

Interview with Raymond Turner  
Session 1 (2/12/2020)  
Timed Log

[00:00:00.00]

Born in St. Louis, Missouri on March 31, 1945. Grows up in a neighborhood called The Ville, which is located a few blocks from Charles Sumner High School. The Ville is a predominantly Black neighborhood that was once very prestigious.

[00:02:12.11]

Three [high] schools in St. Louis that Blacks can attend: Vashon High School where comedian Redd Foxx [born John Elroy Sanford] attended; Hadley Technical High School, for students deemed as “not college material”; and [Charles H.] Sumner High School.

[00:02:56.13]

Historical sites border Sumner High School. Hotel across the street from Sumner houses the headquarters of Madame CJ Walker [born Sarah Breedlove], the first Black millionaire [and the first self-made female millionaire] in America. Additional sites include the Homer G. Phillips Hospital [the first teaching hospital west of the Mississippi for Blacks] and Annie Malone Children’s Home.

[00:04:00.14]

Notables who attended Sumner High School, include Tina Turner - [who was born] Anna Mae Bullock - and worked at Homer Hospital bussing dishes. Chuck Berry also attended Sumner and lived in the neighborhood on Good Avenue, which inspired his song “Johnny B Goode.” Turner grows up playing baseball with Nate Colbert. Nate Colbert and fellow St. Louis resident Stan “The Man ” Musial are the only two baseball players to hit five homers in a double-header.

[00:05:53.22]

Sumner High School principal George Dennis Brantley resides over high school for 40 years, and at the time he gives out more diplomas than any other high school principal in the nation.

[00:06:16.07]

Despite being classified as “marginally poor,” children in the community have so much fun growing up that they don’t realize it. Awareness comes as the children grow up and are able to explore other areas. The Ville is boxed in by Welston in the [west], the Mississippi River in the east, a natural bridge in the north, and Lindell in the south. The only people who venture outside of the neighborhood do so for work, like his mother who works in homes in areas outside the Ville.

[00:08:18.27]

Young people are fearful of venturing into some of the areas and getting “beaten up if caught over there after dark.” Community has everything it needs, including a baseball team which is very popular. At the time, tennis is not a Black sport, and among the guys it’s considered a “sissy sport.” To be respected as a Black athlete must play basketball, football, and track. No attention paid to tennis until Arthur Ashe arrives.

[00:10:07.17]

Multiple activities young people do for fun growing up in The Ville, including skating. An all-Black roller rink called The Crystal and the Steinberg Memorial Skating Rink are located in Forest Park - the Central Park of St. Louis. Steinberg initially created for Whites but as Blacks start coming in, it becomes all Black.

[00:11:52.15]

Rapping in the 1950s, and especially having a “heavy rap,” used as a way for young boys to talk to girls. Music and parties. Parties advertised at the high school water fountains telling people when, where, and how much it cost to attend.

[00:13:54.16]

Giving money to a “wine-o” to get them to buy alcohol and giving alcohol to girls to try to get them drunk.

[00:15:06.16]

Relationships with his mother and grandmother. First one in the family to get a car, 1951 Chevy Jalopy.

[00:16:54.24]

Generally, parents try to shield children from what’s going on with civil rights, however Turner’s aware of Emmett Till because his own brother is also in Mississippi at the time visiting his mother’s family. Father’s family originates from Arkansas. Grandmother takes Turner on a train to Tupelo, Mississippi to visit her siblings. Father never goes into detail about discrimination he experienced growing up, but before Turner travels with grandmother to the South, father instructs him not to look at the White girls and to always use “yes, sir” and “yes, ma’am” to respond to White people. Parents try to shield children from discrimination to keep them from feeling inferior.

[00:19:16.13]

Awareness of discrimination gradually comes, but he doesn't feel inferior. Protests against faculty at Sumner because they don't teach about the heritage. Another famous alumna includes opera singer Grace Bumbry.

[00:21:48.09]

Most of the figures young people know about are in sports and entertainment.

[00:23:11.29]

Using buses and streetcars to get around because few people in community have cars.

[00:23:51.21]

Begins attending Sumner in 1958. Towards last years at Sumner, and after graduating, becomes more aware of the history of the school. Sumner is the first all-Black [high] school west of the Mississippi [established in 1875].

[00:25:23.16]

Students, educators, and administrators at Sumner are all Black. See photo referenced in supporting documents. The only time White people who enter area are city officials, but they never live there or attend the schools.

[00:27:24.27]

Teachers and more well-off professionals live outside of The Ville, more west, on streets like Northland and Highland. Many, including Mr. Richard Hudlin, make money investing in real-estate.

[00:29:09.02]

Lack of Black history and awareness at Sumner. Major theme promoted by parents and the church is Christianity. The church is central, and children do not have a choice about attending.

