

Reuben Gant

After a successful career in the NFL with the Buffalo Bills, Gant returned to Tulsa and became a community leader.

Chapter 01 - 1:04

Introduction

Announcer: Reuben Charles Gant was born on April 12, 1952, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Reuben was a standout athlete from an early age, often having to show his birth certificate to prove he was old enough play baseball. He excelled in football, basketball, and track at Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School, and during his time there, the football team never lost to another Oklahoma team, and won the state championship three years in a row. After being recruited by many colleges, Reuben chose to play football at Oklahoma State University. A successful three-year career with the Cowboys led to a 1st round draft choice, 18th overall in the 1974 NFL draft, by the Buffalo Bills. O. J. Simpson was a teammate during Reuben's seven years as a wide receiver and tight end. Reuben retired in 1980. For many years he was President of the Greenwood Chamber of Commerce in Tulsa.

You can now listen to Reuben Gant tell his story, including his reflection on the 1921 Race Riot...heard on the Oklahoma oral history website...VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 11:42

Uncomfortable in Schools

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Reuben, if you'll state your full name, your age, and your date of birth.

Reuben Gant: Reuben Gant, age 58, born April 12, 1952.

JE: Tell us where we're recording this interview.

RG: We're in what's left of the Greenwood Business District in Tulsa. We're at the corner of Greenwood and Archer.

JE: This area was once known as the Black Wall Street, where we are right now, right?

RG: Right.

JE: Where were you born?

RG: I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Your mother's name, maiden name, and where she grew up?

RG: My mother's name is Amelia Marie Gant. She actually was born in Gans, Oklahoma, and moved to Tulsa in the 1920s.

JE: Your father's name?

RG: Uh, father's name is actually unknown. Don't know who my dad is. Never met my dad, never saw him, grew up in a single-parent home until, oh let's see, about the age of six, maybe. And my mom married so I had a stepdad.

JE: And often wondered about who your real father was?

RG: Uh, no, not really. It really never entered my mind until I was older, after college.

JE: Your stepfather's name?

RG: Ira Brooks.

JE: And so he became your dad?

RG: Correct.

JE: Do you have brothers or sisters?

RG: I have seven brothers and sisters, all older. I'm the youngest of eight. Three girls, five boys.

JE: Where did you live the first home that you remember?

RG: It was North Tulsa, 2833 North Trenton.

JE: You went to elementary school from that home?

RG: I did.

JE: And what school did you go to?

RG: Ralph Bunch Elementary School.

JE: Did you show a sports ability then in the early elementary grades?

RG: No I didn't. Actually, I didn't get involved in sports until sixth grade. I got introduced to football through the Red Shield Boys Club on North Harvard.

JE: Red Shield, that'd be Salvation Army.

RG: Salvation Army, right.

JE: Somehow you went there one day?

RG: Uh, well, you know, I was a nerd, actually.

JE: A nerd?

RG: My friends were participating in football and asked me to go out for the team with them. They asked my mom and I asked my mom and she gave her blessing, and that's how I got involved in football.

JE: You're tall now, you're six four.

RG: Correct.

