog would hear my dad. Around eleven o'clock, Dad would always come home for lunch, and my mother and them would be playing cards and different things, partying. Then the dog would start barking, my mother knew that Dad was on his way home. She'd get in the house and cook in fifteen, twenty minutes, you know. So she would run everybody off, and then she would take and sweep just like my daddy did, make it look like nobody'd been there, you know. Mama and Aunt Marg and them, they partied from seven in the morning till eleven that morning.

MILES

What kind of partying were they doing?

HENDERSON

Playing cards, drinking beer.

MILES

Your mom, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Partying, drinking beer.

MILES

Do you remember what kind of cards they'd play?

HENDERSON

They played bid whist.

MILES

Bid whist, that's what I thought.

HENDERSON

And Spades.

MILES

Even then, played Spades?

HENDERSON

Yeah, played Spades back then.

MILES

Did you know how to play?

HENDERSON

No, my dad didn't allow us to play no cards. The only thing we could play was Chinese Checkers and checkers, that's all; no cards, no nothing. Couldn't listen to no kind of music except spiritual or like The Ink Spots.

MILES

So your mother was doing it when he wasn't home.

HENDERSON

Right. She partied. [laughs]

MILES

Well, she was a young woman.

HENDERSON

Yeah, she was young.

MILES

Well, he was young, too, though, if you think about it.

HENDERSON

Yeah, yeah.

MILES

What was your house like?

HENDERSON

We had a three-bedroom, and back then, you know, we even had running water. But the toilet was on the outside, but we had to use slop jar at night, and the toilet was on the outside. But we were the only one; we had running water to the toilet outside the house. I was born right across the street from the ballpark, Andrew's Field. We could walk right across the street, and the ballpark's right there. And that's where I— Would I be getting ahead of us if I said that's when I first met the Negro League leaguers?

MILES

I'll come back to it. Don't worry about it.

HENDERSON

Yeah. That's how I got involved in baseball.

MILES

So that was before you went to California, then, right?

HENDERSON

Oh yes. Oh yes, yes.

MILES

How old were you when you went to California? Just curious.

HENDERSON

Ten. I was ten.

MILES

But you got involved in it before you were ten?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Okay. All right. We'll come back to that, then. We'll come back. So you had this three-bedroom house. Who slept where? Because there's three children and two adults.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Well, my mother and father and them, they had the bedroom off from the kitchen, and my sister had one of them. Me and my brother slept in one room, you know. Like if anybody else come to spend a night, like an uncle or whatever, my sister would come in the bedroom where we was at, and then the company would—

MILES

Have her room.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

How did you get along with your brother and your sister?

HENDERSON

Fought every day, me and my brother, with the neighbor. We lived next door to the Whitfields, and it was seven, eight little ones. Five boys and five girls, and we fought almost every day. When we'd get out of school, it was always a fight. Then we had another guy, we called him Snooky, and he was the bully of the neighborhood. He was a lot older than all of us. He was about seven years

older than myself and he was about four years older than my sister, and he was always trying to flirt with my sister, and she didn't like him at all. Then we would always get in a fight with him and everything. Aunt Jo, which was his mother, she had taken him and tied him up and put him in a croaker sack and put him right in the gutter. Put him in a croaker sack, built a fire.

MILES

What did he do?

HENDERSON

He tried to mess with my sister, you know, and everything. And she kept telling him to leave her alone, leave her alone, and he wouldn't listen. So she took and built a fire and put the fire out and put him in a croaker sack and swung him over and smoked him.

MILES

Did she burn him?

HENDERSON

No. And every time he'd go by, she would whup him, hit that croaker sack. He's still Snooky.

MILES

I assume he's black, right?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah.

MILES

And the Whitfields?

HENDERSON

The Whitfields is black. But it was only three families, and we was the only ones in this all-white neighborhood.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. The white kids would come over and sleep with us, and we'd go over and sleep with the white kids. No, we didn't have no problems.

MILES

No problems?

HENDERSON

No problems whatsoever.

MILES

Now at this time, I'm sure you didn't think of yourself as black or call yourself black. What did you refer to yourself?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, we was colored. We was colored.

MILES

Yeah, that's what I figured.

HENDERSON

Yeah. And just like going to the movies, you had to sit up in the balcony and everything, you know. But my grandmother, she came to visit us in 1936 from California, and we went downtown and she'd get on the bus, and my grandmother'd sit right down right in front, and we went on back to the back. So the bus driver, he sit there, and he'd look back at my grandmother, say, "Ma'am, you're going to have to move there. You can't sit there." So my grandmother kept sitting there. So he sat there for about maybe five minute, look back at her again, said, "Miss, you can't sit there. You going to have to move to the back of the bus." So my grandmother sit there and so she finally said [stuttering], "All right. Where I come from, you sit anywhere you want." So the man look back at her again, cranked the bus up, and went on.

MILES

No problem.

HENDERSON

No problem. No problem.

MILES

Where was she talking about, where she came from, from California?

HENDERSON

San Diego in California.

MILES

From San Diego. So you already had people in San Diego then.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. My uncle came out here right after World War I.

MILES

The First War?

HENDERSON

Yeah, the First War. He was a general's boy. He worked for the general. He was a general's boy. He took care of the general. So he came with the general to California. And he bought my uncle a car, a 1917 or 19-something convertible, and my uncle drove that car back to Fort Smith, Arkansas, and the white people took that car away from him.

MILES

No, they didn't.

HENDERSON

Yes, they did. Took it away from him. It was red, red convertible. And he came back to California—

MILES

Without the car?

HENDERSON

—without the car, and the general went down there and got that car, told them, "Wherever I send my boy, wherever my boy go, you don't mess with him."

MILES

What was your uncle's name?

HENDERSON

Name was Alan White.

MILES

How did they take the car from him?

HENDERSON

Well, just because he's black. They said, "Hey, ain't nobody down here with no car like he had."

MILES

Nobody, black or white, right?

HENDERSON

That's right. Yeah.

MILES

Was there any violence involved, or they just took the car?

HENDERSON

Oh no, no. They just wanted it; they took it. Back in the day, he always have had a nice home. Boy, he had a fantastic home, and back in them days you might not think— You might think I'm telling a story, but he had a garage-door opener in that day, in them days.

MILES

When was this, like the twenties?

HENDERSON

Yeah, this was in the twenties. This was in the twenties when he came to California.

MILES

It opened up automatically?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Just like we think of today?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

How in the world did he get that?

HENDERSON

Well, things been like that for years, you know, work for anybody. He had an electric door opener back in the twenties. But the general had anything he want, and so uncle had just about anything the general had.

MILES

So he came out here around, what, 1914 or something like that?

HENDERSON

He came right after World War I, after the war.

MILES

Now, did you go to California before then? When was the first time you came to California, even if it was just to visit?

HENDERSON

I came to California— We came out here in 1937.

MILES

Was that the first time that you—

HENDERSON

The first time, yeah, I came out. I was seven years old.

MILES

But your grandmother was already out there?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

And your uncle was in San Diego?

HENDERSON

Yeah. They were out there, yeah.

MILES

Your grandmother, where does she live when she was out here?

HENDERSON

She came from Fort Smith. They left Little Rock and came to Fort Smith and then from Fort Smith, she came to San Diego.

MILES

Why did she move to San Diego?

HENDERSON

She had one of her sons was out here.

MILES

Just to be with him?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

This is your Uncle Alan, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah, Alan.

MILES

Would he come back and tell you about California?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What did he say?

HENDERSON

He would tell us how prejudiced it was. Oh, yeah, it was awful prejudice when we got here. Yeah, I learned all about it. But you'd be surprised what all the blacks own. Back then, they called it the Waterfront, and it was all black-owned all the way down to Harbor Drive. And from Harbor Drive all the way to 16th Street, all that was black-owned. And all the way over to Washington [Street], because my grandmother lived over there off of Washington by [Scripps] Mercy Hospital, and all that was black-owned. I remember that like it was yesterday.

MILES

When he said it was prejudiced, though, what was he talking about?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. You couldn't, like, go to the movies and everything, you couldn't sit anywhere you want; you had to sit toward the back. You had to get on the bus and everything; you had to sit to the back. It was just ridiculous, you know, but just like I thought I was back in Arkansas.

MILES

That's what I was going to ask you. What were things like in Arkansas?

HENDERSON

They was the same prejudice.

MILES

Even though you said you still were friends with the little white kids?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Back then, both white and we ate together, slept together and played together and just played ball against one another and never had no misunderstanding, no fight, or anything, you know. And when the war broke out, the guys that was within that age group, when they came to California and soon they came to San Diego, they would look us up and spend the night with us and everything.

MILES

White guys?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Which war was this, II? This was World War II at this point?

HENDERSON

World War II, yeah.

MILES

So then if everything was pretty equal with the young people, when did things start to change? I mean in terms of like I guess when you become an adult things get difficult.

HENDERSON

Yeah. It was like that all the way through my adulthood, and it ain't too bad down there now. But you couldn't sleep in the hotels. You couldn't, some restaurants you go to and it said "We have the right to refuse service to anyone." I might be getting a little ahead, but after we moved, like I said, we moved to California just before the war, and we would play sports. We'd come up to L.A., and, man, it was prejudiced. A lot of places we couldn't go in and

eat with the team members, and with the group that we'd be with, they would get stuff and bring it out to us and everything, you know.

MILES

Which was worse, San Diego or Los Angeles?

HENDERSON

San Diego.

MILES

San Diego was worse?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. San Diego was a little smaller than L.A. was and everything. But like a lot of the white guys that we'd be with, they would go into a place and order something and walk out, you know, and wouldn't pay for no meal. They'd order up a whole bunch of stuff, and when they'd bring it to them, they'd get up and walk out. That happened all the way up until I was eighteen years old, be playing sports and different things up and down the coast. A lot of the high schools we'd go to, we would have to sleep in the gym. We couldn't sleep in the hotels and everything.

MILES

Just the black players?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. We had to sleep in gyms.

MILES

Okay, let's go back a little bit, though. We're still in Arkansas.

HENDERSON

Okay.

MILES

Even though you played and had white friends and everything, the schools was still segregated?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Boys Club, everything.

MILES

The Boys Club was segregated?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

So then how did you have opportunity to play with the white kids if the school was segregated? Just after school?

HENDERSON

Yeah, after school and everything, go, we'd just— See, like, we want to play ball, and we would gather up about nine of us black kids and then we would get the white kids, we'd play against one another.

MILES

Baseball?

HENDERSON

Baseball. Yeah, but, you know, across the street, the guy, when they break a bat, whenever, we'd go over, and they'd give it to me and I'd nail it up, tape it up, and they'd give us baseballs, give us a little raggedy glove or something, you know. But my dad, he worked at Sears and Roebucks, and we had brand-new mitt, and my brother, he had a brand-new catcher's mitt and everything.

MILES

What did your father do at Sears?

HENDERSON

He changed tires and also janitorial work and drove a truck.

MILES

For Sears?

HENDERSON

Sears. Uh-huh.

MILES

And he was the pastor of a church.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Now, you said you were in church a lot.

HENDERSON

Oh yes.

MILES

Every day?

HENDERSON

Every day.

MILES

What did you do in church every day?

HENDERSON

They would have prayer meeting.

MILES

Now, what did you do, though? [laughs]

HENDERSON

We mostly'd be outside playing hide-and-go-seek and everything, but most of the time, you know, you had to sit in there, and practice like for programs and different things, you know, and had a choir.

MILES

Were you in the choir?

HENDERSON

I couldn't sing a lick, no. I stuttered. Back when I was a kid, I couldn't say "street sweeper." I couldn't say it, and I couldn't say a lot of things. I'd get my tongue get tied up, and I couldn't pronounce. I just couldn't talk, in other words. My mother, when she'd get ready to whup me, I was a tattletale. I told my daddy everything.

MILES

And you stuttered, too.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Because he would come home from work and ask me, "Bobo, what's your mama been doing?" And I would just haul off until I can't say what I wanted to say. Back then I couldn't say "truckin'." So you can imagine what I was saying. [mutual laughter] And then he'd go in there and jump on my mother.

MILES

And then she'd jump on you.

HENDERSON

Yeah, boy, she called me and said, "Bobo, come here. I'm going to teach you how to say "truckin'." Ask me why I can say truckin'. [mutual laughter]

MILES

So you weren't in the choir. Did you have to do anything for the church?

HENDERSON

Well, what we had to do, I had to clean out the trough where the stove was, where they had sand around it. And you know, my sisters with that snuff and stuff, they'd be [spits] spitting it, hitting that stove. So that's what I had to do; I had to keep that stove whistling clean. And also I put out the pamphlets and different things and did whatever, like put up the water for the priest, pastor, or whatever, you know. But my brother, my brother Bobby [Henderson], he was almost a minister. He took up preaching.

MILES

At what age?

HENDERSON

Bobby started preaching when he was thirty. He tried it and everything, and he went into it for not the right reason.

MILES

What reason was that?

HENDERSON

He went into it talking about money. My brother was money crazy. Yeah, he has his own postal annex here in Monrovia. Yeah, my brother, he was smart, that boy. He graduated, what, two years early.

MILES

Oh, really?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, he was very— Also he went to USC [University of Southern California] and went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and took classes and everything, and he's a speaker, I mean. Bobby's good.

MILES

What did your sister end up doing?

HENDERSON

My sister, she ended up getting married, and she worked at the [Los Angeles] County Hospital here in L.A. for a little while, and then she and her ex-husband— She broke up and then she remarried, and she's living out in Compton.

MILES

So everybody's out here?

HENDERSON

Except me. I don't like L.A.

MILES

Oh, yeah, well, they're in California, though.

HENDERSON

They're in California.

MILES

Now, were there any expectations for you to become a preacher? Did your father—

HENDERSON

Oh no. I couldn't talk. Could you see me up there trying to— I'd get excited and start trying to stutter. Yeah. No, no.

MILES

Did your friends make fun of you for stuttering?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What did they say?

HENDERSON

What they didn't say. But I was a fighter.

MILES

Oh, did you, literally?

HENDERSON

Oh Lord, yeah. My dad and them used to have to whup me not to fight, and I'd fight in a minute. I'd fight in a minute. I don't care what, yeah, Lordy, what size you were or what, I'd tie into you.

MILES

Did you have a best friend, though, little buddy?

HENDERSON

William B. I had my best friend down in Arkansas, his name was William B. And "B Boy," we called him B Boy. He lived over on Red Road, that was over across the tracks, and we would go up there and we used to— I don't know if you ever seen the movie they call *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*?

MILES

Oh yeah.

HENDERSON

We had to yell, "Ho-ho!" We could holler from where I lived all the way over the hill where he lived across the railroad tracks, and he'd holler back at you.

MILES

So you were the two thieves.

HENDERSON

That knew to come, I knew to come, let's come together. I would get ready to get up a team and play ball.

MILES

How did you meet him? How old were you?

HENDERSON

Oh, in grammar school. In grammar school, I guess.

MILES

So you were there till sixth grade together?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Best friends. He cried when we left Arkansas. He cried and I cried. We was just like brothers, and I lost him about five years ago.

MILES

You stayed in touch with him?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Every time I go down there, we'd still— Even after we got grown and everything, I'd go to visit, and we'd get a team together and go over in Oklahoma and play on Sundays and play a team over in Oklahoma.

MILES

So he played, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What did he do? Did he stay in Arkansas all that time?

HENDERSON

Yes, he stayed and went to work in the service and everything down there. But he ended up marrying one of the Whitfields. Yeah, he married one of the Whitfield girls.

MILES

One of those ones you were fighting?

HENDERSON

Yeah, Bertha. He married Bertha.

MILES

One of those ones you were fighting?

HENDERSON

B Boy had— They had six kids together down in Fort Smith.

MILES

Now, baseball sounds like it was really important.

HENDERSON

Hoo, back then—

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

—baseball was my life dream. I ate and slept baseball.

MILES

When do you first remember playing?

HENDERSON

Well, my mother and Aunt Marg and my sister, they would get out there in the field and play with us.

MILES

The women played, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Was that common?

HENDERSON

Oh, that was common, yeah. My mother and them, yeah, that was common, yeah. The mothers in our neighborhood, they got out there. Everybody got out there and played. Oh yeah.

MILES

In that field you were talking about?

HENDERSON

In that vacant lot. Anywhere. Yeah, we made— And we used to use cow flop. You know, hard, after it get hard, we used cow flop for the bases.

MILES

So as early as you can remember, you were playing.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh..

MILES

And your sister played, too.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Mary Frances was a good little athlete. But my mother played basketball in high school at Lincoln [High School]. She was a heck of a little basketball player.

MILES

Now, did your mother finish high school?

HENDERSON

Yeah, she finished school.

MILES

She was still married, though? Was she married when she—

HENDERSON

Uh-huh..

MILES

Married and going to high school.

HENDERSON

And finished school.

MILES

That's great.

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

And while she was married, she was playing basketball at this time.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh, and she was a heck of a basketball player. Oh yeah.

MILES

So it was okay for women? Was it okay for women to play basketball?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

It wasn't considered too, you know, "manly" or whatever?

HENDERSON

No. They could have a regular basketball team.

MILES

How good were they?

HENDERSON

They was good. They was good. Oh yeah. They played Oklahoma and they played Little Rock. Yeah, my mother was real good.

MILES

What position did she play?

HENDERSON

She played guard.

MILES

Back then there was six on six, though, wasn't it?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Did she play five on five?

HENDERSON

Five on five.

MILES

Or six on six?

HENDERSON

No, five. Played five on five.

MILES

Wow. Because you know they didn't change the rules till a lot later to five on five. I know some places has five on five. Did your father go to her games?

HENDERSON

No, Dad was strictly church. And like I said, after he got— Trying to keep his congregation together and everything going, choir rehearsal and everything, and then he studied that Bible, man. We almost could know his whole sermon. He practiced. He'd get in front of the mirror and make them expressions, and my dad would get on that one foot. He would get on one foot and boogie all the way across the floor. And he started dancing and he'd—That old man was something else.

MILES

He played baseball, though, right?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

How did he feel about sports in general? [tape recorder off]

MILES

You were telling me about your dad, and I was wondering how he felt about sports.

HENDERSON

Ooh, my daddy loved sports.

MILES

Oh, he did? So he didn't feel like it was like heathen or anything?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no, no. No. After I played American Legion ball and I was in the movies there in Fort Smith, my daddy would sit there the whole day waiting for the news to come on to see me on the news, yeah. I made the news down there in '47, sliding into home. Old man sat there and cried.

MILES

You told me your father, not only did he play baseball, he did something else, too.

HENDERSON

Boxed. He boxed.

MILES

Tell me about his boxing.

HENDERSON

His boxing, he was good.

MILES

This was before he was a preacher?

HENDERSON

Yes. Yeah, he was quick. He was a good little boxer.

MILES

Who was he boxing for? Was it just a little local thing?

HENDERSON

A local thing, uh-huh..

MILES

In Arkansas?

HENDERSON

He didn't go professional.

MILES

What about his baseball playing days?

HENDERSON

They would play in Little Rock. They would play Muskogee, Tulsa, and they'd play over in New Orleans. They'd go down, go down to Texarkana and different places, yeah. He played all of them.

MILES

Who was he playing for?

HENDERSON

For the Fort Smith Giants, a Negro— The team was black. It wasn't pro or nothing like that, but they would just, yeah, get up a team and go around and play. And they would go and have a little Model-T Fords. Sometimes they'd go in a wagon or whatever, you know.

MILES

Was he married at this time?

HENDERSON

No, Daddy wasn't married.

MILES

This was before that?

HENDERSON

Yeah, before then.

MILES

So once he got married, he stopped playing that?

HENDERSON

No, he played while he was married. Oh yeah.

MILES

He just didn't play for that team.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I used to have a picture with him with his uniform on. They had their pant knee-high, like knee-high and then socks and skintight. It was skintight, yeah. We laughed at him.

MILES

Did you go to his games?

HENDERSON

I don't remember, because I don't remember him playing after I got up around five and six years old. It might have been when I was two or three or something like that. I don't remember that.

MILES

Okay. But he did play every now and then?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

You said he played on the weekends and stuff.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Who was he playing with then?

HENDERSON

With the Fort Smith Giants, [inaudible]. They named their team, like the white team, they were named Fort Smith Giants. And my dad and them, they took that name.

MILES

Was he playing on an all-black team at this point?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Were there any integrated teams?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, not back then. No.

MILES

Not at all?

HENDERSON

No. But before then, back in 1800s, they was integrated.

MILES

In Arkansas or just in—

HENDERSON

Throughout the whole United States. Down South also, because the West Coast, out here, they never did have no Negro League or anything like that. But we had a team named the Gibson Tigers, which was a Negro all-black, and we tried to get— Well, we were organized. We did play or go over to Mexico and different places. We played here and there in San Diego against a lot of the white teams and beat them. We won. We won the league.

MILES

Did you?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

This is after you moved out here?

HENDERSON

No, it was winter ball. I'd play one after— Get through with the Negro League, and then during the winter months, we'd all have jobs and on the weekends we would play different organizations.

MILES

Hold on. We're running out of time on this side. Let me turn it over.

HENDERSON

Okay.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO
March 20, 2004

HENDERSON

In my high school days, well, back when I was in the Boys Club—

MILES

This is in Arkansas still?

HENDERSON

No, no, we'd moved to California.

MILES

Let's stick with Arkansas. You're playing baseball in Arkansas.

HENDERSON

Then in Arkansas, like I say, we would get little teams up and play the white, and then we'd bounce over, go all the way over on the north side and play against the black guys and everything. But when we'd get over there and play the blacks, after the game, I'd always get in a fight. You don't know why, but I guess it's the same way as it is today, one of us would get to fighting against one another.

MILES

This isn't mostly north side versus south side?

HENDERSON

Right. You hit it right on the head. That's what it was about.

MILES

Was it a little more of the middle-class in the north?

HENDERSON

Yeah. They had better homes than what we had. I tell you, strike a match, ain't no telling what's liable to happen. [mutual laughter] But we were one of the first families on the south side to have electric lights.

MILES

Regardless of color?

HENDERSON

Right, regardless of color. My daddy was one of the first to have electricity. And I never will forget it, I tried to figure out what made the light, and I stood up on an ironing door and unscrewed the bulb and stuck my finger up in there, and if my brother hadn't hit that ironing board, I'd been dead.

MILES

Yeah. You were trying to figure it out.

HENDERSON

I remember my mother put bluing, put bluing all over in there. I don't mess with electricity today.

MILES

Since then, huh?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

But you said you were one of the first families in that neighborhood. Were there any problems that you know of when they moved in?

HENDERSON

No, no, no, no, no. Like I said, my daddy had a barbecue café. My daddy had a café and he barbecued, did hamburgers and everything, you know. Peoples come from Oklahoma and all around just for my daddy's barbecue, regardless of color. Yeah. And like I said, the restroom that was there with running water was out behind our restaurant, and the peoples from the ballpark, they'd park out on our ground, and Daddy would charge them, what, fifteen cents a car back then for parking for the ball games and stuff.

MILES

So he would just move— Where was the barbecue?

HENDERSON

He had a café.

MILES

Where was the café?

HENDERSON

On the side of the house.

MILES

Okay. So it was near your house. Okay.

HENDERSON

It was right near the house, because I remember big old trees we used to swing on and everything. Tornadoes come through there, boy. Can you see us trying to hold a door, at six and seven years old, and my daddy is helping us trying to hold something. [mutual laughter]

MILES

Tell me about this field that you say was across the street from your house. Andrew's?

HENDERSON

Andrew's Field. Yeah, the home of the Fort Smith Giants. It was a nice ballpark. Like I say, only time we could fit in the grandstand would be when the Negro League would come to town.

MILES

So it was segregated seating?

HENDERSON

Yeah. We had to sit on the bleachers and everything.