[00:31:09.20]

Becomes involved in sit-ins in 1958 [when he is 13 years old] with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council. Segregation in St. Louis prevents Blacks from going to the nicer theaters and amusement parks. At the Sportsman Park (now Busch Stadium) where the St. Louis Cardinals play, Blacks can't sit anywhere along the first-base side, third-base side, or behind home plate; they can only sit in the outfield in the Pavilion.

[00:33:48.15]

Preparation for the NAACP sit-ins. Instructed about how to dress-up and conduct themselves. Taken to restaurants to attempt to receive service until the police are called. Police take protestors down to the station before releasing them to their parents. Young people and children are recruited as protestors to draw more attention. Protests persist until the barrier is broken down [c.1960] after sit-ins begin reducing business. Once Blacks can freely go to the [previously White-only] businesses, they never return.

[00:36:52.03]

Parents' responses to participation in the sit-ins. Father doesn't comment on participation, and mother always encourages whatever he and his brother, Ed, choose to participate in as long as they don't get into trouble.

[00:38:29.13]

Brother begins spending time with the Nation of Islam, and despite being a devout Christian, mother never attempts to deter. Brother never joins the Nation, but listening to teachings motivates both siblings towards activism. Attention grabbed when neighborhood kid Carl Ball, who'd previously been troubled, gets involved in the Nation and his life changes. Teachings serve as a source of Black pride and spark intrigue and study into Black history, awareness, and culture. Previously only knew Black culture through music.

[00:42:20.17]

Musical history of jazz (named for Jazbo Brown from Memphis, Tennessee) ragtime, rock & roll. Pride comes as he understands more about the history of Black people.

[00:45:20.15]

Discussions with Jewish friends about being "a chosen people," and beliefs about Black people as a chosen people.

[00:48:06.10]

Introduction to tennis through Coach Richard Hudlin in 1960 [the same year Arthur Ashe moved to St. Louis and began playing at Sumner High School].

[00:50:51.08]

Tennis team performs poorly. Black schools' tennis teams generally don't perform well. First time seeing Ashe play shortly after the team's first match. Coach Hudlin describes Ashe as "the best in the world" for his age. An assembly called to welcome Ashe, which is uncommon for new students.

[00:54:33.26]

Shares study period with Ashe. Plays chess for money and maintains position as the champion of the school. Beats Ashe in chess and notes their respective talents in tennis and chess, remarking “I am to you in chess like you are to me in tennis.” Ashe quips, “No, I’m not that far behind.”

[00:57:28.16]

Earns United States Junior Chess Federation Expert Rating.

[00:59:03.28]

Greater association with Ashe through chess than tennis. Ashe’s personality is reserved, but approachable. Students expect Ashe to become a successful as a tennis player, but don’t anticipate [extent of success] or impact off the court.

[01:02:42.29]

Tips from Ashe on improving backhand serve.

[01:04:26.14]

Tennis team practices three times a week, but Ashe doesn’t practice with the team. Team travels to tournaments and matches in personal cars while White teams use school buses.

[01:06:47.22]

References photograph of the tennis team. [See supporting documents for photo.]

[01:07:56.03]

Tennis is generally unpopular with the campus community, as it doesn’t bring in any money for the school. Comparatively, athletes from the popular sports receive special treatment.

[01:11:10.24]

Family is unfamiliar with tennis, as baseball is the dominant sport among Blacks. Prevalence of Blacks in basketball and football today compared to the past.

[01:14:06.14]

Typical path for graduates of Sumner. Not many graduates pursue college. Parents can’t afford to send him to college, but other students whose parents can afford to send them to college do attend like his friend, Augustus Phillips. His Father, Dr. Augustus Phillips Sr., is the only principal with a PhD [doctor or philosophy] in St. Louis at the time and he creates the curriculum for Hadley Technical School.

[01:15:59.12]

Attends St. Louis City College the first semester it opens in 1964. Gets a good job with McDonnell Aircraft Corporation. Drafted into the army for two years and serves in Vietnam during his last year of service. Briefly attends the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) on the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the "G.I. Bill."

[01:19:03.27]

Returns to Vietnam to work on battle-damaged aircraft, and later takes over a restaurant and bar in Saigon. After returning from Vietnam a second time, moves to Los Angeles, California, invests in real estate, and drives Santa Monica Big Blue Bus for 30 years.

[01:21:36.05]

Transformation of childhood neighborhood from prestige to dilapidation. Joins Mathews-Dickey Boys and Girls Club in 1959 as one of the original members. Club becomes the world's largest and most successful Boys and Girls Club.

[01:23:58.24]

Seeing the world gives a new perspective to St. Louis.

[01:26:52.13]

Sees Ashe for the last time while driving Big Blue Bus near the Brentwood Country Club. Ashe is in a car on the opposite side of the road. Follows Ashe's career and experiences a sense of pride at having an association with him.

[01:29:52.16]

Views Ashe's life as an illustration about how even a degree can't promise anything, but the most important thing is determination.

[01:32:27.21]

Offers wisdom for life, and how to discover more than one way to be successful.

[01:36:48.10]

Thanks.