- JE:** Were you always tall then as a youngster?
- RG:** Always. Always tallest in my class.
- JE:** And playing football they placed you as tight end immediately, right?
- RG:** No, no, I actually started out as a running back.
- JE:** Okay.
- RG:** I was a running back in junior high school, seventh to the ninth grade.
- JE:** What school was that?
- RG:** Anderson Junior High School. Mary Anderson Junior High School.
- JE:** Do you have any memories of classmates?
- RG:** Well, what was interesting was most of the kids I went to school with I went to school with from elementary school all the way through high school. We pretty much stuck together from elementary school all the way through high school.
- JE:** I'm curious, are any of them still a friend of yours?
- RG:** Sure, a few of them. One name in particular, a guy named Roger Wilson. We grew up in the same neighborhood, blocks from each other. We went to school from elementary school all the way through high school together.
- JE:** Then through junior high you were already making a statement probably in sports and football.
- RG:** I was pretty good, I guess you would say. It was my first exposure to recruiting. In middle school I was recruited actually to attend various schools in the Tulsa metro area. And I also had some rural towns.
- JE:** That was probably unusual at that level.
- RG:** I thought it was, but I came to find out it's pretty much common place, after a while.
- JE:** Ultimately you went to what high school?
- RG:** I went to Booker T. Washington High School.
- JE:** Did they recruit you or—
- RG:** Uh, no, no, actually I had two stops before going to Booker T. Washington High School. I received a scholarship to attend Cassia Hall. I went to Cassia Hall for one day.
- JE:** There's a story there. Why one day?
- RG:** Well, the environment just wasn't conducive to me, I don't think, excelling. I wouldn't have been happy there because I would have been in a school surrounded by students that none looked like me. I would have been the only black in an all white prep school. And I just didn't feel comfortable.
- JE:** But they recruited you?
- RG:** They did, they did. It's a private school, I received a scholarship. I then, for two months during the summer, went to Harlan Hall 'cause my mom wanted the best education she could get for me. Turning down an opportunity to go to a prestigious schools was not

going to happen in my household. And so if it were not Cassia Hall it was going to be Harlan Hall. So I went to Harlan Hall for two months.

JE: So then at the end of the first day at Cassia Hall your mother must have been deeply disappointed.

RG: She was. But we had an alternative, which was Harlan Hall. Where I would have been the only black at Cassia Hall and Harlan Hall, I actually went to Harlan Hall with a friend named John Winesberry. Both of us received scholarship offers from Harlan Hall. We were classmates in middle school. His mom wanted the best education possible for him and so we both went to Harlan Hall for two months.

JE: So that was in 1967 then? The summer of '67 that you went to Harlan Hall.

RG: Right.

JE: In the summertime.

RG: I actually went in the summer preparing for fall. It was part of, I guess, orientation, if you will for incoming students. It was perceived it would be a good idea for me to get acclimated to the school by going to summer school, so that's what we did.

JE: How did it feel? You did have a friend so how overall did it feel?

RG: Uh, it felt okay, but still, we weren't happy there. So we kind of plotted to get kicked out of school, basically. We stopped doing class work and stopped doing homework. We turned in blank pieces of paper for homework and blank pieces of paper for testing.

Finally got an audience with the headmaster and was pointblank asked if we wanted to be there and we said no. So the headmaster said, "Well, you know, we don't want you here if you don't want to be here. We want you to be where you're happy."

So we went home and told our parents. Another moment of disappointment, but then communicated to them we wanted to go to Washington High School. So it became okay. "If you're going to do that you have to get a summer job, buy your own school clothes, and we'll go from there." And that's what we did.

JE: As you review that now as an adult, you certainly understand and probably if you were to do it again probably would have done it again.

RG: I'd do the same thing.

JE: Yeah.

RG: Right. I would do the same thing. I just did not feel like I would reach my fullest potential in an environment that didn't encourage me to do that, from a social perspective.

JE: Did you feel racial tension there?

RG: No. I didn't. And at the time, our decision not to go there wasn't racially motivated. Our decision not to go was what we felt like would be in the best interest of us socially. Being in an environment that we were comfortable with we felt like we excel. Because both of us were good students.

JE: You excelled when it came to the academic side anyway.

RG: Right, right.

JE: So that was not an issue at all. Right?

RG: No, no, we were confident in ourselves as youngsters, students, that we could compete with anybody, as far as academics were concerned. The athletic part of it, the sports part of it, was not really a consideration.

JE: It was the social part.

RG: It was the social part.

JE: So this is a good teaching moment here. You certainly understand, even today in 2010, when blacks find themselves in the vast, vast minority that that does become an issue, doesn't it?

RG: It does, but, you know, I think John and I, we kind of grew up in a different home environment. John's parents were both professionals but they had an attitude of not drawing a line in the sand when it came to color.