MILES

Now, Fort Smith Giants, that was the white team?

HENDERSON

The white team.

MILES

Did you ever go watch them play?

HENDERSON

Ooh, yes.

MILES

It didn't matter to you?

HENDERSON

No. We went all the time. We never did have to pay to get in.

MILES

Why not?

HENDERSON

Because we did pick up the cushions and different things, and Mister [inaudible], he knew us real well, and I used to slip over the fence and go around and run the bases. I'd go over there just by myself, get over there and just play like I hit the ball and take off, and I got to where I could scat around them bases and everything. Even after I grew up and everything, they used to brag on me about how fast I could run the bases.

MILES

Now, who were you going to the games with at this time?

HENDERSON

My brother and the Whitfields and my buddy B Boy. We'd all go together and everything. Like I'm saying, the white team would be practicing, they never griped at us. We would go out there and flag balls with them. They never ran us out or told us to get on out of here and call names. But what they used to try to do is rub our head and everything. We wouldn't allow them to do that. And throw money and try to make us scramble for us. We'd use our noggin; we'd wait till they'd leave and then we'd get the money and everything.

MILES

Why wouldn't you let them rub your head?

HENDERSON

They think they're Uncle Tom and trying to say for good luck, rub your head for luck. I wouldn't play. That wasn't my game or my brother. My dad told us not to let nobody be doing that.

MILES

Did the girls go with you, or was it mostly boys?

HENDERSON

Mostly boys. Yeah, girls they'd be playing dolls, hopscotch, or something.

MILES

So boys and girls did have some things they did together and some things they did separate.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. We played hide-and-go-seek together. [mutual laughter]

MILES

Real hide-and-go-seek. All right.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Had to hide and go get it. [mutual laughter]

MILES

Did you have a girlfriend?

HENDERSON

Ooh!

MILES

In Arkansas now. I'm not talking about later.

HENDERSON

I had more than one.

MILES

Back when you weren't yet ten years old, were you?.

HENDERSON

I knew what girls were.

MILES

Okay. You were fast in other ways.

HENDERSON

I had a little one named Matty Jo. She was part Indian, Negro, black back then. But you're talking about pretty. And had a sister named Palestine. They was the prettiest girls you ever wanted to see, boy. They was part Indian, and Lord have mercy.

MILES

Was she your girlfriend?

HENDERSON

If you want to call it that.

MILES

If I asked her that, would she say that?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Oh, yeah, back then, yeah. Because I ended up, after I got married, a couple times out here I ended up taking her out here. In '67, I brought her to California. We stayed together about five years. We have son named Anthony, a little boy. Anthony. He was a heck of a little basketball player there in Fort Smith.

MILES

How did people— If you could speak for the community, what did they think about baseball at this time?

HENDERSON

Down there in Arkansas?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Whew, they loved it. Yeah, the whole community. Yeah, they loved it because that was income for them, because the teams come with cars, didn't have no place to park, everybody in the neighborhood was parking cars, you know, making a little extra change, and selling sodas or sandwiches or whatever, you know.

MILES

How did you follow the games? Was it in the newspaper?

HENDERSON

Through the newspaper.

MILES

Ever on the radio?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. They'd announce it on the radio. Oh yeah.

MILES

What was your favorite way to— You just followed it in the paper?

HENDERSON

No, I'd be at the game. [mutual laughter] Eating peanuts and everything. Yeah, boy, we used to have a good time. But during when there wasn't no ball game, they would have rodeo. That's where I met Gene Autry, Roy Rogers. I met all the movie stars, I mean cowboys, back in them days, rodeo. They tricked my brother and them one time and the Whitfield boys, and they put them in a croaker sack and drug them out on the field. [inaudible], and they drug them out on the field. Like I told you a while ago, I was a tattletale. And they drug them out on the field, and the old guy on the microphone would say, "Hey, what you got there?" Say, "Man, I got a bunch of coons." "Man, this ain't coon season. What you mean you got some coons?" "Yeah, man, I got me five coons," and everything. So he drug them out there. "Oh, man, you ain't got— Let me see 'em." So he took and, bam, bam, bam, shot up in the air and took and dumped that croaker sack, and my brother and all them come out of that sack.

MILES

Your brother was in there, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah, he was in there. And one day I [inaudible] and went home and told my mother and told her.

MILES

What did your mother say?

HENDERSON

Come out of there raising sand.

MILES

Oh, yeah?

HENDERSON

Yeah. And she whupped my brother and, well, all of them got whupping.

MILES

But why did she beat the boy?

HENDERSON

Beat my brother?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Because she always told him never to get in no croaker sack, don't be around letting them people do the things what they was doing, you know, and that's the reason why he got a whupping, because he went against my mother's word.

MILES

My mind went in two different directions there. Let me ask you about— Back to the baseball team. How did the people feel about the Negro League at the time?

HENDERSON

Well, they loved it. We had a sellout crowd every time. Like when the Negro League would come to Fort Smith, I would always be the batboy for the Kansas City Monarchs, and my brother would always be the batboy for whatever other team that was there and everything. So then in '36 when the Monarchs came, I was the batboy for them, and then the following year in 1937, I was the batboy for them. This was the year that they had the first night game played there in Fort Smith, Arkansas. This guy came up with a truck, and I asked, "Hey, what you going to do?" "Man, we're going to have a night baseball game." I said, "A night game?" "Yeah." And he explained to me what he was going to do and showed me about the generators and all this, and he put the lights all out on the field. And he put one up around third base, put one back of the backstop, then he put one behind first base and all around the field. So round about five o'clock, the Monarchs pulled up, and I asked them could I be the batboy, and they said yeah.

MILES

Was this the first time you'd asked them?

HENDERSON

No, no. This was the following year in '37. So my brother, round about five-thirty, the Homestead Grays came up. My brother asked them could he be the batboy, which he did and everything. So then that's when I met [John] "Buck" O'Neil.

MILES

You were seven years old.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I was seven years old. And Cool Papa Bell and all the guys. So they get out and they take infield, I get right out there with them. And Cool Papa Bell and them, they let me take my turn.

MILES

At bat?

HENDERSON

At everything. I did everything that they did. They taught me everything until Cool Papa Bell took me under his wing, showed me how to field a ball. I could scat, yeah. I was doing everything he was doing. So every time they'd break a bat, I would put it back, you know, because we were going to take and fix it and everything. But Buck O'Neil and all, they taught me a lot. My brother had a catcher's mitt, and Josh Gibson had a catcher's mitt and he had five sponges in it. They were just ate out in here, in the palm. So he asked my brother, "Son, let me use your catcher's mitt." My brother said, "Okay, but make sure you give it back," you know. So he used it the whole game, and then after the game was over, my brother ain't seen that catcher's mitt. My brother had that old catcher's mitt, and I remember when we left Arkansas, my brother left it with my dad. And I remember going back fifteen, twenty years later when I went there, that catcher's mitt was out in the backyard. But just think of what that catcher's mitt would be worth today.

MILES

Exactly.

HENDERSON

Yeah, that catcher's mitt was worth some money. Yes, Lord.

MILES

How is it at age six you could approach them to be a batboy?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

You just asked?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh, because I loved the game. I loved it, loved the game.

MILES

But everybody loved the game. What set you apart?

HENDERSON

It's just something that I— Because I know my dad played, and I wanted to be just like my daddy, except for preaching, because I had a speech defect. And that's what my problem was in school, everybody would laugh at me when I get up to read, and they would laugh at me. That's the reason I hated to read and I hated to even talk half the time. But the reason why I loved baseball and I got to a place where I could hit and I'd bunt, I did everything just perfect, you know.

MILES

So at this point, did you want to be a ball player?

HENDERSON

Yes, yes. Well, like I said, while I was out there taking infield with Cool Papa Bell and all of them, I made a vow. I said, "One of these days I'm going to play with these guys." And twelve years later, I signed with the Kansas City Monarchs.

MILES

Eighteen years old.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. I was just getting ready to turn nineteen, because I signed with them in 1949.

MILES

When you were six, around this time did you have a favorite team or a favorite player?

HENDERSON

My favorite player at that time was— You know who. You seen him in the paper here today. Babe Ruth.

MILES

Oh yeah.

HENDERSON

Yeah, Babe Ruth, because when I grew up and everything, that's the number I wore, was number three, Babe Ruth and everything. I finally got to meet Babe Ruth.

MILES

When?

HENDERSON

1947, when I was playing in the Little World Series and everything, I met Babe Ruth, taking pictures with him and everything.

MILES

What is it that you liked about him? Why did you like Babe Ruth so much?

HENDERSON

Because he was hitting them home runs, and he was real friendly to all the youth, young men. No matter if you was black, green, white, or whatever, he spoke to you and held your hand and everything, you know. Like when he held my hand and everything, talked to me, about out of six teams I was the only person that had number three on, and he stood up above the grandstand and

he looked down on the field, and when he came down, he came straight to me because I had number three on, and he went straight to me.

MILES

Where was this?

HENDERSON

We were playing in the Little World Series here in Los Angeles.

MILES

Oh, you were here?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. 1947.

MILES

Did you have a favorite team, too, or just a favorite player?

HENDERSON

My favorite team, I always wanted to play with the [New York] Yankees. That's who I wanted to play with, until— I knew about prejudice and everything, and I thought maybe that thing would change, which it did. But you had to be strong. If you were like me, I was raised up to not be taken, let nobody rub my head, not let nobody spit on me. I couldn't take that. So I was going to be a man regardless.

MILES

Now, at this time, were there people, let's say, black people in the community who were trying to integrate or anything like that, or did people just keep to themselves mostly? Like we think about Rosa Parks, you know, years later.

HENDERSON

Are you speaking of in Arkansas?

MILES

Yeah, in Arkansas.

HENDERSON

Oh, in Arkansas, no, we mostly stayed to ourselves, you know, because we know the consequences. I remember the time when a kid drowned down on the river. St. James, our church, had a picnic down along the riverbank and barbecuing and doing everything else, and this kid or young man fell out the boat and drowned.

MILES

Black man?

HENDERSON

White guy. And this black guy, he sent him out, [inaudible] this tree, and they saw him when they fell out the boat, and they hollered, "Somebody fell out the boat and they're drowning up there," and everything. So everybody swam over there to try to help him and everything, but it was too late. He went down; nobody found him. So they put the word out that a kid, somebody, had drowned, and they come trying to say that we drowned him. You should have seen the black folks getting off the riverbank and then going home. You could see shades coming down, curtains coming down, because they were scared of the after effects, what's going to happen, you know. So they came. They drug the river and they finally got him out, and they found out that he was drunk.

MILES

What would have happened, do you think?

HENDERSON

Whew. Somebody was going to lynch somebody or do something to somebody.

MILES

Were there lynchings back then?

HENDERSON

Ooh, yeah. Back then, yeah. My mother used to tell us when they'd lynch somebody, they would take and tie them to the back of the car and drag them

through the street, through the Negro neighborhood, and was still shooting the body and everything when they was [inaudible].

MILES

After they took the body down, or was this before they'd even lynched him?

HENDERSON

They tarred and feathered them and everything after they lynched them.

MILES

After they lynched them?

HENDERSON

After they lynched them, they tarred and feathered them, and then they drug them through the street. Then the body was just— They said flesh was just falling off.

MILES

Do you know what for?

HENDERSON

The same always; some white girl, you know. But back then, when I was kid growing up, you could see the white womens coming over with black guys and talking over there by the ballpark because there wasn't no— There was a vacant lot and everything out there, and you could see any direction if anybody was coming. But us kids and everything, we never missed nothing. [mutual laughter] Because boys will be boys, you know. So we never missed nothing. We seen all that. The white women would come over there with the black guy, and if they get caught, you know, they going to holler rape, but it wasn't always that way.

MILES

Were you told to stay away from white girls?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, I knew that. I knew that, oh, yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

So you'd play with the white boys, but not necessarily [inaudible].

HENDERSON

No, never did, never did play with the girls. My sister and them played with dolls and everything with the girls, but, no, we knew better.

MILES

So then how did your family decide to move to California?

HENDERSON

Well, I forgot to tell you about that. My grandmother worked for this white lady over on— No, Aunt Priscilla. The lady I'm talking about right now, Aunt Priscilla, she had a son by— What's the name of the book, *Roots*, the one that wrote the book.

MILES

Alex Haley.

HENDERSON

Alex Haley. His brother was named Sidney, Sid. Sam. Sam Haley. His name was Sam Haley [cannot confirm that Alex Haley had a brother named Sam or Sidney]. And my aunt had a baby by Sam Haley, which his name was Sam. They called him Sam. Sidney White, but they called him Sam. She worked for this white lady, and the white lady had a Polly parrot. And this Polly parrot, she taught him how to say "nigger." So the Polly parrot would say, "Hey, nigger, nigger. Polly want a cracker. Polly want a cracker. Priscilla! Priscilla! Nigger! Nigger!" Then when we go over to visit and everything, and hear that parrot call Aunt Priscilla nigger, so Aunt Priscilla had somewhere to go one day, and we come by there coming from school, and we stopped and wasn't nobody at the house. So we went around to the back door, because couldn't go through the front, went around to the back door, knocked and everything. So we went on in, and so we ended up killing that parrot. [laughs]

MILES

You did? This is in Arkansas, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Yeah, in Arkansas. We killed that parrot.

MILES

How did you kill the parrot?

HENDERSON

Choked it. Choked it.

MILES

Why did you kill that parrot?

HENDERSON

Because he called "nigger." And he was white. He was a white parrot. And we ended up, me and my brother and my cousin there, yeah, we killed him. My cousin, he dead now, Donald. The Ware brothers. Like I was telling you before, the one went to UCLA, Timmy Ware, played end for UCLA. He went pro and did real good there in UCLA. But anyway, we killed that parrot, and Aunt Priscilla quit work and moved to California.

MILES

Because you guys killed the parrot?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. And not too far from there, that's when my mother, we all moved, came this way. My dad, my mom, they broke up and everything, and that's when my mother moved. She came out here first and left us with Aunt Marg, and about six months later then we came.

MILES

Wait. You told me a lot there. Okay. So Priscilla, is that your mother's sister?

HENDERSON

Right.

MILES

Where did she move to when she came out here, where in California?

HENDERSON

San Diego.

MILES

Did she move with your grandmother or just in—

HENDERSON

She was the first one to come. She came before my grandmother, my Aunt Priscilla.

MILES

Oh, she came. Oh, okay.

HENDERSON

Priscilla White, she came. She worked for a doctor in Point Loma, a rich, rich doctor.

MILES

A white doctor?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. She was a woman, was a woman doctor.

MILES

A white woman?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Dr. O'Donald, and, boy, she was rich. She had money. She had property up in Big Bear. She used to live— Aunt Priscilla— We went up there a couple times to Big Bear.

MILES

Was she married, this woman?

HENDERSON

No, she wasn't married. She gave Aunt Priscilla anything she wanted. That woman had anything she wanted. We're talking about luxury. Boy, when she passed away, Dr. O'Donald gave her all kind of jewelry and different things, you know. When she died, she left Aunt Priscilla a whole lot of money and everything. Aunt Priscilla had a very nice home. She had a five-bedroom house over in the black community.

MILES

Did she get married, Priscilla?

HENDERSON

No, she never did get married. No.

MILES

But she had her son, Sam?

HENDERSON

She had more than one son. Altogether she had four boys.

MILES

But she never married?

HENDERSON

She never married.

MILES

So she came out here first, then your grandmother, but your uncle was already here?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Is that your mother's brother, too?

HENDERSON

Right.

MILES

So why did your mother come?

HENDERSON

My mother, after my dad and my mom broke up, she moved out here to be with her mother.

MILES

Okay. So they split up first before she came out here?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

How did your father feel about you guys leaving? Because he stayed in Arkansas, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah, he stayed, stayed in Arkansas. And he said he couldn't raise us and everything, plus being a minister and doing what he was preaching, not being at home. My sister, Mary Frances, was thirteen, and I was getting ready to turn eleven. And she scalded herself. I never will forget this. She was trying to cook, and turned the pot over on her, and it scalded. She still got that scar. Almost got in her ear. She got a big blister-like on her back. Never will forget that.

MILES

Were you guys at home by yourselves or something?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Oh yeah. My dad was at work.

MILES

Where was your mom?

HENDERSON

She was in California. She had started coming out here to California.

MILES

Oh, she already— Okay.

HENDERSON

Aunt Marg was supposed to been watching us, but she was at work, and my sister was trying to raise us when she was just— Mary Frances was thirteen. She was trying to cook and do woman's work, yeah.

MILES

Right, and still a child. Was it a scandal at all in your church, considering that the pastor and his wife had broken up?

HENDERSON

Oh no. No. No, no scandal.

MILES

Those things happened?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Boy, my mother had a voice. She could sing. We had a beautiful choir. And like I said, my brother could— I'm trying to find this here— If you ever could find somebody to find a poem and say "You may talk about the Negro," boy, that poem is a beautiful poem, and I'd love for somebody to trace that down. It said "You may talk about the Negro, but when you get to heaven, my white brother, there will be some Negroes in it." I never will forget that.

MILES

You don't know who wrote that?

HENDERSON

No, that's what— If I knew that, I probably could find it. "From the [inaudible] to the Senate, there's not a place on earth that a Negro isn't in it." Oh, it was a beautiful poem. My brother cited that at the age of six and got a standing ovation. We was at a convention, and he turned that place out. Like I said, he was a—

MILES

Where was this? What convention?

HENDERSON

We was in St. Louis, the big the Baptist church there in St. Louis.

MILES

Oh, I see. So he was the speaker, huh?

HENDERSON

My brother?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Well, they had him recite that poem, yeah.

MILES

How did your mother get out here when she left you guys?

HENDERSON

She came out on the train.

MILES

Did she tell you any stories about it?

HENDERSON

Oh, told me how it was, and that's the way it was. My sister came out before we did. Then my brother and I came out later, and we traveled by ourselves, you know, and that was a— They put the money on my brother. They didn't think that Bobby would have any money. They'd probably think me being older, they'd got me. But they put all the money on my brother.

MILES

Hold on. Actually, how did you feel about your parents splitting up? I didn't even ask you that. Didn't bother you?

HENDERSON

No, it didn't bother me.

MILES

Oh, okay.

HENDERSON

But like I said, my dad, even though he was minister, he was pretty cruel to my mother and everything, you know, because he was jealous. My mother had any kind of clothes that you could name, and my daddy would take and burn her clothes up, you know. I hope I ain't talking too much, but that's the way life was. And I swore when I grew up I never would mistreat my wife or treat nobody the way that my mother had to go through. All them mink stoles and different things that she had, all them things were burned up.

MILES

So she decided to go.

HENDERSON

Yeah, she decided that she was going to leave him, and she did.

MILES

What did she do when she came out here?

HENDERSON

She worked. Like I said, she worked in a cleaners, in a laundry. She even pressed clothes down in Arkansas at her age and everything. She was one of the top pressers, said she would do nightgowns, the gowns for all the rich white people, tuxedos and—

MILES

That's what she did when she came out here?

HENDERSON

Yeah. She worked for a laundry and a cleaners, dry cleaners.

MILES

Did the pay change?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

She got paid more?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. [mutual laughter] Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

Because you told me she got paid about twenty-five cents.

HENDERSON

Yeah, she was making twenty-five for doing laundry down in Arkansas.

MILES

Do you know what happened when she came out to San Diego, what the difference was in pay?

HENDERSON

No, I can't— It was more than twenty-five cents a day to wash all day for twenty-five cents, plus iron, you know, and wasn't getting no nickels a shirt or nothing like that. It was twenty-five cents, period.

MILES

So tell me about this trip you had to take out here with just your brother. How were you feeling about it before you had to come?

HENDERSON

Oh, it didn't bother us. We knew—

MILES

Were you excited to go?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And I remember after I got older and I came this way, I came on the bus, and these white guys talked about how they was going to kill me. And this white lady heard them over talking it, and so she came back and said, "Son, when you guys stop up here at the bus stop, don't you get off this bus. I'm going to bring you back some food and everything, but don't you get off this bus." She never did tell me what was going down and everything. I didn't get off the bus. So when she came back, she gave me the food. What did she do that for? Them guys went berserk, and the bus driver ended up getting them off the bus.

MILES

Was this that trip you were making to come here for the first time, or this was later on?

HENDERSON

This was later on when I was sixteen. I was sixteen years old. It was in '46.

MILES

Who were you traveling with?

HENDERSON

I was by myself.

MILES

You were by yourself?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I came home to see my dad and everything. I was going back, coming back to California.

MILES

Where were you?

HENDERSON

We was almost to Texas.

MILES

But that first trip you made with your brother.

HENDERSON

Oh, we were on the train. We went to St. Louis. From St. Louis, we came this way.

MILES

Did you have to sit in a certain section?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

Did it change at any point, like when you got to, I don't know, Oklahoma, you could sit somewhere else?

HENDERSON

No, didn't change till you got to California. It was the only time it changed, all the black folk. Then coming back this way, when you get over to Arizona, that's when you had to get to the back of the bus.

MILES

So really, when you got to California is when you could just sit wherever you wanted to?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What did you think about California before you got here? What did you think it was going to be like?

HENDERSON

Paradise.

MILES

Why did you think that?

HENDERSON

Oh, looking at the movies, looking at different things, you know, and from the way my mother and them talked about it, you know, that you could go to school with the white kids and you can play sports and, you know, Boys Club, go swimming and everything. Now, only thing about, like, at the YMCA, the blacks could not go swimming with the whites in San Diego. We had to wait till they were going to get ready to dump the pool, and we could go swimming. That's on Saturday night, when they were getting ready—

MILES

That's the only time you could do it?

HENDERSON

Only time a black man could go. You couldn't even take a shower. If you played basketball, after the game you couldn't go in there and take a shower with the white kids or nothing like that. You had to go [inaudible]. You couldn't take no shower.

MILES

How was your train ride?

HENDERSON

The train ride, we had to stay right in one spot, you know. You couldn't go to the diner and eat and sit down and eat, but you could go down and order then come back to your seat. They had the people that go around and sell things. But we always carried a lunch, box, box lunch.

MILES

But that was a long train ride. How long did it take you?

HENDERSON

We had peanut butter sandwich [inaudible]. It took, what, like two and a half, three days and two nights, or two nights and three days, something like that.

MILES

You had enough food for that?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

Peanut butter sandwich and what else?

HENDERSON

Peanut butter and jelly.

MILES

What else? That was it? [mutual laughter]

HENDERSON

Yeah, peanut butter and jelly.

MILES

That's a lot of sandwiches.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Did you make friends when you were on that long trip?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

You talked to people?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. The conductor, they looked out for us, one of the black porters.

MILES

I'm sure there were porters.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

They were looking out for you?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Did they ask you where you were going?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Were you excited?

HENDERSON

Not leaving my friends. We cried, boy. You should have seen the stuff we buried, talking about we coming back. Man, Marlboros and toys and different things we buried. Then I had to leave my dog and everything. Oh, man.

MILES

So that was hard for you.

HENDERSON

It was hard. It was hard.

MILES

So when did you get here? When did you get to San Diego? Do you remember what month it was?

HENDERSON

It was March. School was still going on.

MILES

Yeah, that's what I was trying to figure out. So you left in the middle of the school year.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. We got here in March.

MILES

Did you start school as soon as you got here?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Went to Stockton Elementary [School].

MILES

What's the name of it?

HENDERSON

Stockton Elementary.

MILES

What grade were you in?

HENDERSON

Fifth.

MILES

And how was that compared to the school you were at? You were at Lincoln.
No, Dunbar.

HENDERSON

Dunbar.

MILES

You left Dunbar and then you went to Stockton. Okay. What was Stockton like then?

HENDERSON

Oh, man, it was— The first person I met was a guy named Tommy Martinez, a Mexican, and we befriended and to this day we're still friends. We played ball together, and he played second base and I was shortstop. We were the best on the West Coast. We got all kind of awards, and we made All-State for three years.