My mom was pretty liberal in her thinking. We were poor, of course. She worked for a South Tulsa family as a housekeeper and probably earned all of thirty-three dollars a week. But growing up poor, I don't ever remember being unhappy, and that's the good thing about that.

JE: So then when you went to Booker T. you had to work?

RG: Right, and that didn't put any fear in us at all. I mean, we expected that. In order to stay where we were we knew we had to excel in the classroom. Sports was an aside, it was something that our parents really weren't interested in. As long as we did well in the classroom then whatever sports we wanted to participate in was our business.

JE: So then as you attended Booker T., when you walked in it just felt good? You just knew you were home?

RG: It felt good because we were surrounded by familiar faces. And more, people that looked like us, people that understood us from a cultural perspective. It just felt right.

JE: When you went to Booker T. Washington it was all black because we still were in segregated schools.

RG: That's correct.

JE: Here in Oklahoma and in Tulsa.

RG: That's correct.

JE: Did you feel any pressure, "Boy, we've got to excel here because we've already been to two other schools"?

RG: No we didn't feel any pressure at all. Probably one of the reasons why it didn't concern us was Carver Junior High and Anderson Junior High were feeder schools for Booker T. Then the athletics in middle school were run by parents. The Tulsa Junior Athletic Association, made up of all parents.

For three years running, Anderson and Carver football teams only lost one game a year, and it was to each other.

JE: Hmm.

RG: So we knew going into high school, talent from these two teams being combined on one team that we should be a pretty good team.

JE: So your freshman year athletically, what kind of impact did you make on the team?

RG: I started every year of high school.

JE: And the position was?

RG: It was tight end my freshman year, my junior year it was full back. And my senior year it was full back and tight end.

Chapter 03 - 5:49

Racial Disparity

John Erling: Let's take you back as you grew up in the '50s and '60s. By 1962, you're ten years old. Your memories of downtown Tulsa in the '50s, early '60s, did you have any perceived feelings or real feelings of racism that you were welcome? Because in that time period, I believe, blacks were invited to lunch counters or to restrooms. Is that true?

Reuben Gant: That's true.

JE: So here you are as a young man, say ten years old, or even nine, did you go downtown? Were you confronted with these situations?

RG: No. What's interesting about that is I never went downtown. I never crossed Archer Street to the south. As close to downtown as I got as a kid was Archer and Greenwood. Never went south of Archer.

JE: And what was a young lad—were your thoughts about what is out south? And you were certainly told either not to go there or whatever.

RG: No we were never told not to go there. Really, I guess, the advantage for me growing up was there was no need to go there. Everything that we needed as a family, to sustain a family, we could get right here in North Tulsa and Greenwood. Grocery stores, banks, professional services, it was all right here, so we had no need to go south, and we didn't, or I didn't anyway. Plus we were a family without transportation, couldn't afford it.

JE: I interviewed the Roberts family, they live up north here, and he talked about how they would go downtown Tulsa and to the major stores. And even though they had the money those stores would not accept it from them because they were black.

RG: Oh I can believe that. What's interesting is there are stories not told dissimilar from

that that's happening today. I mean, I deal with a lot of minority entrepreneurs, a lot of perspective business owners in Greenwood right now. We've had clients to start businesses in South Tulsa, prospering businesses, until it was made known who the owner of the business was. And then business took a nosedive. It was okay as long as patrons to the stores didn't know who owned the business. So we had owners of businesses working in the store and it was perceived that they were just employees. Until one of the patrons asked the owner one day, "Well, who owns the store?"

The owner said, "I do." That was the last time they saw that patron in the store, but business just went south after that.

JE: And we should point out, we're recording this in 2010.

RG: That's correct. It happens today.

JE: Do you remember the first time you went south of Archer?

RG: I really don't remember. I do remember doing my athletic participation, I mean, I traveled all over the city to compete. We had to. It wasn't confined to just the North Tulsa area. And I even participated in baseball. We traveled to small rural towns to compete. But what's interesting about that is I never was on any one particular baseball team, I floated. I was a good baseball player so teams would call me and say, "Can you play with our team this week in a tournament?"