MILES

And you met him in fifth grade?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh, and we did and are still friends to this day.

MILES

Since you've mentioned this, had you had any encounter with Mexicans before?

HENDERSON

No. My dad used to tell us, said, "Don't you mess with the Mexicans out there, man. They'll cut your throat and drink your blood." [mutual laughter] I was scared, and that was on my mind all the time. Don't be no friends with no— But anyway, that was my best friend. And next door we had a kid named D. T. Trujelio, and he was Mexican. He and I was friends, because Tommy lived down in the Valley and Trujelio lived next door to us. I see Trujelio sometime right today, and we're still friends. We used to walk and ride our bikes over to Mexico to Tijuana to visit his grandmother.

MILES

Did you? They let you go over there?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. My mother let us ride bikes and everything over there.

MILES

What neighborhood did you move to when you first got here? I keep saying "here." To San Diego.

HENDERSON

We lived with my cousin, Aunt Dinah [Jones]. In fact, when everybody left Arkansas, just about, that's where they came to, 2926 Commercial, with Aunt Dinah Jones, the Jones family.

MILES

So you stayed with her first.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh, that's where my mother was and my grandmother, and Aunt Priscilla was with the doctor down at Point Loma and everything, but everybody that came from Arkansas stayed right there at 2926 Commercial. Yeah, that's where everybody got started at.

MILES

Where is that street in the city?

HENDERSON

It's [inaudible] ways to the town, you know, and not really in the ghettos, but it was in the ghetto.

MILES

All black?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

Oh, that's right, because Tommy was there. I mean not Tommy, but the neighbor was there.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Okay. So what kind of people lived there?

HENDERSON

Well, mostly Mexican. Japanese. I can remember when they came and took all the Japanese people away, and all our friends, man, we cried. They cried, we cried, to see the Motos and everything, when they put them in a truck and hauled them off.

MILES

Yeah, you would have been a teenager around that time, right?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

No?

HENDERSON

No. I just turned eleven.

MILES

Oh, yeah, that's right, the beginning of the war. That's right, not the end.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Was this the first time you'd ever seen Japanese?

HENDERSON

Yes, yes.

MILES

Did your father warn you about the Japanese, too?

HENDERSON

No, no, no. But we had a lot of friends, a lot of Japanese friends. Like I said, we all hugged, cried, when they took them off in the army trucks and everything.

MILES

What did you think of San Diego when you first got there?

HENDERSON

Oh, I wanted to be back in Arkansas.

MILES

Because you missed your friends?

HENDERSON

[inaudible] on the streetcar. Only way we could get to where we was at , because my mother didn't even have cab fare, so we had to catch a streetcar. And it was only a nickel. Didn't have to pay for us. She had to pay a nickel. The first person I saw was a girl named Donna Walker and Betty, and they looked just like the ones I left down in Arkansas, talking about Mattie Jo and Palestine, and they was my first love. Love at first sight. [mutual laughter]

MILES

Did you forget all your friends then?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord, yeah. I said, "I'm going to get that girl." And sure enough, I did. [mutual laughter]

MILES

So did she live in your neighborhood?

HENDERSON

No, she lived about four blocks down, but we all went to the same school, to elementary school.

MILES

So you were sad when you first got here?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

How long did it take you to get over it?

HENDERSON

Not long, because after I started playing ball and kickball and—

MILES

You got your friends?

HENDERSON

Yeah. And like I was saying, I was the first person anybody ever seen kick a football barefooted. I learned how— Mama used to whup me because I used to kick out of my shoes all the time, so they put the steel plate on the toes of my shoes and I still kicked out of them. So I learned how to kick barefooted to keep from getting a whupping.

MILES

Didn't it hurt your feet?

HENDERSON

No, no. I used to kick old rubber balls barefooted. So when the war broke out, we used to go on the navy base, marine base and everything, and we used to perform for the soldiers and sailors and everything. And they saw me kick, and I used to show them how to kick a football barefooted. I kicked it before forty-some thousand people in a high school game that we played.

MILES

What high school did you go to?

HENDERSON

San Diego High [School]. I was one of the first black quarterbacks there at San Diego High School. I'm the one that started the ball a-rolling for the black quarterbacks on the West Coast.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Well, they had them up here in L.A. like at Jordan [High School] and different places like that, but not at the white schools, see.

MILES

What was Stockton like?

HENDERSON

Stockton was a grammar school, you know, and it went to the sixth grade. And that's where I kicked out of my shoes and everything. [laughs] Well, it was fun. I had a lot of fun because we had a coach there name of Frank Penuelos, and Frank taught me a lot; ball, plus fighting.

MILES

He taught you how to fight?

HENDERSON

No, I already knew how to fight, but if you get in an argument or a fight, he made you put on a glove. He wouldn't let us go fist to fist, and he made you put on gloves and you had to go. There was a guy named Billy Jones. He used to— I don't know what went on with him. Me and him had a fight every day, seven days a week. He used to come to my house before school and wanted to fight.

MILES

Was he a black guy?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Well, he was high yellow. He was high yellow. And his name was Billy Jones. We had to fight before we come to school. After we get to school, we fought all day at school.

MILES

Why was he fighting you?

HENDERSON

He was just one of them types, a bully, you know, and I wasn't going to let him bully me. Then he would try to jump on my brother. Bobby was littler than I was, but Bobby would hold his own ground.

MILES

What about Frank? What was Frank—

HENDERSON

Frank Penuelos, the coach?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Oh, man, to this day, he used to— After he would leave school, he would come over to our house, and him and my mother then would drink beer together. And he just took up with me and just made sure that I was good at school and— You know. He taught me manhood, because we didn't have no father, you know. I came up without— After ten years old, I came up without a father. But thank God and everything, my mother taught us a lot. I had a paper route. I shined shoes. My brother, he sold newspapers and he shined shoes and everything. We hustled. Then I worked for Harry's Market right around through the alley, and I worked there as a stock clerk.

MILES

After school?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

I remember you telling me that in Dunbar you had that one teacher for all grades?

HENDERSON

Right, right.

MILES

What was Stockton like?

HENDERSON

Stockton, like fifth grade, one class. There wasn't no— It wasn't like Dunbar had everybody in one room. No, fifth grade, had fifth grade one room.

MILES

So one teacher per grade.

HENDERSON

Yeah, fifth, sixth. You had a different teacher for the fifth grade, when I got in the fifth grade.

MILES

It went to sixth grade?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. Junior high school was from seventh to the ninth. Then went to San Diego High School from the tenth grade to the twelfth.

MILES

Was Stockton integrated?

HENDERSON

Yes, yes.

MILES

You had white kids, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah, everybody. Yeah.

MILES

How did you feel going from an all-black elementary school to a mixed school?

HENDERSON

I was fascinated. And guess what? When I got from elementary school and went to junior high school, the white kids was bused in.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Yeah. [mutual laughter] The big old yellow buses come up every morning and everything, and we used to tease. To this day we still tease one another, "Hey, you guys were bused." Yeah, we tease one another to this day about that thing. How does it feel to be bused in?

MILES

Did you feel uncomfortable at all?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

Did you feel uncomfortable at all when you started?

HENDERSON

Never. Never. Never. No, because, like I said, my mother, in South we would play with white, yeah. The only thing that hurt me was when black playing baseball and they call you nigger. And football, man, they had it bad. They'd call you a nigger and everything, you know.

MILES

On your team or the other team?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, on the other team. Oh, no, you better not— Oh, no, nobody on our team called you nigger. But the other team would call you a nigger, them white boys get on like Frank Gifford. You ever hear of Frank Gifford?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Frank Gifford had it bad calling you a nigger.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord have mercy. Oh, Lord. And Granville Walker, he's out of Bakersfield, he came from out of Bakersfield, and we played them up there. Granville Walker whupped him something terrible. Oh, yeah, Frank Gifford.

MILES

Was he on an all-white team?

HENDERSON

Yeah, up there. And in college, we played him in junior college, and he had calmed down a little bit then. You know, it wasn't all that "nigger" this and "nigger" that, you know, and he was a little bit better.

MILES

He got tired of being whupped. [mutual laughter]

HENDERSON

He was a little bit better in college and everything. But like we'd go down to Arizona and play, we had to stay with a preacher; we couldn't stay with our team members. We had to stay with the preacher. And even here in California, some places like Riverside and all up along there, we couldn't stay at the hotel; they made up sleep in the gym.

MILES

Oh yeah, you were telling me about that. This is when you were in high school, right, and you were traveling?

HENDERSON

Yeah, high school.

MILES

We're getting at the end of the tape now.

HENDERSON

Same way with Bakersfield, when we'd go up there in Bakersfield, yeah.

MILES

Okay. We're going to pick up on this next time, because we have to end the tape.[End of March 20, 2004 interview]

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE
March 21, 2004

MILES

This is La'Tonya Rease Miles, and I'm interviewing Mr. Neale Henderson on Sunday, March 21st. All right. How you doing?

HENDERSON

I'm fine. I'm blessed. I'm still breathing.

MILES

Still breathing. All right. Okay. I was listening to the tape yesterday, and just a couple of things I want to go back to.

HENDERSON

Okey-doke.

MILES

The first one was, I'm not sure that we ever got your mother's name. What's your mother's full name?

HENDERSON

Her full name was Rosalie, and everybody called her "Baby." Her nickname was Baby.

MILES

And her last name was White before she got married.

HENDERSON

Yeah, before she got married, her name was White, Rosalie White. And her mother named her Baby because she was the last of twenty-some children she had.

MILES

She was number twenty-two?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Wow. Okay. And her sister that you were talking about, Aunt Marg, is that her sister?

HENDERSON

That was her play sister. Margaret was her play sister.

MILES

Oh, Margaret, that's her full name.

HENDERSON

Yeah. And her sister was Aunt Priscilla, Priscilla White. She was the oldest.

MILES

The oldest out of the twenty-two?

HENDERSON

No. The uncle, the one I was telling you about was in the First World War, he was the oldest, Alan White.

MILES

And Priscilla was the oldest girl.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Okay, I got you.

HENDERSON

My grandmother lived to be 109 years old.

MILES

Where did she die?

HENDERSON

She died in San Diego.

MILES

Now, I want to go back. I know we made it to San Diego in the last tape. I want to go back to Arkansas just for a minute, because you mentioned that the Yankees were your favorite team and Babe Ruth was your favorite player.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Did you have a favorite Negro League team?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Who was that?

HENDERSON

Kansas City Monarchs.

MILES

Okay. No question?

HENDERSON

No questions there.

MILES

And tell me, why were they your favorite team?

HENDERSON

Because that's the team that I batboy for mostly when the black leagues came to Fort Smith, and I got to be friends with mostly every player that was on the team. You know, like when the Indianapolis Clown came and they had a guy, he's 100 right now, [Ted] "Double Duty" Radcliffe, he's 103.

MILES

He's still living?

HENDERSON

He's still living. We was just together a couple months ago, and he's a hell of a guy and he loves young women. A hundred-and-some years old and any young woman won't pass him, man. He's going to stop them. [laughs]

MILES

Did you have a favorite player in the league?

HENDERSON

Yeah, my favorite player was Cool Papa Bell.

MILES

On the Monarchs.

HENDERSON

Yeah, on the Monarchs. And then next to him, it was [John] "Buck" O'Neil.

MILES

Now, why was Cool Papa your favorite player?

HENDERSON

Because he was the one that taught me a lot when I was seven years old, six and seven years old. He was the one that helped me a lot in fielding the ball and how to hold a bat and how to swing a bat and how to steal bases.

MILES

That was the main thing. That's what he's known for, too.

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Now at this time, or at least when you were a youth, did you think of the Negro League in terms of play, style of play, as different from the white teams, the way they played?

HENDERSON

Oh, yes, yes, very much so. I would notice that the pitchers, they would pitch differently from the white teams.

MILES

How's that?

HENDERSON

Like he really followed the catcher. The catcher was almost the leader of the team, because he could see the whole outfield, and every batter that come up, he would give the pitcher a certain pitch to throw to this batter and everything. And I noticed like on a white team, the pitcher just about controls, to tell the catcher what he was going to throw. And I noticed that a lot of the white teams, they used to come out and watch the black teams play, and they would go back and they would imitate, you know, the blacks and what they do. I know we, the blacks, was the first ones to come out with their pants from their knees to their ankle, and later on, you could see the white team, they changed and started wearing their pants the way the blacks was wearing their parts. I had a friend named Gene Richardson, left-hander, and he was All-State and everything in high school with us and everything, and when he went to the Monarchs in '47 and he had a move to first base. And Whitey Ford claimed his move that Gene Richardson had and said that he come out with it. But, like I said, they would come out and watch the black team play, and they would go back and emulate everything that they saw us do and they would do it.

MILES

How did you feel about that, the white teams copying you?

HENDERSON

Oh, it didn't bother me at all. We learned from each other.

MILES

Now, still, you as a boy now, did you have a favorite position that you liked to play?

HENDERSON

I played mostly shortstop. I liked the infield, but I learned how to play all position. I could catch, I could pitch, play first base, second base, shortstop, third base, outfield, you know, because when we was playing as kids, you know, you couldn't pitch all the time. Like my brother, he owned the catcher's mitt and I had a glove. My brother, he wanted to catch, but you know, you got to trade around, you know, let other kids pitch to get along good if you want to have a good team.

MILES

But you liked to play shortstop?

HENDERSON

Yeah, I loved it. I loved it. I loved it.

MILES

Why shortstop, though?

HENDERSON

Because you could roam. You could cover third base, you cover second base, and go back out deep in the middle of the field and get balls and everything. I loved it because you had a long throw to first base, and I had a good strong arm. I used to tease the guy. He hit a ball, and I know the ones that run slow. I'd tease them and tell them, "Run! Run!" And before they get halfway, I'd throw the ball and throw them out. I used to have a lot of fun. We used to talk to one another, and the kids today, you know, they don't talk to one another like we did. Is it okay to talk on this here?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

The crowd used to come out just to watch us practice, you know, do a little thing before the game and everything, batting practice, and we'd take infield practice. And the crowd would really come out to see us act a fool out there in emulating, you know, like a guy would run around the bases, the guy would take the ball, hit the guy out to the field, and the guy would throw him out going to third or trying to steal going into home. And the crowd used to just go crazy over that. Yeah, and then they would have races. You know, like a guy would run, like from the Clowns or whatever. Back then, a woman played in the Negro League. There were four womens that played.

MILES

I didn't know there was four. I know about Toni Stone.

HENDERSON

Yeah, there was four of them. And one of them is still living.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Mamie. Mamie. She's still living. We were just together about two months ago. They called her "Peanut." Her name is Mamie Johnson.

MILES

Did they all play for the Clowns or they played for different ones?

HENDERSON

Oh, different teams. Oh yeah.

MILES

I didn't know that. Okay. Now, once you came to San Diego, though, how did you maintain your connection to the Negro League once you moved out here?

HENDERSON

Because, like I was saying, my buddy Gene Richardson, which we played together in high school, he joined the Kansas City Monarchs in 1946, and we stayed in touch with one another. And they also came to California and played against the Padres, and my buddy Gene Richardson pitched against the Padres, and he struck out this one guy four times, which was the Padres' best hitter. And he struck him out four times, and the white guy called him—excuse the expression—"a dirty blackassed nigger." And Gene was just as white as he was, you know. But, no, he was black, but he called him a dirty name. And Gene put that little walk on and swished on off the field and everything. He didn't get mad or nothing like that and everything. So we really had a good time. That time after the game, and everything, I talked with most— Gene introduced me to most of the guys, and three years later, like I was saying, I signed with them and everything, which he kind of helped me to get on with the Monarchs besides my coach, Mike Morrow, from the high school.

MILES

So you were able to watch them when they came out here to play?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Was that mostly during the winter leagues when the—

HENDERSON

No, no, they were doing the regular baseball season. They hooked up a game with the Monarchs, and they came west and put on an exhibition game with the Monarchs. They had Luke Easter and all them playing at that time with Padres and everything, you know. That's the time Luke used to hit one out of the ballpark and it landed in a boxcar and they found it up in Frisco. And they call it the longest ball ever hit, you know.

MILES

How did you feel about the Padres?

HENDERSON

The Padres, at that time, you know, we had a guy on the team that called— Was Johnny Ritchey, and which was the first black to sign with them. And the Padres I liked. I still like the Padres and everything, but as far as playing with them and everything, to me, back in the days they really wasn't ready for the blacks because they really didn't treat all the black guys that played with them right. When they tried to get them to go professional, I mean they were professional, but when they liked to move up to other teams like Chicago, they would sell them, and they didn't pay the black guy what they was supposed to pay them, you know. Like I know a friend of mine, they still owe him some money, but I don't know what's going to be the outcome of it.

MILES

To this day, they owe him money?

HENDERSON

To this day, uh-huh.

MILES

What, forty-something years later, more than that years later?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Yeah.

MILES

Once you were in San Diego, you were about ten, eleven years old, how often did you go back to Arkansas?

HENDERSON

Well, my dad was still there. We went back mostly every summer.

MILES

Every summer for the whole summer?

HENDERSON

No, not for the whole summer, because I was involved in baseball with Post 6, American Legion baseball, and I was involved in American Legion baseball with coach Mike Morrow from my high school. And we would play the teams up

here in L.A., and we played teams up in Oakland, played teams all up into Frisco. We played a team in Sacramento, and this white guy came out who was watching the game, and we was beating Sacramento pretty good, and he started calling us names. You know those favorite words, "nigger" and everything. And we couldn't really play for him interrupting, calling us names and everything. So my coach went and found someone to get security, so they had security to get a policeman to come in, and they escorted him out, and they made him apologize.

MILES

Really? And he did it?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, they made him. Yeah, he apologized, because we was, what, fifteen, sixteen years old at that time, you know. And he apologized and everything, and we went on and played good baseball after that and everything.

MILES

How old were you when you first started playing in the American Legion?

HENDERSON

In American Legion baseball, I was fourteen.

MILES

What kind of league did you play in before that?

HENDERSON

I played with what's called the Gibson Tigers, and I started playing with them when I was eleven years old, all the way up until I signed with the Kansas City Monarchs till I was nineteen. Mr. Gibson, John— He was related to Josh Gibson.

MILES

That's what I was going to ask you.

HENDERSON

Yeah. He was related. They was first cousins. Like in the picture I showed you, you could look at him and look at Josh Gibson and you say, "Yeah, they cousins," and everything. The Padres would refuse to play us because what would happen if they beat us. Well, you know what they called us and everything. It wouldn't prove nothing for them or to us, you know, and so they would never play us. But we played teams like the Lions during the Winter League, and they had would have most of the Padres' players playing for them. One year, Ted Williams played with us. You hear of Ted Williams?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Ted Williams worked with Consolidated Aircraft [Corporation]. We had guys like John Ritchey and had Walter McCoy, had Gene Richardson, and myself. We won the winter league that year, which was, what— I think it was '52, '51, '52, somewhere around in there.

MILES

You were playing with them for a long time, then.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I worked with General Dynamics [Corporation], started with them in '52, I think it was.

MILES

How did you get involved with the Tigers?

HENDERSON

The Gibson Tigers?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

Oh, I got involved with the Gibson Tigers from when I was in Memorial, going to Memorial Junior High School.

MILES

So this is after you left Stockton.

HENDERSON

Yes, after I left Stockton and everything, well, I got involved with them because, like I said, I was a pretty good athlete, and they would come to my mother's house, because my mother, we all was from Arkansas and that's where Gibson was from, from Arkansas. And he would come and ask my mother, said, "Miss Henderson, is it okay if Neale go play baseball with us this Sunday?" And like I say, I was eleven. And she said, "Yeah, if you really take care of him and watch out for him," and everything. And I was eleven years old playing with guys, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen years old, twenty years old, or older, because like Mr. Earl Wilson, as old as he was, he was in his thirties probably back then. And I had Mr. Powell, Charlie Powell's dad, played with us, and there was a lot of older guys. Some of them was thirty and forty years old.

MILES

On the same team as you?

HENDERSON

Yes, yes.

MILES

Were you the youngest?

HENDERSON

I was the youngest. I was, like I said, eleven years old, and I could hang at shortstop, and I would go and play shortstop with them and everything.

MILES

How did they treat you?

HENDERSON

Good. You know, they drank and everything, and I'd drink soda. They'd give me sodas and everything, sandwich, and they treated me just like I was one of

them except for being around alcohol. They never tried to give me no kind of alcohol or nothing, no.

MILES

When did you play? What time of the year were you playing?

HENDERSON

In the winter, during the winter months.

MILES

How did it, or did it, conflict with school at all?

HENDERSON

Oh no. No, no. It never conflicted with school because played on weekends.

MILES

Oh, I see.

HENDERSON

Yeah, played on the weekends.

MILES

How often did you go— Well, you said that you went back home during the summer, back to Arkansas during the summer.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Like after my mother would said, "Well, you're not going to play baseball this time. You're going to see your father." He would want us to come South. But after we would get down South, like I was saying, we'd get up a little team, William B., B Boy and all the Whitfields would get together, and we'd go over in Tulsa and Muskogee and Farrow [?] and them places over in Oklahoma and playing down in some parts of Arkansas like Arkadelphia and Little Rock and different places around there and play baseball on weekends.

MILES

But once you went back, how did you feel about being in Arkansas? Did it seem different to you when you went back, after having been in San Diego?

HENDERSON

Oh yes. Oh yes.

MILES

What did you think of it then?

HENDERSON

I still loved Arkansas, and, like I said, the people down there in Arkansas, the whites in Arkansas, it seemed like they was better to you. Well, you knew your place and everything. But in California, it was just like I was telling you before, you know, I was going to school. When I got to San Diego High School and I was a good athlete, well, naturally, all the girls, most everybody, going to start trying to be your date or whatever, you know. And this one love, she was a Portuguese girl, she used to come out to watch me practice every day. She would come sit there from two-thirty till five o'clock.

MILES

Watching you.

HENDERSON

Watching me and everything. So I don't know how her mother got my phone number, but she called me one day and told me, said, "Neale, if my daughter's going to stay there and watch you play practice, the least you could do is make sure that she got home safe and everything. But watch out for her father, because he don't like blacks." It wasn't "black" then, but, you know, "colored." So I says, "Okay." So all of my team members, the whites and the rest of them guys, used to tease me and say, "Man, how can you get a good-looking girl like that?" and everything. I'd say, "Hey, I don't know." I would walk her from the school to the bus, and the white people would be looking and running into one another and wrecking their cars and everything. So word got out that we was dating one another, and the principal called her in and then they called me in and told me that was a no-no, you know. So we was going to have to change schools if it continue and everything. So, well, I got away from that because I loved baseball and football and basketball and everything, so I left that. We got out of that, but we still stayed friends.

MILES

What was her name?

HENDERSON

Josephine Macowich. She was one of the head cheerleaders. She did the flags and everything. And the girl that I married, my first wife, Mary Ella Williams, she was also. She was a pompom girl and everything, big old bowlegged. She was pretty.

MILES

She was the one that you saw when you first— Was that the one you were telling me about yesterday?

HENDERSON

No, no, that was— Her name was Anita Walker. She was part Indian, Negro, and had a sister named Betty.

MILES

That's right. But you married Mary Ella.

HENDERSON

I married Mary Ella. Her daddy was one of the barbers there in San Diego. But Mary Ella, that girl could sing. Ooh, she had a voice. Yeah, she sang in the choir at San Diego High.

MILES

When you first arrived in San Diego, back in Stockton Elementary, what did your classmates think of you? Or do you know what they thought about you when you got there?

HENDERSON

Well, at first it was hard making friends. Like I said, my best friend at that time was Tommy Martinez, Mexican guy. I stayed at his house, he stayed at mine, and we befriended one another all the way through. Pretty soon, you know, after they saw the type of athlete I was and everything, everybody wanted to be my friend because I could kick the ball the farthest and I could throw the furthest, and because I had some good teachers down in Arkansas, which,

through the Negro League, and I learned a lot and I was able to pass that on to some of the kids in my school from the experience that I gained while I was—

MILES

What did you teach them?

HENDERSON

How to field the ball better and how to charge the ball. You know, that's the main thing. Don't let the ball play you, but you play the ball, you know. And that's what Cool Papa Bell and Sherwood Brewer taught me.

MILES

So why was it hard to make friends at first? Because you were new?

HENDERSON

Because I was new, and the girls, they always wanted to try to check you out, you know. [laughs]

MILES

What did they think about you?

HENDERSON

And I was a good dancer. I could dance, because I had pretty good feet movement.

MILES

What kind of dancing were you doing then?

HENDERSON

Turkey trot, Suzy-Q, Jitterbug.

MILES

Well, let me ask you this. You said your father was still back in Arkansas. Was he still pastor of the church then?

HENDERSON

No, he had moved over into Spiro, Oklahoma. He had a church over in Oklahoma.

MILES

Oh, he moved.

HENDERSON

He also moved a church down in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

MILES

So he didn't stay in Fort Smith?

HENDERSON

He was still living in Fort Smith.

MILES

Oh, he would just travel.

HENDERSON

Yeah, he would travel and drive down there.

MILES

Okay. Did he remarry?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Did he have other children?

HENDERSON

Well, stepchildren.

MILES

Oh, none of his own?

HENDERSON

No. None of his own.

MILES

Now, back in San Diego, what was your life like without your father? I remember you said you couldn't listen to certain kind of music and that type of stuff. Without your father there, did it change for you? Could you listen to music now?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

Because I know Mom liked to party.

HENDERSON

Yeah, my mother— Oh, yeah. We had the latest music and everything. And my life without a father, you know, it was rough, but my mother was trying to be a mother and a father to us, which she did a very good job. We never went to jail during our childhood, never went to a detention home or anything, and we knew right from wrong. We never sassed nobody. Because of the upbringing that we had down in Arkansas, you better speak and say "Good morning" to everybody you saw. No matter if you white, black, green, or whatever, you had to speak to one another. And I wish we could come back to that today, you know. We have lost that in the home, you know, get in the morning, say "Good morning" to one another. That's what we need to be doing today, and maybe the young generation that's coming up would learn responsibility and respect to one another.

MILES

So what kind of music were you listening to then?

HENDERSON

Out here?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Oh, the blues. I'm a blues man. I love the blues and rock and roll.

MILES

Do you have a favorite rock and roller? Who were you listening to?

HENDERSON

Back then, I listened to all of them. Wasn't nobody special. I liked Sam Cooke and liked— What that one that danced?

MILES

[Ernest] "Chubby" Checkers?

HENDERSON

James Brown. Well, we used to go to Chubby Checkers' and dance, used to come hear B.B. King, Louis Jordan. And back then, back in the forties, wasn't it Joe Louis came there to the USO [United Service Organization]. That's what was strange to me, that here it is, you had the armed forces, but the blacks had their own USO. We couldn't go to the white USO and everything. We had a black USO out off of Imperial there. And my sister, back in '43, she was Miss USO in San Diego.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Yeah. My sister was built. She was a good-looking girl, you know. And she taking picture with Joe Louis and everything there at the USO.

MILES

You moved to San Diego in '40. A year later the war broke out.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What was your memory of that war? Do you remember Pearl Harbor and hearing about it?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, yeah.

MILES

What do you remember?

HENDERSON

Well, I remember— I think we was in church when it happened and everything, and, well, everybody, we all left church and everything. After the preacher prayed for everybody and everything, then we left church and everybody came home. And it was just a turmoil, you know, and everybody came together. It seemed like the whole world came together once that broke out. And like I said, we lost all our Japanese friends when they came and picked them up and put them in concentration camp.

MILES

Can you say some more about that? What do you remember about that?

HENDERSON

Well, I can remember when they brought all these army trucks and started gathering up all the Japanese there off of Imperial and down in the Valley, which was off of Paradise Valley Road and everything there in La Mesa. They had gardens and everything out in the farmlands. And we had a lot of friends that lived out in the farmlands, because we used to go out there and get vegetables and different things. And they picked all those guys up, and we hated to see them go. But the government had to do what they had to do.

MILES

What happened to their houses, do you know, while they were gone?

HENDERSON

Yeah, they lost them. Yeah, they lost all their property and everything. And down in the Valley where most of the Japanese was— The Daltons. Well, I went to school with the grandchildren of the Dalton Gang. They went to

Memorial Junior High School with me. And they was bad. They gave me my first pair of Levis. Like I said, my mother, she worked but she didn't make that much money and everything, and I always wanted me a pair of Levis. And one of the Dalton boys gave me my first pair of Levis. They were used. [mutual laughter]

MILES

Do you remember when your friends came back after the internment camp? Do you remember them coming back?

HENDERSON

Oh, yes, yes. After the war was over, they came back and got back on the football team. By that time, we was all in senior high school, and they all came back and just like they never left.

MILES

Did they tell you about what it was like?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah, yeah.

MILES

What did they say?

HENDERSON

A lot of them joined the armed forces, you know, and they didn't send them to Japan, but a lot of them was interpreters and everything for them. But a lot of them went to Germany and everything.

MILES

Do you know of any other people, not Japanese, who went and enlisted, who fought in the war?

HENDERSON

Yes, yes. You've seen the movie *Cabin in the Sky*?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Had a buddy named Sonny Peaton and he did that, the Jitterbug and, what was the name of them, with the peg-legged pants on, he was the one that was doing that—

MILES

He was in the movie?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. In the movie he was one of them curly-haired, light-skinned, women's man back then, and that boy could dance, though.

MILES

Was he in the army?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

And he was an actor, too.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Now, you did mention church. Even though your father was a preacher back in Arkansas, back in San Diego how much did you get involved in church?

HENDERSON

Well, my mother sung in the choir, and she went back to a Methodist church where her mother was attending a Methodist church, and my mother started attending the Methodist church, but we continued to go to the Baptist church. Yeah, I belonged to the Bethel Baptist there in San Diego, and I stayed with Bethel Baptist until I got married, and I left Bethel Baptist and went to my wife's church.

MILES

Now, your mother went to one church, and you went to another church. Who did you go with then?

HENDERSON

My brother and sister, we all stayed in the Baptist. We stayed Baptist. My mother—

MILES

The three of you went without an adult?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

All right. So you're still in church at this point.

HENDERSON

Yes, yes.

MILES

But at some point, and that's while you were still— I guess you're probably in junior high at this point now when you joined the Tigers, when you started playing for the Gibson Tigers.

HENDERSON

Gibson Tigers.

MILES

Okay. And that allowed you to travel a lot.

HENDERSON

Yes. We went to Mexico. We traveled over into Mexico. We went down in the Valley, played up in L.A., mostly all around here in L.A. and everything. Being as young as I was, being eleven, twelve, and thirteen, I learned a lot from each one of the guys that I played with.

MILES

Now, tell me about your experience in Mexico then. You're eleven years old?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What was it like? What was your impression of it?

HENDERSON

Man, the way the peoples live down there, you'd go in the house and would be dirt floors. Wouldn't be no wooden floor, wouldn't be no concrete; it was right on plain dirt, you know.

MILES

What city did you go to in Mexico?

HENDERSON

I went to like in Tijuana, went to Mexicali, went to Calexico, went to Ensenada, and on down further than Ensenada.

MILES

Did you learn Spanish at all?

HENDERSON

I can say all the bad words. [mutual laughter] I learned a little bit, because my friend and next-door neighborhood when we lived on Commercial, they was mostly Spanish, and they taught me—

MILES

The bad words?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What was your impression of other cities throughout the state? What was it like compared to San Diego, let's say, or Sacramento or Los Angeles or all these different places?

HENDERSON

Well, I thought that like when we came up here with the Boys Club, I found L.A. to be in certain areas was really prejudiced.

MILES

Name some areas.

HENDERSON

I mean, like we couldn't go in a lot of the restaurants and eat, for one thing. We had to go down in the ghetto, mostly, and that's where we mostly went down and got like the big restaurants and the hotels. Like we would come up, they wouldn't let us stay in the big hotels. We had to go down, either stay at the Boys Club or stay at like the campus, UCLA or whatever, stay in the gym. They would put cots in there. We came up to like for to run track at the Rose Bowl, and there would be sometimes twenty, thirty busloads of us, and everybody couldn't stay at the Y[MCA], when they put us like at the gyms and different schools.

MILES

You couldn't stay at the Y because they didn't allow you to stay in the Y because the Y was segregated, or there was just too many of you?

HENDERSON

It would be too many of us. And like I said, you couldn't use the showers. They wouldn't let you go to the swimming pools, nothing like that. So they put us at the schools, because you could use the showers and everything, take a bath.

MILES

What was considered the ghetto at that time in Los Angeles?

HENDERSON

Down where the burlesque shows and everything was, down in the lower part of the town.

MILES

Down like Central Avenue or—

HENDERSON

No, downtown.

MILES

This way? Okay.

HENDERSON

Yeah. We would be downtown.

MILES

Then you went to Sacramento.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

What was Sacramento like?

HENDERSON

Just like any other part of California. It was prejudiced, and they still had their own little areas that you wasn't allowed to enter. If you was out there after dark, the police would stop and ask you what was you doing out in this area, the same way they did there in San Diego. Yeah, we wasn't allowed in a certain part of town at night, you know, because they would run you out of there and give you a ticket.

MILES

A ticket for what, though?

HENDERSON

Being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

MILES

That's what I was saying, just for being colored.

HENDERSON

Yeah, for being a black; colored back then.

MILES

Yeah, colored at that time, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What was the high school like for you?

HENDERSON

Over when I was at Memorial Junior High School, back then they was allowed to give you swats. Like if you was bad, [inaudible], you'd go to the vice principal. He had a paddle in there about like this here with suction holes in it. And you had to drop your pants, and he'd give you so many swats, you know.

MILES

Did you get swats?

HENDERSON

A whole lot of times. Yeah, he got to know me pretty good, because I used to tease the kids, the girls. I used to take their hair and put in the inkwell. In other words, I hate to say this, because I wouldn't want the young kids to act like I was acting when I was young, but seemed like that's the only way I was getting attention and everything. So I was kind of being mischievous. Today I look back at it and say, "Oh, you was a fool." But I made friends with a lot of the girls.

MILES

Now, your junior high was also integrated, too, right?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Were you an athlete in junior high?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What were you playing there?

HENDERSON

I played everything. I never was a good swimmer. Yeah, my dad—

MILES

Did you try it?

HENDERSON

I tried to swim, but my dad made us a fear of water back in Arkansas. He didn't allow us to go nowhere near no water.

MILES

Why is that?

HENDERSON

I really don't know, but he was scared we would drown. Then you had all them water moccasins and different things around there. I remember the time that one Easter I saw my first snake, and a lot of peoples don't want to believe about a jointed snake.

MILES

What is that?

HENDERSON

A jointed snake is when you hit him, he'd break all apart and the parts would go different directions.

MILES

Oh, that's nasty. [laughs]

HENDERSON

Yeah. Then you'd see him all of a sudden, he'd start crawling with them, he'd go back together, and he'd take off.

MILES

You saw one of those?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Yeah, one Easter. We had an Easter egg hunt there at church, and that's when I saw my first jointed snake.

MILES

Jointed snake. I don't think I've ever heard of that before.

HENDERSON

Yeah, well, they're real.

MILES

Okay. What sports did you play? This is junior high, I guess.

HENDERSON

Junior high I played basketball, football, softball, because you wasn't allowed to play hardball. I played handball and volleyball, and I played all— And then we had track meets there at the school. I did the hop, skip, and jump, and ran the hundred, seventy-five, the fifty, and broad jump, hop, skip and jump, pretty good all—

MILES

Did you have a favorite? Because that's a lot of teams there. Was there one sport that you really liked best above all?

HENDERSON

Baseball.

MILES

Still baseball?

HENDERSON

Still baseball. Yeah, I wanted to be a professional baseball player. I wanted to go up to play with the Yankees. That was the team I wanted.

MILES

That was your goal?

HENDERSON

That was one my goal. "One of these days I'm going to play with the Yankees."

MILES

Did you ever consider any other occupation besides playing baseball?

HENDERSON

No. Playing baseball, that was it. That was my goal, was to be a professional baseball player.

MILES

Now, as an athlete, were you treated differently? Did you have any special privileges because you were an athlete?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

They treated you the same?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

What carried over into high school then, in terms of you playing sports?

HENDERSON

Well, like I said, my high school coach saw me playing with the Gibson Tigers, and he came to me and asked me what school was I going to. And I said, "My goal is to go to San Diego High School," because that's where Gene Richardson, Charles Coffey, and a lot of the older guys that I played with the

Gibson Tigers, Willie Steele. Willie Steele went to [Herbert] Hoover [High School]. He was the only black out there at that time. Then his cousin came up; Harold Steele was the next black to go there that I know of back then, two blacks going out to Hoover High School.

MILES

Wait. The whole school, you mean, not just—

HENDERSON

The whole school out there at Hoover. They didn't have hardly no blacks out there at Hoover.

MILES

Why was that? Was it because of the part of town it was in?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

About how many blacks were at San Diego?

HENDERSON

[laughs] They were swamped. [mutual laughter] Yeah, that's why we were so powered. We had power.

MILES

What about whites, then? What was the racial breakdown? About how many whites, how many Mexicans? Do you remember?

HENDERSON

I would say it was 25/25/25.

MILES

Oh, it was equal?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, it was just about equal.

MILES

Okay. It was really mixed then.

HENDERSON

Yeah. But there was less Japanese, Filipino, you know, like that, but it was more black, white.

MILES

Mexican.

HENDERSON

And Mexicans than anything.

MILES

Now, you said that you hoped to go to San Diego. Did you have a choice in where you could go for high school?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

It was dependent on where you lived?

HENDERSON

Yeah. After the war was over and my mother remarried to Thomas Scroggin—

MILES

Oh, she did remarry?

HENDERSON

Yeah. She remarried to Thomas Scroggin, which was my daddy's handyman down in Arkansas.

MILES

So he moved out to California, obviously.

HENDERSON

Yeah. My mother sent for him and he came down to California and they ended up getting married. And with him being an ex-serviceman, ended up getting a house over in Coronado, over in the project. And we all moved over to Coronado, and now they had a school over there, Coronado High School, and we thought we was going to have to transfer to Coronado High School, but they didn't allow no blacks to go to that school. My brother tried to go to the school, and they refused him to go there, so we was all going to San Diego High. So after my first year of playing sports and everything, I was real good playing, good athlete, and they found I lived in Coronado, they were going to try to make me go to Coronado High School now. So my mother said, "Oh, no, Neale's going to continue to go to San Diego High School," and everything. My brother's going to continue to go to high school, "and my daughter's going to continue to go to high school." Out of the project, which was almost about 50 percent black, all those used to catch that ferry and come over to school in San Diego. But two years later, they finally got some blacks, I remember, and that's the first time they ever won a championship.

MILES

When they got the blacks.

HENDERSON

Got the two black young men.

MILES

Just two?

HENDERSON

Yeah, it was two.

MILES

Two, and they won the championship?

HENDERSON

Yeah. We couldn't even go to the movies over in Coronado. And we boycotted. We boycotted, and finally they started letting blacks go to the movies.

MILES

What sport did they win the championship in?

HENDERSON

Basketball.

MILES

What was the city like?

HENDERSON

Coronado?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Well, you know, it had the air force or navy. It was navy. But like I said, even the sailors and none of them could go to the theaters, couldn't stay at the hotels over there, nothing.

MILES

What was San Diego High like?

HENDERSON

Oh, San Diego High was— It was nice. Only one time we had an incident. The principal called Teresa May Dixon a nigger.

MILES

The principal did?

HENDERSON

The principal did, and she came, told. We found out about it and everything, so we boycotted the school. We refused to play football, baseball, any kind of sport, until he apologized to her and everything.

MILES

When you say "we," who do you mean?

HENDERSON

The whole team. The whole school. The whole school, we boycotted, and we said the only way that we was going to continue to play sports and play anything until he apologized to the whole school. So they called a meeting, which all the whole school came to the auditorium, and he apologized to Teresa May Dixon up on the stage and everything.

MILES

Really?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. And that Friday, they lost the football game because we wasn't there and everything. And they lost.

MILES

Did no one show up for the game?

HENDERSON

No. No blacks.

MILES

No blacks.

HENDERSON

No blacks.

MILES

Did other players play?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

How did you manage to organize a boycott? Was there some person who all— Was there one leader, or people just started talking?

HENDERSON

There was one leader. We had a leader, which was Teresa May Dixon. Yeah. Teresa, she was dipping snuff back in them days.

MILES

As a teenager?

HENDERSON

Yeah, as a teenager, she dipped that snuff.

MILES

What happened? What did she do?

HENDERSON

She got the whole school; we signed a petition. She got up a petition and everything and signed it, and, like we said, we started boycotting and got the word out, what the principal did. We came together and everybody was for us 100 percent.

MILES

Was she an athlete, Teresa?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no, no, no. Teresa was just an outspoken person, you know.

MILES

Were there female athletes in the school? Was there girls' teams?

HENDERSON

Volleyball and golf, things like that.

MILES

Not softball?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

And what about a basketball team?

HENDERSON

Basketball. I don't remember no girls playing basketball.

MILES

All right. But there were cheerleaders and stuff?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

And was it integrated?

HENDERSON

Integrated. My cousin was one of the first black—her picture's still in the gym down there at San Diego High—to twirl a baton. She was the first black. She passed away about two weeks ago, and they still recognize her there at San Diego High.

MILES

Wow. Tell me about you playing football.

HENDERSON

Oh, that was— My baseball coach didn't want me to play football.

MILES

Why?

HENDERSON

Because he didn't want me to get hurt, because he wanted us to win the championship that year. And they wouldn't let me play varsity. They put me down on JV [junior varsity], but I was good enough to play. And I found out about that and everything, so the following year, they asked me to play quarterback, which I played quarterback, but I couldn't run the ball. They didn't want me to run the ball because—

MILES

They didn't want you to get hit?

HENDERSON

They didn't want me to get hit. So we planned just about the end of the season, I broke and ran one and scored a touchdown, and my coach put that play in the game. [laughs]

MILES

Did they let you run after that?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Hold on. You know, we're at the end of the tape already.

HENDERSON

Already?

MILES

Yeah.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO
March 21, 2004

MILES

You said yesterday that there weren't that many black quarterbacks.

HENDERSON

No. I was one of the first blacks on the Pacific Coast in an all-white schools to play quarterback. I started the ball rolling for the black quarterback in the black high schools that was all-white and predominated black. I started the ball rolling for quarterbacks in the high schools.

MILES

Now at this time, what were the perception of black quarterbacks? Was there a stereotype about them, about their ability to be a quarterback?

HENDERSON

Yeah, they said that we couldn't think and that we wasn't able to communicate with the team members and everything. But I proved them wrong and everything.

MILES

Why is that they let you become a quarterback?

HENDERSON

Well, we were playing up on the upper field one day and just playing flag football, and a coach happened to pass by me, saw me hook a pass up with a guy named Douglas Hunt, which could run about a 9-800 or whatever, you know. I threw a pass pretty deep, and he ran and caught up with it and went in for a touchdown. So the coach said, "Well, I think we're going to make Neale our quarterback," and everything. So that's how I got to be the quarterback.

MILES

How did people treat you as a quarterback? What were the fans saying about you?

HENDERSON

Oh, man. Oh, they loved me.

MILES

Were you the hero?

HENDERSON

After the game and everything, all the kids, young kids would come over and ask me to sign autographs and everything. The first black judge at San Diego, which was [the Honorable] Earl [B.] Gilliam, he only had one eye and everything. I remember one night, they hit Earl pretty hard and his eye popped out. Each team, I remember everybody got down on the ground, feeling for his eye.

MILES

His eye popped out?

HENDERSON

Well, he had one eye, a glass eye, and the eye popped out. See, we didn't have face masks and everything back then, and his eye popped out. And we all got down on the ground, and they found the eye. And Earl took the dip and rinsed it off and popped it back in, came back, "Neale, Neale, call that same play." So we got back in the huddle and called the same play. To this day, before Earl died, he never told us what he did to this guy, but the guy was bloody, ooh, Lord. Looked like he'd been in a hatchet fight, and there wasn't no penalty called on it. But this guy was laying out, and nobody ever knew what Earl did to this young man.

MILES

Who were the teams that you played?

HENDERSON

We played John Muir [High School], played Compton [High School], played—

MILES

Compton in Los Angeles?

HENDERSON

Yeah. They didn't have no blacks.

MILES

But you were a high school team in San Diego. What were you doing playing a team up there?

HENDERSON

We played in the Coast League. It was All-Coast league.

MILES

For football?

HENDERSON

For football. We played, like, Compton, John Muir, East L.A., and the Valley, and Pasadena High [School] and just everything up in this community.

MILES

What was your teammates made of, mostly black?

HENDERSON

Oh no, we were integrated.

MILES

Integrated through and through.

HENDERSON

Power. Power. And, see, San Diego and Hoover High was about the only big schools there. But, like, Point Loma [High School] and all those schools around there, they wasn't as power as we were, you know, so they was in the city teams. They didn't travel up in the area, playing unless it was, like, for championships.

MILES

How many championships did you win?

HENDERSON

Oh, we won ours just about every year that I was there, baseball and football, basketball. Our team even played the Harlem Globetrotters.

MILES

No, you didn't.

HENDERSON

Yes, yes, they did. I played basketball when I was playing for the Boys Club. I played one game, scored fifty-five points.

MILES

By yourself?

HENDERSON

By myself. At the high school they wanted me to play basketball, so I went out and played, but I was too involved in working after— Trying to help my mother and everything. So I went out and worked, you know, so I could help support our family, and I wouldn't play basketball because I had to try to help my mom with money-wise.

MILES

What position did you play for basketball?

HENDERSON

I played guard.

MILES

Two questions. What kind of jobs did you do, and then how did you have time to do all this?

HENDERSON

I had a paper route. I would get up early morning before school and go do the paper route. Then I would work in Harry's Market, which was stock. I was a stock boy and everything. And shine shoes, and I'd go on the base and different places, had a little shoebox and everything. Sold newspapers on weekend out on the corner. Different little things. Then I even worked in a leather place over in Coronado, worked in a leather shop there polishing s_____ and different things for the— Washing windows. I was washing windows, washed windows.

MILES

What kind of student were you? Did you like school?

HENDERSON

No. No, I wasn't like my brother. I had problems, you know, spelling, and reading, because like I was telling you, I was tie-tongued, and the kids would laugh at me.

MILES

Even still in high school?

HENDERSON

Even high school, yeah. I didn't really learn how to pronounce words and everything until later on in life, and after all the whupping my mother gave me to learn me how to say "truckin'". I couldn't say like "street sweeper" and different things, you know. I just had problem pronouncing words.

MILES

Did you have a favorite subject, though, at all or one class you liked more than the other?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Which one?

HENDERSON

Gym. [mutual laughter]

MILES

I'm noticing a pattern here.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I couldn't wait for gym. I'd go out there and get my hand on a football, a baseball or handball or volleyball. Anything that was athletic, I was superb.

MILES

So why did you choose baseball over football in terms of a career?

HENDERSON

Not to get hurt. Football was a tragic game. You could easily get hurt, break a leg, anything, but baseball was more comfortable for me and everything.

MILES

Could you tell me, in Fort Smith, baseball was really popular. Was it just as popular in San Diego as well?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

No? Why not, do you think?