So I would travel all over this part of the state going to baseball tournaments, playing. It became somewhat of a challenge because I had to start taking my birth certificate with me everywhere I went, because my size and my talent would become questionable to opposing teams. "He's too big to be that young. He must be not of age." So I had to start taking my birth certificate with me everywhere to prove that I was of legal age to play on this particular Pee Wee team.

JE: Pee Wee team? So you would have been how old?

RG: Ten.

JE: You were obviously much bigger than the rest of them.

RG: Right.

JE: Do you think those questions would have been asked of you if you were white?

RG: No, because there were white players just as big as I was, tall, but not as good. The question of their age never came up. The question of my age came up because I was the deciding factor in who won and who lost.

JE: Because your talent was so above the rest of them.

RG: Right.

JE: I hate to go here but do you think they thought that because you're black you would lie?

RG: Oh yeah, absolutely. If they didn't think that they wouldn't ask for my birth certificate.

JE: Okay. And if you're white you wouldn't lie, but if you're black you would.

RG: Right.

JE: That's cold, isn't it?

RG: Yeah, I'm telling you. But it's a life lesson.

JE: So when you were twelve and thirteen and when you made a marked difference in the game, how good it must have made you feel.

RG: Correct. But at the same time, it also afforded me the opportunity to make myself known. Notoriety for me was never an issue because of my sports participation. Everybody in this town knew who this big, tall kid with athletic ability was, in Tulsa. They all knew that.

JE: Do you even know how tall you were at twelve or thirteen years old?

RG: Uh, six one, something like that.

JE: Absolutely amazing.

RG: And I've only grown three inches since.

JE: Wow.

Chapter 04 - 3:07

Football Over Baseball

John Erling: Why did you choose football over baseball?

Reuben Gant: Baseball is too slow of a game for me. It was boring, especially when I wasn't pitching. I played the outfield so if there were no hits there was no activity. And it was just boring.

Football is a sport of activity and constant action. I had speed and I had agility so I just played football and basketball, actually.

JE: When you were at Booker T. as a freshman, then was it solely football you played?

RG: No, played football and basketball and ran track.

JE: Basketball could have been a choice maybe for you?

RG: Basketball could have been a choice. Basketball was my favorite sport, actually.

JE: Really?

RG: Oh yeah.

JE: Why didn't you pursue basketball?

RG: You know, at the end of the day it's easier to make a fifty-man roster team than a twelve-man roster team.

JE: Was that your thought process?

RG: Yeah. If I want to go any further with this, not that I didn't have confidence in my talent and ability. Coming through high school I had scholarship offers academically. I could have gone to Princeton University on an academic scholarship. Could have gone to SMU

or Stanford or a couple of Ivy League schools. Getting my schooling paid for wasn't a problem, but I had this love of sports. And so it's, "Do I want to play?" "Yeah, I do." "You want to make the team?" "Yeah, I do." In college I played football and basketball.

JE: Let's go back to Booker T. for a moment. Your record there or the team's record, did you win a State or anything during those years?

RG: Won the State three years in a row. Never lost a game to an Oklahoma team. Lost one game in three years to a team from Texas, by one point, who we beat the next year by fifteen points.

JE: Your coach at Booker T.?

RG: Ed Lacy.

JE: You've great memories of him, I'm sure.

RG: Absolutely.

JE: He's an icon in the football business.

RG: Absolutely. At the time, I think it was his second year as the head coach when I went to Booker T. There was a little bit of recruiting on their part too, but my siblings had all graduated from Booker T. I had an older brother at the time, on the team. When I was in the eighth, ninth grade, he was in the eleventh, twelfth grade. He played football.

And the message was sent home to me that if I wanted to go to Booker T.'s games I am more than welcome to ride on the team bus to every game. And so I did. I went to every Booker T. football game when I was in the eighth and ninth grade, with the team. I rode on the bus. Didn't matter where they went. Like I was a part of the team.

JE: Sat on the bench?

RG: Sat on the bench. Was in the dressing room at halftime. The whole game.