HENDERSON

In the games, the high school games and everything, nobody never came out to a baseball game, not even the school. When we played for the championship, we would have everybody. People would show up for the game. But as far as games, the only time we would have— I'll bet you it wouldn't be ten people at the game.

MILES

No way. Why is that, though?

HENDERSON

I don't know. No high school kids. Nobody would come out for to watch us play. On Saturdays and Sundays that we would have games, nobody. No, we'd be out there playing amongst one another, and just that was it. That was it.

MILES

What did they watch, then? Was there another sport that people preferred?

HENDERSON

No. Now, even professional baseball, they would get pretty good crowds down at the Padres and everything, but even those guys on the baseball team, we hardly ever went down to watch the Padres play. But nobody hardly ever came out to watch high school games or anything.

MILES

That's surprising.

HENDERSON

Yeah. But football, ooh, Lord. We would have thirty- and forty-thousand people at our high school games.

MILES

So in '47, Jackie Robinson signed. Do you remember that?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

What were you thinking at that time when you heard about it? Where were you when you heard?

HENDERSON

I was in high school, and when Jackie signed and everything, also that year we was playing ball down in Arizona, and our coach, Mike Morrow, had went— We was, like I told you, ended up staying with a preacher down there, and my coach went before the board down in Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, and told the guy that was over the baseball game for that night, said, "If you do not bring," he called them, "boys, as you call them, downtown and let them sleep and eat at the hotel and everything else, we refuse to play you." And they had sold out for this game because it was the championship game and everything. So they called a town meeting and everything, so they told him, said, "Okay, you can go get your boys and bring them down to the hotel and everything." And we integrated. The same year that Jackie Robinson made it to the majors, we integrated Tucson, Arizona, for blacks, just not the team, but all blacks could go to the hotel, could eat and sleep, eat in cafes and everything.

MILES

After you guys did it, everybody could.

HENDERSON

Yeah, everybody. It was open. We integrated Tucson.

MILES

Do you remember what hotel that was?

HENDERSON

Tucson— What was it? No, I don't remember the hotel. [tape recorder off]

MILES

Tell me about how you heard about Jackie Robinson.

HENDERSON

Oh, well, back in the days when Jackie was at UCLA, I followed him in his baseball career at UCLA and wished him the best. But when he signed with the Kansas City Monarchs and he played in the Negro League, and I came two years behind him. He played shortstop and also played second base. Well, he could play any position, and he didn't know how to play first base until he got with the Brooklyn Dodgers. They pushed him over to first base. But I came two years behind Jackie and I came behind— Can't think of the name right now. But I came along with Ernie Banks, Elston Howard, Roy Campanella was still there, and Buck O'Neil and Sherwood Brewer and the brothers, the ones that live here in L.A. You're going to do the next interview on them.

MILES

The Porters.

HENDERSON

The Porters, yeah, Merle, Merle Porter. Merle was a hell of a ballplayer. Yeah, he was. He was a hell of a ballplayer. And like I say, all of them should have went to the majors, but they was different personalities, I guess, is what it was all about, you know. They look at your personality and the way you reacts and everything with different peoples and everything. And some of us, if you spoke wrong, then they weren't looking for that, you know.

MILES

What do you think they saw in Jackie Robinson?

HENDERSON

They saw that Jackie Robinson could take abuse. He wouldn't fight back verbally or physically, you know. And a lot of us, just through the tone of our voice to the white man, could be abusive to him, you know. He would fear you, you know. And they really did a complex on some of us, and they know we— There was better ballplayers than Jackie Robinson, but they knew who to put there for to get us into baseball history.

MILES

Did you see him play before he played with the Dodgers?

HENDERSON

Oh yes. Oh yes.

MILES

You saw him play for the Monarchs?

HENDERSON

Yeah, for the Monarchs and also UCLA.

MILES

What did you think of him?

HENDERSON

Oh, he was a ballplayer. Yeah, he was a team player. Yeah, he was a team player.

MILES

So what was your reaction when you heard that the Dodgers had signed him?

HENDERSON

Oh, I was happy. I said, "Oh, the ball is rolling now. Yeah, the ball is rolling now." And they picked a lot of guys from the Monarchs and everything, and I was proud of that. And I just knew that some day I might would make it to the majors.

MILES

To play for the Yankees.

HENDERSON

To play for the Yankees. But I was farmed out to a little team down in Abilene, Kansas, and that's where I met [Eldrick] Tiger Woods' dad, Earl Woods. He played for a team out on the army base there. It wasn't Jackson City. It wasn't in Kansas. What's the name of where the army base is there in Kansas? But we

played them for the championship and we won. And like I was saying, I was one of the first blacks to sign for Abilene. I was down there. That was where [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was from.

MILES

Was this before you played for the Monarchs?

HENDERSON

No, the Monarchs farmed me out down to Abilene.

MILES

Were you at all concerned about what integrating the majors would mean for the Negro League?

HENDERSON

Yeah, very concerned. Very concerned.

MILES

What were you thinking?

HENDERSON

I was thinking that maybe this would be a token where others would follow, you know, other teams like football, basketball, golf, you know. That would be a start for us, which it was. It started open the doors for us and everything, every token of sports.

MILES

Were you worried, though, that the Negro Leagues would fall apart? Was that a concern?

HENDERSON

No. We thought we was going to be able to go on, you know, but it broke us up. You know, that was the fall of the Negro League.

MILES

Why did you think that that would be— You said you thought you'd be able to go home. Why did you think that would happen?

HENDERSON

In what term? I can't get it, "go home"?

MILES

Well, I'm just wondering, did you think it would be good or bad for the Negro Leagues?

HENDERSON

I thought it was going to be good.

MILES

Why did you think it was going to good?

HENDERSON

Because that would open up more positions and more things for the Negro—

MILES

Oh, the other players. I see.

HENDERSON

Yeah, right. See, even though they might not jump good into the majors with the farm teams and everything, they could still play in the Negro League, which would boost them forward to the farm teams for the major leagues, which it didn't. Everything started folding up. But here's the way I looked at it. The white man was after that dollar, you know, and, see, we— Little do they know, we, the Negro League, saved a lot of ballparks here in the United States. A lot of the ballparks was going broke, and we went in there and played at the ballparks and put them back on their feet. But see, history don't tell this, but it really happened and everything. This is what I would like to go on the record, that we played a role in saving a lot of the ballparks here in the United States. See, we used to have like the National League against the American League, just like the white team, the National League against the American League. We used to pull in eighty- to a hundred-thousand people at our World Series games and everything. They saw this, and they out for that dollar. So they said, "Well, hey, if they can pull in that kind of money, now what if we get

them to playing in our league and pull in? We could make this money," you know.

MILES

Why do you think they didn't do that before, though?

HENDERSON

They wasn't thinking. They wasn't thinking. But they got the wrong person in there that loved that dollar. So they say, "Well, now, hey, let's go after them black players and after that money." See, but the blacks fooled them. They just about stopped going to baseball games after they integrated.

MILES

Why?

HENDERSON

I don't know. I don't know, but we used to pull in that because we used to see pictures and they'd be out there in their suits and they women would be in they mink stole and show them things. The preacher would let church out early so that to go to the ball game, and that's really why everybody would be dressed so nice and everything, because they would leave straight from church and go to the ball game.

MILES

Was this here in San Diego, too?

HENDERSON

No. The Negro League, they came here just barnstorming, you know. But I'm talking about back in the South and the East and everything.

MILES

What were the crowds like when they saw the Negro League players in San Diego?

HENDERSON

In San Diego, we had a packed house. They filled up that stadium, ballpark.

MILES

So they filled it?

HENDERSON

Yeah, we filled it. Yeah, we filled it.

MILES

Was it an integrated crowd?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Or mostly black?

HENDERSON

Yeah, integrated crowd. But here in California, you could sit anywhere you want. But like back in the South, they would rope off a certain area, you know, right behind, but they would charge more money. But they would rope that off and most of the white people sit right behind the home plate and everything, but they paid more money.

MILES

Now, you mentioned that Jackie Robinson had more of a mild kind of personality, and some people felt like he was an Uncle Tom. What was your feeling?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no. He did what he had to do, you know. No. He spoke up, you know. He didn't let nobody— He knew what to say at the right time. Yeah, he thought before he spoke, you know. So I think they took the right man for the job, yeah.

MILES

Now, tell me about you joining the Kansas City Monarchs.

HENDERSON

Oh, like I said, my first night up to Kansas City, they was out on a road trip, and I arrived there late that night. The Monarchs, they came in round about one, and they woke me up, and I happened to— I thought I was going to sleep with my buddy Gene Richardson, but they put me with Elston Howard. That night, before the game and everything, they didn't have a uniform for me, so Elston Howard gave me— He happened to have an extra uniform, and Elston Howard was way bigger than me, and they made me damn near look like a clown with the [inaudible] and everything, you know. Anytime a new player come in, they tried to— I don't know what it is, but they don't seem like they try to help you. They try to hinder you and everything. But when I got out on the field, even though I had a uniform on that was dragging the wind and everything, couldn't move the way you wanted to, I performed excellent. Buck O'Neil was [inaudible] out there with me, and Barney Serrell was playing second base, and he really helped me out. He made me look good. After I'd throw the ball to him made on a double-play or whatever, and Buck hit one out over second base, and I went over and got it and made a perfect throw to first base, and I got a standing ovation from the crowd.

MILES

Did you?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. And Willie Mays and [Henry Louis] Hank Aaron and them was over in the opposite dugout, and that's the night they signed professional with Birmingham Black Baron. And Piper Davis, which was the manager for the Birmingham Black Baron, after the game and everything was over, he talked with my manager and everything, and he tried to buy me from the Monarchs.

MILES

On your first game?

HENDERSON

On my first one, yes.

MILES

Now, had you finished high school by this time?

HENDERSON

Oh, yes, yes. I had graduated.

MILES

So tell me what happened between you graduating high school and you signing with the Monarchs.

HENDERSON

Oh, I left. See, the same week that graduation was over, I left that weekend for Kansas City.

MILES

You did? Why did you go to Kansas City?

HENDERSON

Because they gave me a \$10,000 bonus signing and \$300 a month, you know, and being young and [inaudible], but I wasn't twenty-one, everything went to my mother. I got just enough to buy my toothpaste and to eat and everything, and the rest of the money came home to my mother. And my mother had taken that, the money to pay down on a home. That's when we moved from the projects to the home, and guess who the home that we bought? It was a boxer, and his name was Rusty Payne. You probably never heard of him, but back in the San Diego days, he was one of the heavyweights and a great person there in San Diego. And we bought the home that he was living in.

MILES

Was that in Coronado?

HENDERSON

Right around the corner. No, in San Diego, off Ocean View. And I still have that house.

MILES

Was that before or after you guys were in Coronado?

HENDERSON

This was after. We moved from Coronado to the house that I have.

MILES

Back to San Diego. So they were courting you while you were still in high school?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

When did they first approach you, do you remember?

HENDERSON

Yes. Well, I had scouts to come from the Yankees and from Chicago [Cubs] and from different ones.

MILES

The majors?

HENDERSON

The major leagues, yeah, minor and major leagues and everything. But like they said, I showed aggressiveness. Like we played San Bernardino one game and Eddie Mathews hit a home run. And when he was coming around second base, I put my hand out to shake his hand and he shoved me. And I fell back and fell down, but when I came up, I decked him, see. And I got a standing ovation from the crowd and everything, you know, and everybody asked me, well, why was I being aggressive? I said, "He could have broke my leg, he could have hurt me, and I wasn't expecting on him to push me, you know, that hard and push me down and everything." So that was one of the reasons why I probably didn't go into the majors, because they said I couldn't take it. But, hey, I could take it. But we're out here to play ball, we're not out here to clown and for somebody just to abuse me or something like that and spit on me. No.

MILES

You weren't going to take that.

HENDERSON

Oh no. No matter if I didn't go into professional ball, I was going to be a man in any sport that I go in.

MILES

That's right. Now, what was the scouting report on you?

HENDERSON

I was too aggressive.

MILES

What did they say about your skills, though?

HENDERSON

Oh, man, I was a ballplayer. They said my skill was superb and everything.

MILES

Just too aggressive.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Roger Maris and everything, I played for a team that would barnstorm in my days for St. Louis Cardinals, and Roger Maris stated that I was too aggressive and everything. So that helped me not getting into professional baseball.

MILES

You heard the scouting report on you?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

Did you ever consider toning that down a little bit?

HENDERSON

Well, I toned down 100 percent, you know, but I still didn't make it to the majors.

MILES

How did you feel about that?

HENDERSON

I had everything that they had, you know, because my mother took the little money that I did get and she invested it and everything. And like I say, I own property. I got the same thing all the— And some of the major guys that played professional baseball don't have what I have and everything, because my mother used her head with the little money that we got, and she— That's the reason why all my kids, like where we're at right now, I'm helping them get they own homes and everything. So that's what it's all about.

MILES

So Buck stayed in contact with you all the time?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, Buck still— We still friends and everything, and another major, Andy Porter, we all meet just about once a year. Well, we down from five or six hundred of us, we're down to about a hundred and twenty or hundred and some of us still alive. We're trying to get some money from the major leaguers that would help us before all of us die, and we hoping and praying that we get this little money, you know. They talking a pretty good lump sum, like sixty thousand dollars plus eight-hundred-and-some dollars a month for the rest of our life.

MILES

Wow. So when did you decide to sign with Kansas City? Were you still in high school?

HENDERSON

I was still in high school when I signed.

MILES

Oh, you were in high school when you signed?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. Yeah, I was getting ready to graduate. And the same day that we graduated, the next night I left for Kansas City.

MILES

Right after that.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

What was your contract again? How much was your contract?

HENDERSON

I got \$10,000 for signing the contract.

MILES

Was that considered a good contract?

HENDERSON

For the Negro League, yeah. And \$300 a month, which is \$75 a week.

MILES

How did your mother feel about you doing that?

HENDERSON

Boy, she was happy.

MILES

Was she?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord have mercy, yeah. She said that was a— When they gave her that check, she said, "Oh, we can get out of the projects." So we got out of the projects, and she invested the little money that we had. And when I came home during that September after league was over, she bought me a car, a 1937. Now, this is '49. She bought me a 1937. [mutual laughter]

MILES

A twelve-year-old car. What kind of car was it?

HENDERSON

A Ford, something that we could afford. [mutual laughter] We paid cash for it, and my buddy, Floyd Robinson's dad, Mr. Robinson, he was a painter, and he painted it green. I tell everybody always my car to this day the one I have at the house is green, and I tell them I like anything green because it's the color of money.

MILES

So you left in June to go to Kansas City?

HENDERSON

Yeah, straight out of high school.

MILES

What was Kansas City like?

HENDERSON

Oh, 18th and Vine, that's where we stayed at, and that's where the new museum is at today. But I stayed at the Street Hotel on 18th and Vine, and that song, "Kansas City, Here I Come," it was beautiful. Oh, it was beautiful.

MILES

What was it like?

HENDERSON

I had relatives living in Kansas City. My mother's play sister Margaret, the one you mentioned a while ago named Marg, her mother and her lived there in Kansas City, because Aunt Marg, when we left Fort Smith, she came to L.A., and she was living here in L.A. And my mother, we would come up here every weekend, and my mother and them, they would get together and party. But Kansas City was beautiful, oh, man.

MILES

What do you remember the city being like?

HENDERSON

Oh, bright lights, you know, big city, and pretty girls. Yeah.

MILES

Different than San Diego?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord, yeah.

MILES

In what way?

HENDERSON

Oh, man, hey, just walking down the street on 18th and Vine, just looking at all them pretty girls, man. Oh, Lord. And the park, now, they had a park and they had a swimming pool there, and that's mostly where the Monarchs, we hung out up there at the park watching all the pretty girls up there. Then they had a drugstore down on the corner, which we didn't have. We had one in San Diego on 25th, but down on the corner they had a drugstore with a fountain, and that's where all the girls and people hung out at. And we would go down there after practice. Then they had Gates, and the Gates Barbecue, but Gates finally went to Las Vegas and lost its hotel—I mean the barbecue place.

MILES

What, he gambled it away?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. It's mostly white-owned, and barbecue is not what it used to be.

MILES

Was this mostly a black section of town?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Did you experience any prejudice in Kansas City?

HENDERSON

No, no, not while I was there. No. The whites was glad to come out. But, you know, like we'd go on ball signing, autographing them things, the Negro childrens didn't know anything about the black Negro League. More white kids came out there than blacks.

MILES

In '45?

HENDERSON

No, I'm speaking like now, you know. But back in the forties and everything, before the games and everything, man, they'd have a band come out and march and do the flag and everything. Hey, it was on the ball. Yeah.

MILES

Were you considered a celebrity?

HENDERSON

Oh, man, yeah. Everybody that played ball back then was a celebrity. Oh yes, well respected.

MILES

Were you the only rookie that was signed that year?

HENDERSON

Yes. In late '49?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

The following year, remember he wasn't a rookie, but he came up, Milt Smith. He was out of Frisco, and he came up in '50, and we rode the train together. And his son Dego lived there, and Milt made San Diego his home because he signed with the San Diego Padres, and he made San Diego his home. He

married— When we were down in Juarez, Mexico, playing with the Negro League, he met a Mexican lady there and he ended up marrying her. And they had five kids, which I know every one of them there in San Diego and everything. His son was a hell of a ballplayer, but he made a few mistakes in life. He look back now, he opened a drug program, trying to help kids not make the mistakes that he had made.

MILES

Who was on the team when you joined?

HENDERSON

Oh, we had like Merle Porter, and we had Roy Campanella was still there, Gene Baker, and had Gene Richardson, had Sherwood Brewer. We had Ernie Banks. Had— I've named Elston Howard, and had— I said Sherwood Brewer. Oh, man, my mind ain't what it used to be. Barney Serrell. "Baldy." I can't think of Baldy's first name, but he liked to clown around, but he was good. I forget the one that went to Chicago. We had a hell of a team.

MILES

Now, who were you closest to on the team when you first started?

HENDERSON

Gene Richardson, because he was from San Diego, and Ernie Banks, Elston Howard, Barney Serrell.

MILES

That's a lot of people, actually, that you were close to.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Well, we was all just a— Wasn't no strangers on that team. Everybody was just like family. We were no strangers.

MILES

Now, when you traveled, what was your mode of transportation when you went to—

HENDERSON

Bus. They had their own bus.

MILES

What was the bus like? What was the experience like?

HENDERSON

It was nice. We ate and slept and everything on the bus. We ran into a lot of towns that was prejudiced that you couldn't go in a hotel and we had to go around to the side windows, couldn't use some of the restrooms. And pull up in a service station, they'd tell you that you can't use the restroom. They'd tell you, "Hey, stop pumping the gas. Don't put no more gas in this here," because the man look up and say, "Hey, I'm going to lose all this money, because that bus hold a whole lot of gas. Go on and use the restroom."

MILES

I see money talked, didn't it.

HENDERSON

Yeah, money talked. But a lot of time we played, and like in Mexico we went over there and played, we won, and they refused to pay us, ran us out of town. We didn't get paid in that town. A lot of southern towns, they would do the same thing. They would pay you and some kind of way before the bus could get out of the city limit, they would pull us over and arrest the bus driver, say he was drunk and then they would take the money.

MILES

Fine you?

HENDERSON

Yeah. And take the money back and everything, yeah.

MILES

So how did you guys react to that? What did people say?

HENDERSON

Oh, we didn't— Just let somebody else drive the bus and we keep on stroking, man. We had to catch up.

MILES

Did you get mad at all?

HENDERSON

No, no need getting mad; wasn't nothing we could do. Sure wasn't all of us wasn't going to jail.

MILES

That's how you looked at it?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, we kept our cool. Cool Papa Bell was my manager when I came up in '50, and he kept us— We had to be clean-shaved and had to wear a tie. He made us look presentable every time we got off the bus. We didn't look scaggy or nothing, you know. We looked professional.

MILES

How did the crowds react to you when you were in—

HENDERSON

Oh, man, they loved to see you. Yeah, they loved to see us. But, like, the kids, like they didn't know nothing about the Negro League. To this day, look around, they don't know nothing about the Negro League. And we trying to teach them about the Negro League today, and you doing what you doing, put it in the history books and everything, maybe down through life we never will be forgotten. And the only way that we won't be forgotten is through peoples like you that are doing the history and the stories on us and everything.

MILES

Right. What was your experience like in Mexico as a player?

HENDERSON

Well, in Mexico, they was good ballplayers. They was very good ballplayers. But as far as they seen what was going on in the United States, so they were trying to treat us the way that they was being treated here in the United States and everything, you know, and that didn't work.

MILES

What did they try to do?

HENDERSON

Well, they wouldn't let us use the shower, you know, after a game. We beat them now. If they accidentally beat us, then it was all right, you know. [mutual laughter] But they would want to try to think that everybody was drunks or something and wanted to try to pay you with beer or something, you know, but that didn't work. Money talked.

MILES

What did you think of clowning, you know, teams that—

HENDERSON

Oh, we didn't. We were professionals, yeah. Just like the thing I showed you the other day on *Soul of the Game*. If you've ever seen that movie, that didn't portray us good at all. And during the movie, after the movie went off, we stood up and we spoke on it and told them, no, it wasn't like that. We were professionals.

MILES

How did they portray you in the movie?

HENDERSON

Oh, like throwing the ball all up high and you jumping high and all that. No, no, we made perfect throws. Around the bases, no. Yeah, they portrayed us as clowns, you know. Had [Leroy Robert] "Satchel" Paige out there on the mound clowning. Satchel Paige was a professional. He never clowning or anything out there on that mound. He was very professional.

MILES

Now, some teams did do that. What did you think of those?

HENDERSON

Well, you know, like that was like Bingo Long [Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings] and all that, our last one we met, we was all together that summer. The kid that played that part, he passed away about two months ago.

MILES

[Leon "Daddy"] Wagner.

HENDERSON

Yeah. We was all together in Maryland. But we didn't clown. We were very professional. And you better not, if he catch you clowning, he'll pull you out.

MILES

Who was that?

HENDERSON

Cool Papa Bell and Buck O'Neil. No, you didn't clown. You be a professional.

MILES

Any feeling about teams who did do that?

HENDERSON

No. But we, like I said, we looked at the kids today, all the clowning what they're doing today, and to me it's very unprofessional. And that's the reason why a lot of the young kids don't want to play baseball, because they saying it's too slow, you know. But when we played, the game went fast because we made it fast because the way we played the game. See, you don't wait on no ball. You go after the ball because we ran down the bases. I mean, we ran, because that's the reason why you have a coach at first base, a coach at third base. You paid attention to the coaches. We would hit the ball, we would run. The kids today, they hit the ball and look at it. And the guy is right, he don't have to charge no ball because he don't have time to throw you out, because you up here clowning. The only thing I look at, the World Series, and I see a lot of mistakes in there.

MILES

Do you see—

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Yeah.

MILES

What did you think of the women that were playing? Toni Stone was in when you were.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Did you have any feeling about her?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no, no. Just when as us kids growing up, girls played ball with us then, so I didn't have no bad feeling about ladies playing baseball.

MILES

Did you play against them? Did you play against any of the women?

HENDERSON

Some of them have passed away. And Mamie came a little bit after I had retired and everything.

MILES

Now, what position did you play for the Monarchs?

HENDERSON

Shortstop, but I could play any position. I could bat left or right. And my batting average, lifetime batting was 342, and that's pretty good.

MILES

I know.

HENDERSON

I had a lot of inside-the-park home runs and everything, and I had a head-first slide. I was good at that, at sliding, and I started running when I'd slide. If you

make an overthrow or miss with me, I'll be on third before you know it.
[mutual laughter]

MILES

That fast, huh?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I stole home a lot and everything. I was another Jackie Robinson on stealing home. I would get on third base, I'd worry that pitcher to death. Yeah, Lord.