JE: They were recruiting, weren't they?

RG: Uh-huh (affirmative laugh). Right.

Chapter 05 - 3:28

It Takes a Village

John Erling: I'm wondering, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools, at the work place, and by facilities that serve the general public. Does that mean anything to you? Did you notice anything different as you went about our city and all as a result of that Act of '64?

Reuben Gant: I don't think so. I mean, for me it was business as usual. I mean, here I am a kid, you know, I'm just running around worrying about having fun and extracurricular activity,

and that didn't change for me. I had no exposure to South Tulsa socially, wasn't really concerned about it. Made white friends, of course.

JE: How did you make white friends?

RG: Football, competing in sports.

JE: From other schools, you became friends?

RG: Yeah, oh yeah. One of my best friends today that I went to college with, actually, is a guy named Dave Rosenthal. Went to Memorial High School. Dave and I competed through the baseball league here called the American Legion Baseball League. Played at O'Brien Park. Dave and I competed against each other in that.

And then football, we competed against, so we just became friends. At OSU we were roommates on the road.

JE: As you look back, it wasn't just sports for you. It was academics as well, so if you didn't have sports you would have gone with a great academic life, could have gone to Princeton, so you always had a drive that a lot do not have because they don't have exceptional talent like you did on both sides. Did you—

RG: Well, I had encouragement though.

JE: Your parents?

RG: It wasn't just the talent side, it was encouragement. I had encouragement from, not just my parents, but from adults in the community. Somebody said it takes a village to raise a child. Well, I'm a classic example of that. I just had a lot of male influence.

My best friend's dad, or family, actually, embraced me as one of their own. So I had that male influence. Then I had coaches, Julius Pegues, his brother, Luther Pegues, Eugene Hooks, you know, I had a lot of male influence. Ed Lacy, Eddie Evans, I mean, I could go on and on. I had a lot of positive male influence that was encouraging me. Not just athletically but academically as well.

JE: And you were a standout. Then there are children who come along and they are not a standout. Maybe it was easy to be attracted to you, although all these people took time out to help you. Then there are those who, or say, are at another level and they don't stand out as much to get that kind of attention. Any truth to any of that?

RG: Some. I would say there is some truth to it, of course. One of the advantages of being an athlete of note is you command almost immediate respect. You have doors opened for you that aren't opened for just anybody. Because it is adulation, and that was an advantage for me. I mean, not that I realized it at the time, but as I grew older I realized how important being a good athlete has been.

Chapter 06 - 4:50**Recruitment**

John Erling: OSU, so you're ready to graduate, or probably in your junior year somebody's making contact with you in football.

Reuben Gant: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In colleges.

RG: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Who did make their approaches?

RG: I don't know who didn't.

JE: Who didn't?

RG: Uh.

JE: So they all did. Every Oklahoma school?

RG: Yeah.

JE: Eastern schools?

RG: I probably had over a hundred colleges throughout the country contact me.

JE: Do you recall the very first time? I don't know how old you can be or when they can contact a student.

RG: Very first time was I went to a FCA camp in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

JE: Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

RG: Fellowship of Christian Athletes, when I was eighth, ninth-grader. First trip away from home we had basketball competition at FCA camp. Before we left Colorado Springs I was approached by a basketball coach from Chicago State University. That said, he would want to talk to my parents and talk to them about me attending Chicago State University on a basketball scholarship.

JE: Very first one?

RG: Very first one.

JE: And again, you were how old?

RG: I would say twelve, thirteen? Playing basketball eighth grade, ninth grade.

JE: That's pretty heavy stuff, isn't it?

RG: Yeah.

JE: Okay. The serious football contact started then?

RG: It started probably my junior year in high school. There's a story floating around that there was a Big 8 convention at Booker T. Washington High School. That's because on any given day you would see probably five out of eight coaches from the Big 8 at Booker T. Washington High School to visit with or talk to or just there to see John Winesberry and myself.

JE: You two primarily?

RG: Right.

JE: Almost on a daily basis?