MILES

Once you started playing for the Monarchs, how often did you go back to San Diego?

HENDERSON

After the season was over. Yeah, we would leave and everybody would go their own way. That's when I would work at General Dynamics and play winter ball and everything.

MILES

When did the season end for you?

HENDERSON

When everything ended for me was in '53.

MILES

No, what month of the year was the season?

HENDERSON

September.

MILES

September. That's when you went back to San Diego?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

So tell me about your experience in the winter league.

HENDERSON

Oh, man, we had a ball.

MILES

Who did you first play for?

HENDERSON

I played with the Gibson Tigers.

MILES

What year? Well, you always played with them.

HENDERSON

I played with them every year.

MILES

So you just came back?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. Then I started working at Convair, General Dynamics, Convair. I was a painter and I ended up being the supervisor over the paint shop. I'll tell you a story about that. I'm the type of guy that I was raised up to speak to one another, you know. And every day my boss used to come in, and I'd speak to him. I'd say, "Good morning, sir. How are you this morning?" He never spoke. He never said— Five years went by. So one morning he came in, I said, "Good morning, sir." His name was Ridley. Says, "How you doing this morning, Mr. Ridley?" He never opened his mouth. So this one morning he came in and says, "Henderson, when the whistle blows, I want you to come to my office." I said, "Oh, Lord have mercy, what have I done?"

MILES

This was a white man?

HENDERSON

Yeah, he's white. Red, red-looking. And I said, "Oh, Lord, what have I done now?" So the whistle blew, and I punched out and went on the office. He said, "Neale, I want to ask you why is it that every morning that I come in here you speak to me and I never have spoke to you?" I said, "Sir, I don't know what it is for you, but this is the way I was raised up, and I'm going to be like this till the day I die, you know. It makes me feel good and everything." I said, "You ought to try it." So he says, "Well, I just thought I would ask you," and everything. Then I said, "Well, Mr. Ridley, you don't know what it is to speak to one another. You ought to try it." So the next morning, he came in, he spoke. Everybody spoke to him, and everybody had a different expression on their face. "Man, Mr. Ridley's speaking?" So man, it went on to for almost a year, you know, and productivity and everything, boy, went up and work, everything, was just smooth and everything. He called me in and he said, "Neale, how would you like to be supervisor?" I said, "Who, me?" He said, "Yes, you. I'd like for you to run my paint shop." So I said, "Mr. Ridley, could I think about it?" He said yes. So I was going on vacation, so I went down to Arkansas, and, guess what, the telephone rang, and it was him on the phone. And he said, "Neale, have you thought about it?" I said, "Mom, what you think?" And she said, "Go ahead and try it, son." I said, "Yes, sir, I'll go ahead and take it." So when I came back, they made me supervisor over the paint shop.

MILES

So did they hold the job for you when you played ball or did you—

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

What did they think about you being a ballplayer?

HENDERSON

Oh, they loved it. Yeah.

MILES

Did you sign autographs?

HENDERSON

Yeah, sign autograph, and in the same way like when my son played football down at Southern University. Well, my son played against Doug Williams at Grambling [State University] Southern Bayou Classic. And my son intercepted Doug Williams three times.

MILES

Oh yeah?

HENDERSON

Yeah. And my son helped win the game. It's the first time they won a game in thirteen years.

MILES

Is this your son Anthony?

HENDERSON

No. Neale. And he ended up signing for the Seattle Seahawks and everything. He was good. He was good.

MILES

Your son did?

HENDERSON

Yeah. And he ended up, he spent his life dream he worked for the youth prison there in Baton Rouge, and he was the highest ranking officer in Baton Rouge, police officer for prisons.

MILES

Let me just stop you here. Let me just— [End of March 21, 2004 interview]

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE
March 28, 2004

MILES

This is La'Tonya Rease Miles, and I'm interviewing Mr. Neale Henderson in his son's home in Los Angeles. Today is Sunday, March 28th, I think we said. This

is tape three. Now, last time we left off, you started telling me about your son Neale. He went on the play football, right?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Let's go back and put him into the whole picture. When did you start a family?

HENDERSON

Oh, I started this family in 1956. But my first family, I started in 1950. My oldest daughter, she's '50. But I really had a son in '47, but he died at birth.

MILES

What's his name, the son that died?

HENDERSON

He would have been named Neale.

MILES

Then go ahead and tell me all your children. We'll put them on here.

HENDERSON

Okay. All my childrens that I have, my oldest daughter, her name is Vonda. What's Vonda's middle name? Vonda Garcia Shelbry. Then I have a daughter named Chere—it's French—Vashone.

MILES

How do you spell Vashone?

HENDERSON

It's V-a-s-h-o-n-e. Her name is— Don't ask me how to spell Purifoy.

MILES

Okay. I have an idea.

HENDERSON

That's supposed to be French. And then I have a son name of Ronnie [Stevens Henderson].

MILES

That's right, who I met.

HENDERSON

Neale's the oldest.

MILES

Neale, then Ronnie.

HENDERSON

Neale, same as mine.

MILES

Then Ronnie.

HENDERSON

Then Ronnie. Then Paul. Paul Gerald [Henderson]. And Ronnie's name is Ronnie Stevens. Then I have Anthony, whose last name is Jones. I have a daughter named Marilyn Yale. And I have a son named James Bray. And I have a bunch of stepchildren.

MILES

What did your children go on to do? You mentioned that Neale went on to play professional football.

HENDERSON

Yeah, Neale went on and played football, and then he ran a youth prison down in Baton Rouge. He worked there for twenty years, highest paid officer in the State of Louisiana at one time.

MILES

Was he born in San Diego?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Then he moved to— Well, he went to school.

HENDERSON

He went to school at Southern University.

MILES

That's right, and then stayed over there.

HENDERSON

Yeah, he married, stayed down there. They have a daughter.

MILES

What did Vonda go on to do?

HENDERSON

Vonda, she ended up, she moved to Frisco after she left San Diego, and she had a son. He played in the movie *Soul Food*.

MILES

He was in *Soul Food*?

HENDERSON

Yeah, he played in *Soul Food*.

MILES

Is he an actor?

HENDERSON

Well, he want to be. He tried. He's somewhere up here in L.A. now trying to do his thing.

MILES

Chere?

HENDERSON

Chere, she went into nursing and everything, and she's still trying to do a little nursing.

MILES

Where does she live?

HENDERSON

She lives in San Diego.

MILES

So she's still down there. Ronnie's here.

HENDERSON

And Ronnie's here in San Diego. Ronnie works for drug rehab. He helps in Long Beach there, there's a Drug Rehabilitation Center. He's executive, one of the officers there in the center.

MILES

I know he just moved to this house here in Los Angeles, but where did he move from? Was he in San Diego?

HENDERSON

No. He was here in Los Angeles.

MILES

So he just moved to a different place here. Where's Paul?

HENDERSON

Paul's in San Diego. Paul works for the City of San Diego, and he also have his own little business. What's that ceramic tile? He does ceramic tile, refurnish bathroom, anything where money's at, Paul can be there making money. He's like his dad.

MILES

That's what I was going to say.

HENDERSON

He work two and three jobs, you know. He loves to travel. He loves nice things.

MILES

Where's Anthony?

HENDERSON

Anthony, he's in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

MILES

He's in Arkansas?

HENDERSON

Down with his mother. He's a mother's boy. He works for Tyson [Food].

MILES

And Marilyn?

HENDERSON

Marilyn, she's in San Diego. She works for the Welfare Rehabilitation Center.

MILES

Okay, and then James. Is he the baby?

HENDERSON

James works over at North Island. He works over at North Island, and he's a supervisor.

MILES

How many grandchildren do you have, by the way?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord have mercy.

MILES

Can you keep them straight?

HENDERSON

Twenty-eight.

MILES

Twenty-eight grandchildren. You must be really proud.

HENDERSON

Oh, very, yeah. They're all trying to be somebody. I stress that to any child and parents.

MILES

Now, of all your children, only Neale was the only one who played sports professionally, right?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Did you ever give him any advice about playing sports or anything?

HENDERSON

Ronnie, all of them did, they tried, you know, and they faltered down the road. But Neale wanted to go to college. The other boys, they was a workaholic. They wanted to work instead of going on and getting their education like Neale did. And Neale, he's doing real good. Like I said, he has a nice place in San Antone [San Antonio], and he left there and he moved back to Baton Rouge. He's retired and everything now.

MILES

Were any of your children playing baseball at all in high school?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

No?

HENDERSON

No, no, no.

MILES

Did it stop with you? [laughs]

HENDERSON

They loved football and football. Well, they tell me baseball was too slow for them. And that's what we having a problem right now with our black youth. They don't want to play baseball. They want to play basketball and football. Baseball too slow for them.

MILES

Did you ever take them to the games? Did they ever see the Padres play or anything?

HENDERSON

Yeah. They even saw me play there in San Diego during they growing up and everything. But my grandchildren, now, little Raymond, now he should have went pro in football, baseball, basketball, and anything. He faltered along the way, you know. He got on them drugs and everything, and them drugs just took his life away from him. This is what I stress to any child, you know. Don't let drugs take a hold of your life, because it will ruin you.

MILES

Whose child is Raymond?

HENDERSON

Chere.

MILES

I lost my train of thought. You said something about them seeing you play. You were traveling a lot. Did you get to see your family often, or how did you work that out when you were still playing?

HENDERSON

While I was still playing, it was just another job. The wife, she did what she had to do, and I would call home all the time, you know. We didn't have a problem, me being away from them or anything like that.

MILES

About how long would you be gone from home at a time?

HENDERSON

Well, during the summer league, I would be gone, what, like four or five months.

MILES

Straight?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Wow, that's a long time.

HENDERSON

But, you know, if you got to make that dollar, you got to make that dollar. You just have to have a strong wife, you know. She know that you out trying to make it and just got to do what you got to do, you know.

MILES

Who was your first wife?

HENDERSON

My first wife, her name was Mary Ella Williams.

MILES

That's right. I remember. And your second wife?

HENDERSON

Hannah May, that was my first wife. That's Vonda's mother.

MILES

Then who is your second wife?

HENDERSON

My second wife was Elsa Boudreau. French Creole.

MILES

Oh, so that's Chere's mother.

HENDERSON

Chere, Neale, Ronnie. Then the other one I had was Matty Jo, with Marilyn and James and Anthony.

MILES

Who is your current wife?

HENDERSON

My current wife is Annie Ruth, my Mississippi woman, the best thing that ever happened to me.

MILES

Oh, that's wonderful. How did you two meet?

HENDERSON

I was walking across the park there in San Diego. That's where old Sheffield, he practiced there and everything. But anyway, I walked across the park, and she saw me coming and she said, "Mmm, look at that bowlegged man coming across that field," you know. And I happened to look down there and I saw her. And I said, "Ooo-wee!" to myself, "look at that woman over there. Man, she is stacked." So she happened to be talking to a friend named Erma. So when I walked up to her, I started talking to Erma and everything, and I asked Erma, I said, "Who is your friend?" So she introduced me to her, and the ball got to rolling.

MILES

That was almost like love at first sight?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Or something at first sight. [laughs]

HENDERSON

I think it was love at first sight.

MILES

Love at first sight, that's great.

HENDERSON

But I wish I could have had a woman like her when I was playing ball and everything. I might would have went on and kept playing. But you know, behind every good man there's a good woman.

MILES

What is it about her that you think would have allowed you to keep going?

HENDERSON

She was firm and she accepted the things that I liked to do and everything. But my other wives, they wanted to be in the lamplight instead of trying to raise a family. When I married her, she had five children, and then I was raising five. So between me and her, we raised ten childrens together.

MILES

You're like "The Brady Bunch." [laughs]

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, yeah.

MILES

Okay. Let's go back to your playing for the Monarchs. Now, you had been following the Monarchs for as long as you could remember, but when you actually played for them, the majors had already integrated. Were there any changes that you noticed in the league after the majors were integrated?

HENDERSON

Yes, it started to disintegrate.

MILES

What happened?

HENDERSON

All the white leagues was picking up most of the blacks, and the leagues started to fold. I have a few things here that I was going to give you to show you that the teams [inaudible]. But anyway, the league started to fold, and I just folded with it.

MILES

Were there any changes in terms of, I don't know, salaries or—

HENDERSON

Oh no, our money stayed the same.

MILES

Money stayed the same, that's good.

HENDERSON

You know, had like the American League and they had the National League, you know, just like the white league. And every year at the end of the season and everything, whoever won the American League, they would play the National League team, you know. When I came along, just about all of that had just about folded up, but they still played, you know, but I never did make the All-Star team or any of those.

MILES

Did they have the All-Star team at that when you—

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Did you play in the East-West game at all?

HENDERSON

No. I wasn't fortunate enough to make it to the All-Star games.

MILES

Was there a change in the number of fans that came out?

HENDERSON

Oh yes, a great deal.

MILES

What happened?

HENDERSON

It seemed like after Jackie Robinson and all, they made it to the majors and everything, just like all the— Then most of the black people just stopped going to the ball game, because newcomers was coming along, and the top-name billings, you know, the younger generation, they wasn't like the older generation. You know, the older generation, they didn't have hardly nothing to do, so they went to the baseball game. Even everybody, like I was telling you before, that's the reason why you would see everybody in suits and the womens in they mink stoles and big old pretty hats and everything, because the church would let out early, because the pastor wanted to go to the baseball game.

MILES

Did any of your close friends go to the majors?

HENDERSON

Oh yes.

MILES

Who? Tell me about some of them.

HENDERSON

It was quite a few of my friends went into major league baseball, you know, like Elston Howard, Ernie Banks, Buck O'Neil. Who is that other one? Roy Campanella and Gene Baker.

MILES

Did they ever tell you about their experience playing there?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. They loved it.

MILES

What did they tell you?

HENDERSON

They loved it.

MILES

What did they say was it— What did they love about it? Let's start there.

HENDERSON

They loved the challenge. They knew that they was going to have take abuse and take different things and that, and it was a great experience for them, you know, to see if they could take it. A lot of them, they took it for so many years and everything, and finally they said, "Well, that's enough."

MILES

And then what did they do?

HENDERSON

They started voicing their opinion and speaking up.

MILES

Who would they speak to then? Who could they—

HENDERSON

The managers. Start off with their manager and everything. If it didn't work with the manager, then they go to the next step. They did it the way the book calls for them to do it.

MILES

Any other stories that they told you about it? Anybody not like their experience?

HENDERSON

Oh, I forget this young man's name, but Buck was telling us about a guy at that time when the St. Louis Cardinals put that black cat out on the field and everything.

MILES

A real cat?

HENDERSON

A real black, yeah, a real cat. And Buck O'Neil told me, said they had guys that played with the Monarchs with us that had it happened to them, they would have took that black cat and stuffed it down their throat, you know.

MILES

What was that supposed to mean? I don't even get it.

HENDERSON

It was showing they had a black guy playing on the team. It was downgrading him, you know.

MILES

So they let the cat walk across the field?

HENDERSON

Right. Chased him out on the field. Well, they did some crazy things, you know.

MILES

Yeah. But for the most part, people enjoyed their experience there?

HENDERSON

There you go. There you go.

MILES

I'm sure they were happy to be there.

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, yeah. Some people just come out to just mess with you, call you names, try to see if you would quit or if you would take it. A lot of guys would walk off the field or something, you know, but it would take a man to stand on out there and take the abuse without doing something about it.

MILES

That's right. Exactly, I agree with you there. How long did you play with the Monarchs?

HENDERSON

I played with the Monarchs four years.

MILES

So your last season would have been what year, '53?

HENDERSON

'53.

MILES

Did you ever consider leaving the U.S. to go play somewhere else?

HENDERSON

No, no.

MILES

Why not? I know some people did.

HENDERSON

Family. Family. And I was making more money working. Like I was telling you, I was a workaholic. I worked two and three jobs. Wherever I could get hired, I

would work. Sometime I would sleep three and four hours, you know, and go to my next job, because I had childrens that I had to take care of. So I worked two and three jobs, whatever it took, you know, to support my family.

MILES

What ended your career with the Monarchs? Why did you stop playing?

HENDERSON

I got injured.

MILES

Did you? What happened?

HENDERSON

Riding a motorcycle.

MILES

Not even on the field? [laughs]

HENDERSON

Not even on the field.

MILES

Where were you?

HENDERSON

I had ridden a— Well, back in the young days and everything, I used to go down into Mexico and play baseball. One Sunday we decided that we would ride down to— Not Ensanada. We would ride down to Mexicali, and we rode down. On our way to Mexicali, we got down there, partied for a little while, and then we started back. A Corvette was coming down this hill, the curve, winding curve, and he happened to come over into the left-hand lane, which was coming. It was only one lane going and one lane coming. And he set in the curve in the left-hand lane coming back up, and I was coming back. And just as I set in the curve, he was heading— We was heading right into one another, so I took the shoulder. I hit a rock, and it threw me. I went down a canyon; went about three stories.

MILES

You went down a canyon?

HENDERSON

I went down in a canyon. See those scars right there?

MILES

Oh yeah.

HENDERSON

That's from my helmet, where my helmet crushed into my skull. If I hadn't have had the helmet on, I would have been *adios*. And it broke my right femur. Right here the bone came up through here and everything, and I got a steel plate here in my right knee.

MILES

But how did they get you out of the canyon? What happened? Who was with you?

HENDERSON

Someone seen the accident, and the guys that I was riding with, I was the last bike, and the other bikes had went on. And the cars caught up with the bikers and told them that one of us had gotten hurt, which was me, and they came back. The littlest guy in the group picked the motorcycle up off of me. The highway patrolman, when he got there, he told me after I came to and everything, he and I had played football in high school, the highway patrolman who came to the scene.

MILES

Was this a black man or a white guy?

HENDERSON

No, white. And he stayed at the hospital with me until I was okay. He stayed—I think it was twelve, fourteen hours, and he stayed right there at the hospital until he knew that I was all right. Just to show you that the camaraderie that we had back in those days, even though he went to [Herbert] Hoover [High

School] and I went to San Diego High [School], everybody was still friends and everything, you know. Mom said it wasn't all that black and white thing. It wasn't no big thing to our high school friends or anything.

MILES

Which hospital were you in, in Mexico, or did they take you to California?

HENDERSON

No, I was in Grossmont [Hospital] just outside of San Diego.

MILES

How did they get you there?

HENDERSON

Ambulance came.

MILES

Came and got you?

HENDERSON

Got me and took me red light all the way back and everything, and they didn't think I was going to pull through, you know. They called my dad down in Arkansas and everything, and my dad, did he need to come out, and they decided, no, don't come out, so my dad sent me a prayer cloth. He was strictly into holding his church, and he believed in praying. He sent me a prayer cloth, and they put it on the wound and everything. So I believe.

MILES

How long were you in the hospital?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lord have mercy. I was in the hospital eight months.

MILES

Eight months? Okay. Hold it. At the time of the accident, was it during the off-season, or what time of the year was it?

HENDERSON

It was in March. This happened in '58, 1958.

MILES

Oh, this happened in '58?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

We'll come back to that part, then. So it wasn't '53.

HENDERSON

No, no.

MILES

It was in '58.

HENDERSON

Yeah, this happened in '58.

MILES

But at that time you wouldn't have been able to work, either, right, when you were in the hospital for eight months?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

How did your family respond to that?

HENDERSON

Well, my job?

MILES

Your job and your family, yeah.

HENDERSON

My job, they held my job just like they did during the baseball season and everything. I was a good worker, like I was telling you.

MILES

Did they continue to pay you?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

They did? Oh, that's great.

HENDERSON

Yeah. And the guys on my job, the ones on the motorcycles when I was riding, most of us all worked together. They took up a collection and brought toys and everything at Christmas to the kids and everything. When I hurt in March all the way through Christmas, they took a big collection and bought toys and food and everything to my house.

MILES

But your career with the Monarchs ended in '53. What did you do after that?

HENDERSON

I worked at General Dynamics, like I said, and played sports. I went to [San Diego] City College. I was going to City College, and I played football for City College, everything.

MILES

Yeah, because you would have been a young man still. You were still, what, twenty-three or something?

HENDERSON

No, I was a little older than that.

MILES

What were you born in, '30?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

And you ended in '53? That's twenty-three.

HENDERSON

Yeah, twenty-three.

MILES

Yeah, that's young.

HENDERSON

But I thought we were talking about '58.

MILES

Oh, no, no. I'm talking about what happened when you stopped playing with the Monarchs in '53, though, right? Is that right?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

So what happened in '53 that you didn't continue with them?

HENDERSON

The reason why I didn't continue with them in '53 was that— What happened? In '54 I got my shoulder busted.

MILES

Oh, it was a different injury.

HENDERSON

Yeah. In football, yeah, playing.

MILES

Where were you playing football?

HENDERSON

City College.

MILES

Oh, you started City College at that point?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Okay. All right. So when did you start City College? You were the man doing everything. When did that start?

HENDERSON

I started City College in '53, '54, '53. Yeah, they talked me into coming back playing football because they needed a quarterback [inaudible], so most of my friends that was in college, they talked me into coming to City College.

MILES

So was it your plan to play football and continue playing baseball, or were you going to switch?

HENDERSON

No, I was just having fun. You know, I was working graveyard shift on my job so I could go to City College. And it so happened that my boss that was on nights, he had a concession stand there at the football games, and he gave me pretty good jobs.

MILES

Now, which City College was this?

HENDERSON

San Diego.

MILES

San Diego City College. And what was that like then? What was school like?

HENDERSON

Oh, man, it was nice. I enjoyed it.

MILES

You had a family, too, and you're going to college?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

What kind of classes were you taking?

HENDERSON

P.E. [mutual laughter] And body shop. That's where I learned how to paint and everything, you know, took up painting there. And I took up science, and—
What was the other one? One other class that I had, basic that you had to take.

MILES

Probably like an English or something, huh?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I mean you had to take English.

MILES

That's what I figured. Everybody had to take that.

HENDERSON

So I enjoyed it.

MILES

You did? Well, I was going to say, because I remember when we talked about you being in high school, you didn't like it so much. But did things change for you at that point?

HENDERSON

Yes. They tried to get me to come to Cal[ifornia] Poly[technic] [State University] and everything, you know, to play football for them.

MILES

Up here?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I don't know if you ever hear of a guy named John Jeter.

MILES

No.

HENDERSON

Jeter played with Santa Barbara and everything, and we played them for the championship. And every time he scored, I would score. And that's when it happened when I got my shoulder broke. They told us, "The only way y'all going to win a game, you've got to get Henderson out of there." So I made a touchdown. When I came back on the next play, a guy came and hit me as I was coming up and broke my left shoulder just before halftime. But before then, the school up in— I don't know if you ever heard of Weber College, Weber College.

MILES

Oh, I heard about them through basketball.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Well, we played them in football, and they was trying to pick the saddest team in the nation, and they happened to pick San Diego City College. They didn't know that—

MILES

You.

HENDERSON

—they'd gotten somebody to play quarterback and could run the ball. So we went up there and they played us, and I scored both touchdowns. It's in the

history books. And we beat them twelve to nothing, two touchdowns that I made.

MILES

How long did you play for them before you were injured?

HENDERSON

For City College?

MILES

Yes.

HENDERSON

Two years.

MILES

Oh, it was two whole years?

HENDERSON

Yeah, '53 and '54.

MILES

And what did your family think about you going back to school?

HENDERSON

Oh, they loved it. They loved it. My mother never had seen me play football when I was in high school, and she happened to come to one of our college games, and my mother was running back and forth, up and down up in the stands, back and forth, from one end of the field to the other.

MILES

What was your team like?

HENDERSON

Oh, we had a mixed team. They was good. We had a very good team, very good team.

MILES

Were you playing with the Monarchs at the same time you were playing football?

HENDERSON

No. No, that's winter months.

MILES

Okay. Oh, so this would enabled you to play all year round, just different sports. It's like going back to high school again for you.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Then how long did it take you to recover from that? Did you break your shoulder?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

How long did it take you to recover from that?

HENDERSON

It was like three, four months.

MILES

Did the doctor tell you you wouldn't be able to play baseball anymore, or what happened there?

HENDERSON

Well, I couldn't get this arm up, you know, like I can now, you know. I could only go so high with it. If I wanted to catch something, I wasn't able to function in the way I was supposed to. So I just decided on my own to leave it alone.

MILES

How did you feel about that, though?

HENDERSON

Oh, I hated it, but, you know, I was starting to make good money down at General Dynamics. I said, well, I was making more money there than I was in playing baseball, and it didn't look like I was going to get picked up with no major league team. There wasn't nobody that was writing to me, so I did what I had to do. I just—

MILES

Decided not to do it.

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. And I also opened up my— I had my own little business.

MILES

Tell me about that.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Started painting for CDs, the box, and putting that speckled paint all on the boxes and also on the telephone boxes and everything. I was doing the speckled painting for a major company.

MILES

Where were you doing this?

HENDERSON

In San Diego.

MILES

But did you have your own shop?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh. Me and my stepson, James Bray, went into this business.

MILES

How long did you keep that business?

HENDERSON

Five years.

MILES

Did you continue going to school?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Even after the injury?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Did you finish there?

HENDERSON

I didn't finish, no.

MILES

But you kept going still for a while?

HENDERSON

Yeah, I kept on going. Then I dropped out, because you can only play sports two years. I think it was two years.

MILES

Yeah, that's right.

HENDERSON

At City College.

MILES

Right around this time, too, because you're talking about the mid-fifties, was *Brown vs. Board of Education* and those type of civil rights legislations. Do

you remember hearing about any of those, when they decided to integrate the schools, according to the law, anyway? [laughs]

HENDERSON

Oh, we was already integrated. We didn't have no problems there in San Diego. You had problems, but you know your limits.

MILES

But when you heard the [U.S.] Supreme Court decision, that didn't really affect you in San Diego, did it?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

Were there any kind of civil rights protests going on in San Diego at that time?

HENDERSON

No. No, everything was— To me, everything was functioning pretty good, except for back when I was going in senior high school. That's when we had problems.

MILES

That would have been in the late forties, though.

HENDERSON

In the late forties, yeah. That's when they still was having problems. They was really, really prejudiced.

MILES

At your school or in the city?

HENDERSON

In the whole city.

MILES

Like what was going on in the city then?

HENDERSON

In the city, like I tried to get on the police force. I passed the test and everything, and I went down to be interviewed, and they had— I guess this guy just had got out of [U.S.] Marine Corps, whatever, you know, and they interviewed me and they told me that I was too short. And I'm just as tall as I am now and everything. They asked me, say, "What side of the bed your wife sleep on?" and said, "What would you do if you had to arrest your mother?" You know, stuff like— And that's one of the reason why I— They told me that I didn't qualify to be no policeman.

MILES

Did they ask you this verbally, or did you have to write these answers down?

HENDERSON

No, verbally.

MILES

Then they tell you you didn't pass?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

This was in the forties, though? What year, around what time would that have been?

HENDERSON

Oh, this was in the fifties.

MILES

Were you aware of Martin Luther King [Jr.] or any other civil rights activists at this time?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

Did you see any of the protests on TV or anything? Like in the South I'm talking about what was going on.

HENDERSON

That came along 'round the sixties, yeah.

MILES

And you started to see it then?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

What were you thinking, though?

HENDERSON

I wished them well. But like I was telling you, the San Diego police was really hard on the blacks back in the forties and the fifties and early sixties.

MILES

How were they treating Mexicans then?

HENDERSON

Same.

MILES

Japanese?

HENDERSON

Anything but white.

MILES

Anything but white. Everybody was grouped together, huh?

HENDERSON

Yeah. But I can say one thing, that the ones in school, we all stuck together.

MILES

Regardless of color.

HENDERSON

Regardless of color. The Marine Corps came up there once and the school came together, and we whupped the marines all the way back to the base.

MILES

What happened? Why did the marines come?

HENDERSON

They came, trying to take the girls.

MILES

What girls?

HENDERSON

The high school, in senior high school. So they went back and brought almost the whole marine base back to the campus, and the school came together, all black, white, green, whatever.

MILES

Wait. Hold on a second. The United States Marine Corps, a group of marines, came to your school?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

What were they trying to do to these girls now?

HENDERSON

Trying to take them away from the guys, you know. They was white, but—

MILES

And the girls were white?

HENDERSON

Yeah. But everybody in the whole school came together and fought the marines.

MILES

But why in the world would the marines come into your school?

HENDERSON

Bold. I guess they just bold. They was fighting with the cartridge belts and everything. Everybody on our side was fighting with their bare hands. And we got them all the way back to their base. The military police came up and everything, the MPs, SPs.

MILES

Now, whose side were the police on? On your side?

HENDERSON

On nobody's side.

MILES

They were just trying to break it up. Did the marines fire any weapons or anything?

HENDERSON

Oh, no, no.

MILES

It was just fighting?

HENDERSON

Just fists and cartridge belts.

MILES

When you made your decision to stop playing, did you stay in contact with your teammates at all?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

MILES

How would stay—

HENDERSON

That's the reason we still together, you know, with the Kansas City Monarchs. The whole National League and American League, we all every once a year we get together somewhere in the United States and we meet up. We just got together in Maryland where I made the Hall of Fame, and that's what I was just in. Then I showed you pictures down in Georgia, Alabama, Memphis, Tennessee. We had a big reunion in Tennessee and got to go over to where Martin Luther King was killed, and it was very educational. A lot of guys had never seen the place where Martin Luther King was killed at and everything. When I played with the Kansas City Monarchs, we used to stay right there at that same hotel.

MILES

At that same hotel?

HENDERSON

Yeah, when we'd go to there to play Memphis. We used to play the Memphis Red Sox, and we used to stay at the very same hotel.

MILES

Did you continue to follow baseball after you left?

HENDERSON

Still do. I love the game. I love baseball.

MILES

You had been hurt, but you recovered. Did you pick up another sport after your injury from football?

HENDERSON

Bowling.

MILES

When did you start bowling?

HENDERSON

Oh, I started bowling— Me and my son, James Bray, we was all on the same team. That's when I bowled a 295; almost had a perfect game.

MILES

Almost perfect.

HENDERSON

Some guy gave me a drink of whiskey, and that did it.

MILES

He knew what he was doing. [laughs]

HENDERSON

And happened he went to Hoover. [laughs]

MILES

Where did you bowl?

HENDERSON

There in San Diego.

MILES

Did you have a particular bowling alley you liked to go to?

HENDERSON

No, because I wasn't really no bowler, you know, but I got on a league. We got in a league and we organized a team. It was three men and three women, and James and I was the only black on this one team.

MILES

It was an integrated team?

HENDERSON

Yeah, integrated team.

MILES

In that league, did you go to the same bowling alley or you just went to different ones?

HENDERSON

Went to different ones.

MILES

So did that become your new sport after being hurt and not playing baseball?

HENDERSON

No.

MILES

Just something to do?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

So what other kinds of things did you? Because I know you're very competitive. [laughs]

HENDERSON

I went out and bought me a motor home.

MILES

Around what time was this? Around what year or time of your life was that?

HENDERSON

This was in the eighties.

MILES

Okay, a little later. You bought yourself a boat?

HENDERSON

A motor home. Bought a boat, too. I never put the boat in the water. My wife used to get mad at me, "I told you you wasn't going to never put that boat in the water." I bought it because my next-door neighbor had a boat, and I'm going to buy me a boat and I'm going to put it in the water. But I wasn't that much on swimming, because my dad wouldn't let us go near the water when I was growing up.

MILES

Yeah, that's right. So why did you buy a motor home?

HENDERSON

A motor home? Because I took up outdoor life, camping out. I love to camp out.

MILES

Where do you go?

HENDERSON

Down in the Valley, down in Imperial Valley.

MILES

Did you continue to play baseball at all just for fun?

HENDERSON

No, but used to get out in the yard and on the street and play street ball with the kids. Me and my son, Ronnie, that home we have right now, Ronnie was a very good glove man. He handled that glove just the way I used to could and everything. He could have made it in baseball if he had wanted to go into sports, but he didn't. He didn't go into no kind of sport.

MILES

How long did you stay with General Dynamics?

HENDERSON

I stayed with General Dynamics almost forty years.

MILES

So after your injury in '58, you just went back to that job and stayed there for a while?

HENDERSON

Uh-huh.

MILES

Let me see where we are. Let me stop. [tape recorder turned off]

MILES

So you stayed with them for forty years.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I made supervisor down there, and they put me in charge of the paint shop, and I did all the paint. I did the cruise missiles and I did the Space Shuttle. I did the Atlas missiles. You know one of them capsule that John Glenn went up on?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

I did that.

MILES

What did you do, exactly? [laughs]

HENDERSON

Oh, I did most of the painting, you know, put— We had a certain type of paint that we use for outer space for heat-resistant.

MILES

Did you retire from there?

HENDERSON

Yes.

MILES

Did you work after that, though?

HENDERSON

Retired supervisor.

MILES

Did you take up another job after you retired?

HENDERSON

After I retired?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

I painted houses. Like I said, I was a workaholic. Yeah, I did have my own little business. And Sonny, we went into business together painting houses.

MILES

What are you doing now?

HENDERSON

What am I doing now?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Just taking life easy and going fishing and camping out. Going to take the grandchildren out. All my kids are grown, and I take the grandkids and we go camping in the motor home and everything.

MILES

We started talking before about basketball. You were saying that nowadays most young kids are interested in basketball more than baseball.

HENDERSON

Right.

MILES

What do you think changed? Because baseball seemed to be really important for black communities. What do you think?

HENDERSON

They said baseball too slow, it's boring, you know. But it's boring if you make it boring, you know, but baseball can be awful lively if you make it lively. But like I look at the kids today, they be out in the field and have their arms folded and don't even be communicating, talking to one another, be just out there. It's that dollar. See, they making them millions and [inaudible]. But when we was playing, man, we'd be talking to one another and I'm talking to the pitcher, talking to the catcher, you know, just making up noise and everything and beating your glove. But the kids today, man, they stand out in the field like they asleep or something. To me, it don't bring to get the crowd involved, you know, but when we was playing, we kept the crowd into the game, you know.

MILES

How did you do that? How were you able to keep the crowd into the game?

HENDERSON

By communicating with one another, talking, you know, and maybe look up in the stands and start talking to somebody up in the stands.

MILES

Were you joking with them?

HENDERSON

Oh, yeah, get them involved, get them into it and everything. Sometime, you know, like the guy be after a fly ball and go into the centerfield lane and going, "Get on over there! You ain't going to—."

MILES

Trash talking.

HENDERSON

Yeah. He gone all the way from left field to right field after a fly ball or something, you know, so he'd be into the game.

MILES

Who are you following these days? Do you follow any particular team?

HENDERSON

[Los Angeles] Dodgers.

MILES

The Dodgers?

HENDERSON

I'm still Dodgers. I love them Dodgers. Yeah. And you know, we have reunions up here. I come up here in L.A. We came up here one year, and we got about thirty-, forty-thousand peoples. They had a Negro League. They wore all old uniforms, and the Latin Americans played against the blacks, and it was good. We had a lot of fun.

MILES

Why the Dodgers, though? Because I know you liked Babe Ruth, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah. The Yankees?

MILES

Yeah.

HENDERSON

Because of Jackie Robinson. Yeah, Jackie Robinson.

MILES

That's right.

HENDERSON

The Dodgers took him.

MILES

And that became your favorite team.

HENDERSON

Yeah, because they let the black man in and started the ball a-rolling.

MILES

What about any current players you like to follow today?

HENDERSON

Oh, I followed— I can't think of the kid's name that got on them drugs.

MILES

Strawberry?

HENDERSON

Darryl Strawberry. Because his brother-in-law and I, we fish together down in the Valley. He married one of my buddy's sisters. His first wife, Darryl Strawberry's first wife, yeah, that was one of my buddy's I fish with sister.

MILES

You know there's a new book out about Darryl Strawberry in Crenshaw.

HENDERSON

No. I'd like to read it.

MILES

It's about baseball in Crenshaw, actually.

HENDERSON

In my church, Darryl Strawberry's, one of his sister-in-law attend our church, and she was talking one day and told me her name. And her last name was Strawberry, and I asked her was she related to Darryl Strawberry, and she said, "Oh, yeah, that's my brother-in-law." I said, "Get outta here. I'm going to give you a baseball," and everything. But we have a beautiful church. My pastor, man, that man can sing. He plays organ.

MILES

What's your church name?

HENDERSON

New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. I'm on the [inaudible] board there. If you belong to his church, you're going to have some kind of duty. You're going to do something in that church to get involved, and I like that.

MILES

What's the pastor's name?

HENDERSON

Robert Houston. That man could whup an organ to death. Oh, man, when I tell you he can play an organ and sing, yeah. He was raised up down in New Orleans, come out of down South, and that boy, I love to hear him preach.

MILES

How long have you belonged to that church?

HENDERSON

I've been with the church now three years. I used to belong to New Horizon, and he passed away, and he was out of Arkadelphia, Arkansas, and that's where all of my peoples came from. I forgot to tell you that my grandmother was a Witherspoon. Did you ever hear of the Witherspoon, one of the fighter, the boxers, and Jimmy Witherspoon the singer?

MILES

No, I haven't.

HENDERSON

Those are all on my mother's side, grandmother's side. They're famous people, and I'm trying to find out this Witherspoon that played with them Wayans brothers on TV—

MILES

John Witherspoon, yeah.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I'm trying to find out if he's related to us, trying to find out where he's from and everything. He just might be related to us.

MILES

Let me stop and turn the tape over.

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HENDERSON

Have you ever heard of Jimmy Liggett, the Liggetts?

MILES

No.

HENDERSON

Jimmy Liggett, the singers, they was singers?

MILES

No.

HENDERSON

We're related to the Liggetts, to Jimmy Liggetts.

MILES

Through your mother again? On your mother's side?

HENDERSON

On my daddy's side.

MILES

What do they sing? What kind of music?

HENDERSON

Oh, they were blues, rhythm and blues, the old-time blues.

MILES

You mentioned a few minutes ago something about the Negro League uniforms and the merchandise. And they're making a comeback among young people right now. What do you feel about that, you know, where they wearing some of the hats?

HENDERSON

Oh, I love it, because I sells it.

MILES

Now tell me about that. See how I transition for you? [laughs]

HENDERSON

Through the [Negro League Baseball] museum, we're helping the museum and helping one another. Through the museum, the money goes into a bucket and like certain families, if they need it, we help out.

MILES

Tell me how does the whole process work? Do they send you the shirts and things?

HENDERSON

You have to order it and be responsible for the— Whatever you sell, you're responsible for it.

MILES

What kind of things do you guys sell?

HENDERSON

We sell from t-shirts all the way up to the uniform, baseball, caps, gloves. Whatever we played with and had on, you can buy.

MILES

Who do you primarily sell them to?

HENDERSON

To anybody, anybody that want to buy them, all races. And everybody buy them, too.

MILES

Is it like school groups or at the park?

HENDERSON

At school and just like go to a swap meet, and we be out there at swap meet. And we also sign autographs. I have baseball cards that I sell and everything. Like my baseball card's five dollars, you know. And like if you buy a cap or whatever, I autograph the cap and everything. And like I'll tell anybody, you see this little logo right here?

MILES

Right.

HENDERSON

If this logo isn't in it, it's not authentic. They have now people trying to— Everybody trying to sell the Negro League stuff, so you got to watch what you buy and know the gimmicks, the fake.

MILES

What's your relationship to the museum?

HENDERSON

Oh, I'm in the museum. They have pictures of most all the guys that played in the Negro League. And once a year, Buck [O'Neil] and them, we all get together and have a big reunion and everything.

MILES

At the museum?

HENDERSON

At the museum and everything. We down to about— Out of four, five hundred of us, through the years we're down to say about a hundred, if it's a hundred now. The way time passed.

MILES

[laughs] You still looking good. You're maintaining. How do you manage to stay in touch with people?

HENDERSON

Phone, through the phone, and through the museum. All you have to do is— Now, we have a group, that one I was just showing you there, the one back in Maryland. And Mamie Johnson, all you have to do is call Mamie, and Mamie know where everybody's at, because everybody love Mamie because she was one of the only females out of three of them, four of them that played in the league. She's the only one that's still living.

MILES

Do you know where she's living now?

HENDERSON

Yeah. She living outside of Baltimore, Maryland.

MILES

Oh, really? Okay. I'm from there. I might have to—

HENDERSON

If you meet her, you met a nice person, and she's a wonderful person.

MILES

Now, do you get calls often to make appearances or—

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yes.

MILES

Tell me about those.

HENDERSON

I get called quite a few. We go all over the United States to talk to kids and to talk to churches and to talk to different groups and everything, college and everything, you know. Like you just met a friend of mine's last weekend. He's over at the NFL, and I do shows and everything with the NFL. And we have a

bat here in L.A., the Dodgers. I go and work with the Dodgers, through the Youth Fund and everything with them. And I get a lot of calls to speak at churches.

MILES

And you still do it?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. And I just lost a friend of mine. They're probably having his funeral next Friday. Earl Wilson, Earl Wilson, Sr.

MILES

He did?

HENDERSON

He passed away.

MILES

When was that?

HENDERSON

He passed—

MILES

That's recent.

HENDERSON

—the other day, yeah. Friday. He passed Friday.

MILES

You know, I talked to him about a month ago.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I remember he told me you had talked with him. But he's gone now, and that was my heart and soul, you know. I don't want to talk about him, else I'll start crying.

MILES

Okay. I'll change the topic real quick. Someone, actually Mr. James Lewis, was telling me about an article in the *L.A. Times* where a group of former white major league players were trying to sue for reverse discrimination. Did you hear about this?

HENDERSON

Yeah, they doing the same thing, but they dropped theirs. I got word just the other day that they dropped they case and everything. Maybe the movement for us will work a little faster, but they're trying to get money for the Negro League, which was due to us but never did come. And we got old "Peach Head" Mitchell, Mitchell, he's the one that's spending his own money fighting them and everything. And the ball is looking pretty good for him.

MILES

That's good. Tell me about the case. What is it that he's trying to sue for? Why is there money owed to you?

HENDERSON

Oh, the money's owed because— I can't really explain it, because I don't know too much about it myself and everything, and I don't want to say the wrong thing and everything, so I'll just leave that alone instead of go into something I don't know anything about. I'm just hoping and praying that it come through.

MILES

You just said there are only about a hundred of you players left. What do you think is important for people to remember about the Negro Leagues?

HENDERSON

The main thing, that the camaraderie that we had and still do, you know. That's what I'd like for peoples in our own race to get that camaraderie that we have, because we still speak and talk to one another, communicate with one another. And our black youth and everything, they don't even know what it is to speak to one another. And this is what we need to get back into, you know, and maybe we can get stronger through communication. You know, we learn through communication, which is speaking with one another. We learn from each other. And if we can ever get back to that the way our forefathers

and everybody was, hey, I think we can be a lot stronger than what we are today.

MILES

Any other final thoughts you want to add?

HENDERSON

Oh, we ain't through. I love to talk. My wife always on me about talking and everything. Back in the days, our mother and our father, they get up in the morning, they would speak. Today, the mother get up, she don't say "Good morning" to her child or don't say her name, you know, and the family's just not like it was in the old days.

MILES

What do you think happened? What change do you think happened there?

HENDERSON

The kids, you know— I know you realize when a mother is carrying a child, that baby hear everything that you converse, what you saying. And why, when the baby come, because the baby already know how to cuss, know how to fight and all that because of the way the mother and father act. See, there it starts in the home, you know. Then they took out, in schools, for the teachers used to could correct the kid and everything right then and there. They can't do that no more, you know. And the kids, they don't have no respect for themselves, so how they going to have respect for the teachers?

MILES

Do you think we should go back to that?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MILES

Even giving out spankings and everything?

HENDERSON

Yeah. It sure helped me, I'm going to tell you that much. And the older peoples in Arkansas, you better speak when you walk past an elderly person or else they say, "Hey, boy, what's wrong with you? Don't you have a mommy and a daddy? You don't know how to speak to nobody?" And, hey, you speak, and if you don't, you'll get a whipping right then and there. Then they'll take you home, and then you get another whipping. Because the old folks say it takes a village to raise a child, man, I believe that, you know. We wouldn't have all this gang-banging and stuff if we had more respect for one another, you know. But if a kid don't have respect for himself, how he going to have respect for others?

MILES

Were you able to pass that on to your children? Because you're in San Diego now, not in the South.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Oh yeah. My kids speak. I raised my kids up the same way I was raised up. I was up in the park, my son was messing up up in the park, and he was with some guys I didn't want him to run with. And I happened to be going past the park and I saw him. I got out of my car and went over there and was whupping him, and the San Diego policeman came up to me, "Hey, don't you know you can't whup that child like that?" I said, "Hey, wait a minute." I said, "I'm going to whup my child before you have to kill him." He said, "Okay, go ahead," you know, and he let me, and I kept on spanking him, you know. I embarrassed him in front of his friends and everything, and his friends started respecting me and everything, you know, because they said, "Oh, Mr. Henderson don't play." And I tell them, "No, I don't play." No.

MILES

But you were able to carry that with you from being in the South, right?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Once I tell any kid— There's one kid in San Diego that if he had listened to me, he wouldn't be in a wheelchair today. Somehow word had got to me that something had happened down on Ocean View [Boulevard], and I gets in my car and I runs down there, because they told me my son was down

there. But after I got down there, my son had, they said, just left. They was fighting. And Donald, a friend of ours, my son's best friend, he was down there. So I said, "Donald, come on, I'm going to take you home." So I put him in the car and took him home. And I bet you I wasn't in the house five minutes, the telephone rang, and they said, "Donald just got shot," you know.

MILES

What happened?

HENDERSON

The guy got shot. He left the house and went back down on the street, and some other guy shot him right through the throat right here [gestures], and he's paralyzed. He lived, but he's paralyzed today. And my son's eyes opened up. Yeah, he opened up. That boy straightened his whole life out, and once again I'm proud of him. But you know, I just hate it had to happen that way for a whole lot of eyes to be opened up. But there's still a lot of young kids that still's gang-banging and doing things that they shouldn't do, but they should look and see what happened here. Then they could say, "I don't want that to happen to me," and quit all that stuff that they doing.

MILES

Right. Where did your children go to school in San Diego?

HENDERSON

Oh, they went to grammar school and they went to— I can't think of the elementary school that they went to right there in the neighborhood.

MILES

Did they go to San Diego High like you did?

HENDERSON

Oh, none of my kids went to San Diego High. They went to Lincoln.

MILES

Why not?

HENDERSON

They went to a black school, Lincoln High School. And my son is in the history books there at Lincoln High School.

MILES

Which son is that?

HENDERSON

Neale. Ronnie— I'll tell you a story. We moved out into El Cajon. El Cajon, that's mostly a white community. And I moved out there, and this was in the sixties, late sixties. I bought a lovely home out there, five bedroom, and I was only paying three hundred and fifty-some dollars a month for it. It was a nice little home. I was still working for General Dynamics. As soon as I moved in, the guy across the street come running out there, "There's a nigger moving next door. There's a nigger moving in our neighborhood," you know. And I got right out there next to him and said, "Yeah, and this nigger here to stay," you know.

MILES

Where is El Cajon?

HENDERSON

Just outside about eleven miles from San Diego.

MILES

North? No, no, east.

HENDERSON

Going east. Going towards Highway 8.

MILES

What was it like when you moved in the city?