RG: Weekly basis.

JE: Weekly, okay. Did you appreciate that or did you get tired of it or were you sick of it?

RG: Uh, no, it was fun. Back then they didn't have all the rules they have now about visitation so there was no limit to how many college campuses you could visit. Or schools coming to visit you, or how many times they did it. Usually when they came they were taking you and your coach or you and your parents out to dinner. I mean, it's a free meal. It was fun.

JE: And it was about you.

RG: It was about me, right, right.

JE: You ultimately selected OSU.

RG: I did.

JE: But name some schools you could have gone to.

RG: Stanford, Princeton, SMU, Kansas State, USC, UCLA, Missouri, Oklahoma, Pepperdine, whew, I could go on and on. I mean, you just name it.

JE: Okay. You selected then OSU.

RG: Right.

JE: Out of that greater array of schools.

RG: Hundreds. Right.

JE: And others too. Why OSU?

RG: Close to home, lost my mom, lost my stepdad, lost my oldest brother, before I reached the age of eighteen. So I wanted to stay close to home. I wanted my family, what's left of my family, my sisters and brothers, they would have seen me play. I wanted to be able to come home. OSU just seemed like a good fit.

JE: Your mother, you lost her at a young age for her.

RG: She was fifty-four.

JE: What was it that took her?

RG: Cancer.

JE: And then your stepfather?

RG: Died from a stroke from the loss of my mom. And my older brother died in a one-car accident.

JE: And this was all within a short period of time?

RG: All within two years.

JE: That was devastating. But then you had to feel this village that had supported you before—

RG: Right.

JE: ...supporting you again.

RG: Right, absolutely.

JE: That more than likely helped you get through all that.

RG: Absolutely. Without a question.

JE: Did you have faith? Were you raised in a church?

RG: I was raised in a church. I was. Raised a Baptist.

JE: Where—

RG: Attended church every Sunday at St. Luke Baptist Church. Attitude about religion kind of changed a little bit once I got to college. I got on my own. For me, I really came to understand and maybe it was because of a course I took in college, but, you know, we talked about religion a lot in class. We started talking about there's a difference between being spiritual and religious. God is everywhere. In order for your prayers to be answered you don't necessarily have to go to a house of worship to pray. If you pray at home you'll be heard. If you pray in a grocery store you'll be heard. So I've kind of been living that mantra ever since.

Chapter 07 - 4:13

Oklahoma State

John Erling: I got to ask you, OSU and OU.

Reuben Gant: Um-hmm (affirmative question).

JE: You chose OSU over OU.

RG: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And was there any particular reason there?

RG: Well, don't ask me why 'cause I don't know why, but I had this attitude about wanting to be a part of the start of something good. And I didn't want to be just another number on a roster. OU, of course, has always been known for its football prowess. OSU, struggling program, in grade school. But I wanted to go there and make a name for myself. And I think I accomplished that.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RG: Because the success is that OSU is experiencing today all began back in the 1970s when I went to school there. I'm proud of that.

JE: Who was your coach then?

RG: Well, which year?

JE: You started in '70.

RG: I had three different coaches in college.

JE: Let's begin then.

RG: Freshman year my freshman head coach was Lee Snyder who was the head coach at Nathan Hale. Left there and went to OSU. My sophomore year the head coach was Floyd Gas. My junior year my head coach was a guy named Dave Smith. And my senior year the head coach was a guy named Jim Stanley.

JE: Having a different coach every year had to have some impact on you and the team?

RG: Uh, no.

JE: No?

RG: Not really. It really didn't affect us that much. Even though the faces were different at the top, the schemes were basically the same. And it was all about tackling and hitting and catching and running.

JE: Highlights of your time there then. How did the Cowboys fair and maybe what was your most memorable season?

RG: That's a hard question to answer because at the time I was at OSU the Big 8 was one of the premiere football conferences in the country. Year in, year out, three teams from the Big 8 were ranked in the top five teams in the nation. OU, Colorado, and Nebraska. So we were competing against the best every year.