HENDERSON

Prejudiced. Wasn't too many blacks out there. Wasn't too many blacks in El Cajon. So we moved in, and my kids started going to the schools out there. There wasn't too many blacks in the school and everything, and my son was going to El Cajon High, I think it was. One of them El Cajon ones. And he was

going to play football for them and everything, and then Ronnie, he was going to Grossmont. And Grossmont was really prejudiced back even when I was playing against them. And Neale, they fell in love with Neale because he was a good athlete and everything, you know. The police— Like I say, I was working at General Dynamics and I had a security job, which I was working out in El Cajon where they was rebuilding and everything. I would watch the heavy equipment at night. I would work out there until about one o'clock in the morning, and then I would go home. And the police would always stop me, you know, because I was wearing a gun and everything.

MILES

Well, how did they know you were wearing a gun?

HENDERSON

Well, they seen me patrolling around and everything. They're always talking about, "What you think, you're a policeman?" or something like that. I'd say, "No, sir, just doing my job." We were allowed— I worked for ADT [Security Services, Inc.], and I said, "I'm just doing my job," you know, "and I'm on my way home." So they found out that I lived out there, and when my kids would go to school and everything, they would mess with my kids. They would sic the dogs on my kids.

MILES

The police would?

HENDERSON

The police and everything. So I was into it with the guy across the street and everything mostly, and so I said, "Well, the best thing for me to do," I don't think I stayed out there a year.

MILES

Oh, you didn't stay long at all.

HENDERSON

Yeah, I rented my house out over in San Diego, and I had to end up going, living with my stepson James Bray until I could get my other house vacated, the one that I had bought with my Monarchs money.

MILES

This is back in San Diego now?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

So you went back to that house?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Then did Neale switch schools then at that point?

HENDERSON

Yeah, went back to Lincoln. He went back to Lincoln High School.

MILES

Now, why did they go to Lincoln and not San Diego High?

HENDERSON

Because it was about four blocks from the house where we was living at.

MILES

Oh, Lincoln was closer?

HENDERSON

Yeah. Lincoln opened up in '53, I think.

MILES

Was it a new school?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

You said it was mostly black at that point, then, right, when Neale went there?

HENDERSON

Black and Mexican.

MILES

Okay. What was his experience like at that school?

HENDERSON

Oh, he loved it, because he was always like a star, wearing that big old Afro. Boy, I wish you could have seen that Afro. [tape recorder off]

MILES

All right. Ronnie was a big star.

HENDERSON

Neale.

MILES

Neale was a big star at this point.

HENDERSON

Yeah. Neale swam. Oh, boy, that boy could swim. Yeah, he was a lifeguard down at the Y and he played water polo. I was trying to get him to go to the Olympics and everything, you know. He could have been another Tiger Woods.

MILES

But in water polo. [laughs]

HENDERSON

That boy could swim.

MILES

I was going to say it sounds like you're saying that San Diego seemed to be relatively free of prejudice, but once you go outside of San Diego—

HENDERSON

Oh, man, yeah.

MILES

I didn't realize that.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I had a friend that moved out there near where Archie Moore had his training camp. Archie Moore was one of the great boxers. You heard of Archie Moore, haven't you?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

And he was really a good friend to my Uncle Sid, and they ran together there in San Diego. And I had a guy I went to school with, Thomas Andrestep moved out in Pine Valley, I think it was. And the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross and caught his garage on fire and everything, and Archie Moore's camp was right down the road from where he trained to fight. In San Diego, man, that's where the Ku Klux Klan is, out there in the Valley. Oh, yeah, they— Forget that Mexican or whatever his name, all this.

MILES

But if you stayed within the city itself, you were okay?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Okay. So you didn't have to worry about it too much.

HENDERSON

They beat this one marine up, they paralyzed him. I know you heard about that.

MILES

So, what, no?

HENDERSON

Because he was out there with some buddies of his, they beat him almost to death; they paralyzed him out there. They hardly did nothing about it. Those kids didn't get prison terms or nothing, I don't think.

MILES

How long did you stay in that house that's near Lincoln?

HENDERSON

Where now?

MILES

The house that you moved back into, how long did you stay there?

HENDERSON

I still own that house. I bought that with my money that I got from the Kansas City Monarchs.

MILES

So you're not going to sell that house?

HENDERSON

Oh, no way. I paid nine thousand dollars for it, and it's worth almost two hundred thousand now.

MILES

But you're not living in it right now?

HENDERSON

Oh no. I have it rented out.

MILES

When you moved back then from El Cajon, how long did you stay in that house before you moved again?

HENDERSON

I stayed in that house until '80.

MILES

Oh, a long time.

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Since you had been there, for, wow, almost thirty—

HENDERSON

Yeah, I bought that house in '49. When I signed with the Monarchs, they gave me that.

MILES

That same year?

HENDERSON

And my mother bought that house. I wasn't old enough, you know. I was telling you, they sent all my money to my mother, and my mother took that and paid down on this home and put it in her name and my name.

MILES

But in that long stretch of time, I'm sure you got to see a lot of changes.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What happened? What was it like in '49? What kind of changes occurred over time?

HENDERSON

The Negroes started to move up. Where I'm at now, that used to be all white. You better not be caught up in there at night driving through that community at night. It was the same way like on El Cajon, El Cajon Boulevard. If you go on

the north side of El Cajon Boulevard at night, you just about get arrested. It was bad for the black man back in the late forties and early fifties.

MILES

What neighborhood was that, though, the one that you're now that you couldn't go into, I don't know, thirty, forty years ago? What neighborhood is that, or city?

HENDERSON

That was in— They call that San Diego, off of University and El Cajon.

MILES

Is that where you live right now?

HENDERSON

No, no, no. I live in the Skyline area now. And you couldn't go into that area when they first built it up. The blacks couldn't go out there. It wasn't no blacks out there on the other side of Euclid, east of Euclid. You just about couldn't be caught back up in there.

MILES

You said, though, that in the old house, the one that your mother bought for you, that now or over time blacks started moving out. Right?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

Why did the move out?

HENDERSON

That's what the other places opened up, and they started selling their property and moved out to where the whites— When the whites were moving out of there back up into the hills, you know, and now they're trying to move back to the city.

MILES

That's true.

HENDERSON

Yeah. See, back in the old days, I remember when I first came out here in '37, down near the waterfront, that was all black-owned, all black-owned. And now the blacks sold all that back then, and then the whites are trying to buy it back now, see. And all the property is so high back down in there now, but all that was black-owned. Now everything is white, all down on Fifth Street and Market and everything there, that's what's called the Gaslight District now. And all of it is white-owned. All that was black-owned. And now they just stole that property from them black people.

MILES

So that's the same house. What's the neighborhood like right now?

HENDERSON

Mexicans live there now.

MILES

Okay. It's not down by the water?

HENDERSON

They still call it the waterfront.

MILES

It's probably worth more than a hundred thousand. I'm sure it's worth a lot more than that.

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What do you plan to do with that house?

HENDERSON

I'm going to keep it. They even put a Home Depot and everything up right down the street from me and everything, and they're still building up, put a

Popeye's [Fried Chicken]. Well, the graveyard is about two blocks from my property and everything. So it's a nice little good community there, quiet.

MILES

Do you plan on passing it down to somebody?

HENDERSON

Paul. I've got it in my son Paul's name right now.

MILES

That's good. [laughs] Because like you said, I know too many—

HENDERSON

Paul work— He's strong-minded. He had to learn the hard way. I had to straighten his life up, and once I got firm on him and showed him that I meant business, he woke up and saw the light and made 180-degree turn.

MILES

Wow. That's good.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I'm so happy for him, I don't know what to do. He can get my heart right now, because he's straightened his life up.

MILES

How has the city of San Diego changed since you first went in 1937?

HENDERSON

It's still got a little ways to go.

MILES

Why do you say that?

HENDERSON

The reason why I'm saying that is, you know, you ever seen how you make a cake?

MILES

Uh-huh.

HENDERSON

It's sweet on top, but when you get down a little ways, it ain't so sweet.

MILES

Why, what's going on now? It's 2004. [laughs]

HENDERSON

Well, they still got a long ways to go. As far as, like, jobs, they still don't give the black man preference and everything. And I'm not racist or nothing like that, but we need to come together. And, you know, like the Mexican race—I'm saying "race." There ain't but one race; the human race. But they help one another. And we don't help one another, and that's what we need to come together. If you see a brother down, don't talk about him down; try to help him up. Pick him up. Don't leave him down there; pick him up. But the Mexican people, they work with one another, you know, and that's what we need to do, you know, if we start helping one another instead of degrading one another.

MILES

You mentioned, though, that, I don't know, in the fifties or sixties, the police were after you. When did that stop? When did that change? Or did it change? [laughs]

HENDERSON

It hasn't changed. They're still racist. They catch you out by yourself, and they just down you. I know one night I was on my way to work, and I happened to be—I had to meet a friend of mine because at that time I didn't have a car. My girlfriend had wrecked my car, and so I had to ride with another guy. So I had to meet him up on Wabash, which was about five blocks away from the house there on Ocean View. So I was walking there to meet my friend, and the police stopped me. So the lady— He had the lady to get out and question me, and the lady asked me, says, "Where you going?" I says, "I'm on my way to work." "At this time in the morning?" I said, "Is there a special time I have to go to work? I have to be here. I'm working overtime, so I have to be to work at three o'clock in the morning." So she say, "Well, do you have an I.D.?" I said,

"Yeah." And I reach up to get my I.D., and she did a roundhouse kick at me and everything else and pulled her weapon on me. Now, "Hold it, hold it. Hey, hey, hey. Don't, don't, don't. Don't shoot. Don't shoot. You asked me for my I.D., and I'm getting my I.D." And the guy standing up there, the other policeman, was laughing. I told him, "Man, excuse me, I don't see nothing funny here. I could have been shot." "Oh [mumbles]." I said, "No, ain't all the [mumbles]. What's your badge number?" "Well, no, you don't have to go into all that." I said, "Yeah, I want your badge number." And I got her badge number and everything else. And just about this time, the guy what I was going to ride with came up, you know, and he asked me what was wrong, and I told him. He said, "Neale, that didn't really happen." I said, "Yes, it did, too."

MILES

When was this? When did this take place?

HENDERSON

This was in the eighties. It was in the eighties.

MILES

What were your children's experiences like with the police? Any run-ins?

HENDERSON

No. No, because they, back then at that time, they walked the chalk line because I kept them— They wasn't into drugs or any of that, and nothing like that.

MILES

Did they ever experience any prejudice that you know of?

HENDERSON

Not like I did, no. Not like I did.

MILES

I know that you come up to Los Angeles frequently. Do you ever think about moving here?

HENDERSON

Oh no.

MILES

I knew what you were going to say. [laughs]

HENDERSON

I come into L.A., and I go out of L.A.

MILES

Why do you do that?

HENDERSON

I came up here one year, and my sister live in Compton. I came up here to visit my sister, and I'm sitting on the couch, and a bullet went through the wall up over my head, you know. So I sit there, and later on that night, my niece and her boyfriend or somebody, they came in, and something happened. But anyway, they got to fighting, and my niece dialed 9-1-1. The police and everybody else come to the home, and at the door, my sister went to the door, and she said, "Oh, ain't nothing happening. Ain't nothing going on." Police said, "Well, we had a 9-1-1 call from here." And my sister said, "Oh, lord, I got everything under—." And he said, "Oh no," and he took and slammed my sister back. She went back across that what's the name there. And he came in there, and everybody came in there, there was nine of them, come up with their guns cocked. And I'm sitting on the couch and everything else. And the guy, my niece's boyfriend, he happened to went in the room and took and put a whole lot of clothes over on top of him. He was under all them clothes. When they went in there, they didn't throw the clothes or nothing.

MILES

Why did he do that?

HENDERSON

Because he was hiding from them, because him and my niece had gotten into it. They came responding to the 9-1-1 call. So they said, "Well, everything look clear and everything here," so they left and everything. And when the left, I left, and I haven't been back to my sister's house since then. Normally, I used

to be— And I don't know if you see it right there and right here [gestures], that's from police handcuffs on me.

MILES

Here?

HENDERSON

No, this was in San Diego.

MILES

Why did they handcuff you? I can see that.

HENDERSON

Yeah. I'm telling you the truth. They handcuffed me and everything.

MILES

What happened?

HENDERSON

What happened is we was out gambling.

MILES

Now, wait. When was this? Tell me when this was.

HENDERSON

It was in the fifties. This was in the fifties. And we went out and had a little poker game at the house, and you're not supposed to play cards, you know, gamble. They raided the house, and I was the houseman. I had money, and they went after the money and everything. So Charles Rucker, he's dead and gone now, he and I went to school together, so when they raided and everything, my mother— I happened to hit two or three of them, and so the guy got me down and they really clamped the handcuffs on me. And my mother happened to come out of the back bedroom in the house where I was living at, that she had. But anyway, my mother came out of the room and I looked at her and I hollered, "Mama, Mama, help your son." [laughs] My mother looked at me and said, "You're on your own," and got back into bed. So

then everything got under control and everything, so they arrested most of the guys that was there and took all of us to jail.

MILES

For gambling?

HENDERSON

Yeah, for gambling, and I had to pay to get everybody out of jail. See, but they was trying to get the money that I had on me and everything, to confiscate the money. But I didn't give that money up and everything. I told them, "All this is my money," because we was playing with chips and everything.

MILES

Did they search you looking for the money?

HENDERSON

Yeah, yeah, but they couldn't take the money.

MILES

Did they find it?

HENDERSON

Yeah. I kept my money on [inaudible]. When I went down to the jail, that's how I bailed everybody out, and I was responsible to bail everybody out of jail. I got them all out.

MILES

How were you treated when you went down there?

HENDERSON

Good. They didn't mistreat us, because Charles Rucker was there. Yeah, he was a pretty well-known black policeman. This is when blacks started moving on up in the department. He ended up a detective.

MILES

Okay. So that made a difference?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah.

MILES

What has been your perception of Los Angeles?

HENDERSON

I don't know too much about Los Angeles. All I know is when I used to come up here back in when I was in junior high school, I belonged to the Boys Club, and we used to come up here, and we couldn't go in the hotels, couldn't sleep in the hotels. We couldn't go swimming in the Y and different things, you know. It was the same way in San Diego, you know. Certain things, they just wouldn't let the black man do.

MILES

Better or worse than San Diego?

HENDERSON

This was better than San Diego.

MILES

This was better than San Diego?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. San Diego was— I remember when Compton didn't have no blacks going to school out there. Yeah. We used to come up and play football, wasn't no blacks in Compton back in the forties when we used to go up there and play football. They had a Chinaman, and I remember the Chinese guy, he played.

MILES

Now, I know you said you have a sister here, and I think you have another relative living out there.

HENDERSON

My brother.

MILES

Your brother, too, right?

HENDERSON

Yeah, my brother live in Altadena, up in the mountains. He must have a seven-room house and a swimming pool, yeah. See, he got his own postal annex. He got his own business, and he own five or six homes in the Pasadena area. He rent them out; got them all rented out.

MILES

What did your brother or your sister tell you about life in Los Angeles? Have they talked about it at all?

HENDERSON

No. I got a nephew, my brother's son, he works— He's well known in one bank. He's a bigwig, he goes all overseas, and everything. He got three or four homes. He's doing real good. He went to USC. He graduated at USC. And I had a lot of cousins and my brother took a class at UCLA and everything. Like I told you, my brother was a speaker. Yeah, and he tried preaching.

MILES

Oh, right, I remember. That's right.

HENDERSON

He tried. He started preaching.

MILES

But he didn't make any money. [laughs]

HENDERSON

He said the money wasn't coming fast enough, so he had to go back to gambling.

MILES

What was his experience like at UCLA? He had to go back to gambling?
[laughs]

HENDERSON

Yeah, he went back to gambling.

MILES

From preaching to gambling?

HENDERSON

Yeah, he went back and he started gambling. I never will forget the time my brother came down and stayed over in Tijuana and he had five hundred dollars, and he put that five hundred dollars on a horse named Eager Abby. And Eager Abby broke out the gate, and my brother broke out the gate with him. So Eager Abby started on down, boy, my brother got down on four hands. My brother went back up to the infield, said, "Run, Eager Abby, run! Run, Eager Abby! Swish your tail." The horse had a habit of when he'd do his tail, he's ready to run. So he still had to swish his tail, he got a run on the turn, and he's running about seven. Bobby yelled, "Swish your tail, Eager Abby! Swish your tail!" About that time, Eager Abby did the tail like this here [gestures] and started to move up. And he came on around and started for home, and my brother was up at the other end, and him and that horse running, running up and down yelling, "Oh, swish your tail, Eager Abby!" When Eager Abby won the race, my brother made a turn just like this right here, went on right out to the window, and they paid him off. He went straight on down to Ernie Wright, and they had a Mercury turning around on a turntable. He paid for it.

MILES

He ran straight from the thing right there. [laughs]

HENDERSON

Yeah, he ran down at the other end, and after that, the race was over, he went and got his money and went down to Ernie Wright and bought that Mercury that was turning around on that turntable.

MILES

Right on the display that day, right. [laughs]

HENDERSON

Yeah, the one on display. And right after he bought his Mercury, I was jealous. I ended up buying me one.

MILES

A Mercury, too?

HENDERSON

Yeah, I bought— Mine wasn't as nice as his. He bought the Monte Carlo, and I bought just the plain Mercury coupe.

MILES

Did you still have that Ford? [laughs]

HENDERSON

Yeah. My mother bought me a '37 Ford. Yeah, I still had that Ford.

MILES

You kept it for a while, huh?

HENDERSON

Yeah. It was clean. Ooh, that was a clean little Ford. I used to take my Ford, and I'd run a '47 Cadillac, yeah. That little '37 went so fast that the voltage regulator would jump off.

MILES

You must have taken good care of it, though, because that's a long time.

HENDERSON

Oh, I did, yeah. Floyd Robinson's dad is the one, Mr. old man Robinson, he was a good baseball player, too, just like Floyd. He learned from his daddy. The old Arkansas blood.

MILES

Speaking of Arkansas, when's the last time you've been to Fort Smith?

HENDERSON

I was down there coming back from Maryland, I stopped in Fort Smith and saw my son, saw my— I still have relatives down there, and I saw my cousins and everything, went to my daddy's grave and everything.

MILES

When did your father pass away?

HENDERSON

My dad passed in '85. My mother passed in '80, and my dad was still in love with my mother. He grieved his self to death. Even though, because he used to always say he was going to get my mom back, and he was going to get a two-story house and get his whole family. That's all that old man used to talk about, getting his family back.

MILES

Never happened for him.

HENDERSON

Never happened, no.

MILES

Did he ever stay in contact with your mother or talk to her, they see each other?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. When she passed away, he was right here. He came to [inaudible].

MILES

Even though she remarried?

HENDERSON

Yeah.

MILES

He was still in love with her.

HENDERSON

He was there, yeah.

MILES

So what's Fort Smith like these days?

HENDERSON

Fort Smith is moving up, the blacks, yeah. Where I was born at, that's a graveyard over there all in that area now. All the blacks mostly that was on the south side, they're putting factories and everything over there on that south side. Almost all the blacks moved to the north side.

MILES

Race relations any better there?

HENDERSON

Oh, way better.

MILES

How?

HENDERSON

Way better. Business. They got they own business and they're working at all different banks and working in the movie theaters. And you don't have to sit upstairs no more; you can sit amongst one another. And everybody working in stores and cafes. Where we used to couldn't eat, we can eat there now and everything, yeah.

MILES

Do you know when their schools integrated? Because when you left, they were still segregated at that point. Do you know when that happened?

HENDERSON

In the fifties. Yeah, because I remember going down there and I saw Lincoln. Lincoln just about folded. They didn't have no football team no more. They

was all going to a white school. Because I remember going over into Little Rock. The school played Little Rock that night.

MILES

Did you hear of any problems when the schools started to integrate? Because you know a lot of schools didn't integrate peacefully, you know. There was some fighting.

HENDERSON

Back in the days in Little Rock, they had a confrontation, but up in Fort Smith, they didn't have no confrontation, not at Fort Smith. It was like I tell you, I can't remember hardly nothing happening like that in Fort Smith. Just like I told you about when my grandmother got on the bus and the man told her she had to move back to the back and she sat right there, there wasn't no big disturbance in that. She sat and went on where she had to go. Just like at the ball game, we knew we had to sit in the bleachers, we sit in the bleachers. We didn't have no confrontation. And people, they wanted to buy something, you get in line, and the white would get right behind you. They didn't try to get in front of you and tell you to get back or whatever. You stood in line, got what you had, and just like when the game was over— I told you we had a restaurant right across the street. Whites would come over there and eat and everything. And we had the only toilet in the neighborhood that flushed.

MILES

I remember that. [laughs]

HENDERSON

They would use the toilet and everything.

MILES

What were the police like in Fort Smith?

HENDERSON

Well, the only thing I can remember, my mother and them told about how this one police officer, he was real bad off, and he used to do the blacks wrong until they had a shooting and he ended up losing an arm. They put him on one of them three-wheeled motor scooters, and that's the last little confrontation

I ever heard about. But like I was telling you about the kid named Snooky and how his mother used to whup him, he used to go around and pick up cigarettes. His mind was a little disturbed. And I remember him going down on Eighth Street and stealing a horse, and he rode that horse all over the neighborhood and everything else. Then he took the horse and rode him down Garrison Avenue and put the horse on a meter, and the horse was all up on the sidewalk doing its thing. And the police came and came up in the theater, and he knew exactly who to call for. He told him if he don't come and clean up that— And they made him take that horse back to where he stole it from. They wouldn't even put him in jail.

MILES

They didn't put him in jail, huh?

HENDERSON

No, his mind, he was disturbed.

MILES

But that's really different, I mean interesting, compared to what your experience with the police is like in San Diego versus Arkansas.

HENDERSON

And even like the Woodard brothers. Them Woodard brothers, they were bad. Remember I told you they stuck the ice pick in my daddy's house and everything, well, them Woodard brothers, them was the ones that was really messed up for the blacks there as far as in the community. You couldn't lay nothing down.

MILES

How did they make it bad for the blacks?

HENDERSON

Through stealing chickens and, you know, just messing up.

MILES

Did the police know it was them?

HENDERSON

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, if anything went wrong in Fort Smith, they'd go looking for the Woodard brothers. There was seven of them. All bad, too.

MILES

I was thinking it was just two of them.

HENDERSON

No, seven of them.

MILES

Seven. Winter? What's their names?

HENDERSON

Woodard. And I remember one stole a chicken and a guy shot him with a shotgun half in two, both barrels over a chicken. I never will forget that.

MILES

We really are running out of tape now. So I'm going to give you some— Any last words you want to put out there to the young people?

HENDERSON

Oh, Lordy, that's the main thing. Whatever you young folks do, please come together. You love one another, you know, and communicate with one another. If you have a problem with one another, talk to one another about it. You don't need all this shooting and cutting and cussing out one another. And honor your father and your mother, you know. Don't talk back to your mom and dad. If you have a problem, go to them like two human beings should be. Don't go up there cussing at your mama or threatening her or hitting her and slapping on her. You know, start communicating. And to you young women's that pregnant and everything, when you're pregnant, try not to disturb your child that you're going to give birth to. Treat the baby just like it's already here, because when the baby come into the world and can remember the way it is, and she can hear everything that you're talking about, or him. And you got to teach a baby to honor their father and their mother, just like the Bible says, and your days will be long and holy. I believe thoroughly in the Bible, and

that's the way I was raised under the Bible. I used to watch my daddy preach in front of the mirror and make different expressions and everything, and I knew the sermon before he'd say it and everything. But God is good, and trust in him, and he'll always be good to you if you be good to him.

MILES

Okay. Well, on that note, I'd like to thank you. It's been a tremendous pleasure to meet you and to talk with you.[End of March 28, 2004 interview]

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