Of the three varsity years I think we only had one losing season, which an accomplishment in itself, I think. So picking any one year as the most memorable, that's kind of hard to do when you're competing against the best every year. Probably I would have to say my junior and senior years in college we either led the nation or were in the top three in rushing in the country. My senior year we made the top twenty-five rankings. We were like the nineteenth best team in the country in the polls my senior year, and I'm proud of that.

JE: Some of your teammates from those teams?

RG: Brent Blackman from Tulsa Hale. Tom Stremme from Tulsa Hale. Dave Rosenthal from Memorial. Cleveland Vann from Seguin, Texas. Steve Pettus from Los Cruces, New Mexico. Actually went to college with a teammate from Washington named Worthy Johnson at OSU. Played with Dickie Graham, played with Tony Pounds, played with Eddie Garrett, athletic director at Sand Springs now. Uh, played with Clark Ogleby, the superintendent of schools in Owasso.

JE: While you were going to school you were in the world of academics and I should ask you, what was your major?

RG: My major, actually I started out in communications. Didn't really know what I wanted to do, or should I say, I started out in computer science? Which ended up in communications. And I ended up getting my degree in organizational leadership.

JE: Which has played out for you then since.

Chapter 08 - 2:50**NFL Draft**

John Erling: So you graduated from OSU?

Reuben Gant: '74.

JE: '74. Somewhere along the line and I don't know if the rules were in play, but the professionals were contacting you.

RG: Actually, no. I didn't talk to any professional teams. Who was contacted me were agents wanting to represent me.

JE: Okay. And then you wouldn't have known which team?

RG: No.

JE: So the agents started in junior year?

RG: Junior year, right.

JE: How did that work back then? Could you sign with an agent even—

RG: No.

JE: You couldn't?

RG: No. Rules were basically the same.

JE: Okay.

RG: You couldn't sign with an agent. Even though they contacted you it was limited. And their contact was limited to mail, a letter.

JE: Okay.

RG: Or a phone call. They couldn't come see you. They couldn't buy you a ticket to go see them. It was pretty much the same as it is today.

JE: You could have gone on and followed your major but was it your plan to become a professional early on? Or was that in college?

RG: Never thought about playing professional ball, anywhere. Didn't give it a second thought, actually, until my senior year in college. I'm thinking, you know, I'm going to get out of school and get a paying job somewhere. So I never gave playing professionally a thought.

JE: Then in that year of '74, which was the year you were drafted, somewhere along the line what was it that drove you to say, "Yeah, maybe I should play professional sports"?

RG: I had the attitude that if the opportunity arose I was going to take advantage of it. Really, the day of the draft, it was no big deal for me. And when I got a phone call I was still in bed asleep. Then they didn't advertise the draft or broadcast it on TV, it was just a radio thing then. I was just, if I get a call, fine, if I don't, fine. Well, I got some calls that morning. And then started thinking, "Well, maybe this could really happen." Ended up Buffalo Bills called me.

JE: Your first round eighteenth over all.

RG: Right.

JE: You've already answered my question then, it was kind of, "Okay, I'll go there."

RG: I didn't have a choice.

JE: Were you pumped? Were you excited?"

RG: Not really. I mean, it was—

JE: You just took it in stride.

RG: Yeah, yeah, it was just another opportunity to play.

JE: In '74, what kind of money were you being offered?

RG: My sign-in bonus was seventy thousand dollars, maybe. My salary was about twenty-eight thousand dollars for the first year, twenty-nine thousand, something like that. Minimum wage was twelve thousand dollars. I went from twenty-eight thousand dollars my first year to six figures my last year.

Chapter 09 - 4:40

O. J. Simpson

John Erling: What you played for the Buffalo Bills was a tight end and wide receiver from '74 to 1980.

Reuben Gant: To 1980. That was my last season, 1980, right.

JE: Going by records it looks like maybe '77 was your best year?

RG: Somewhere in there, mid, late '70s. Mid—

JE: You had 41 receptions, 646 receiving yards. That was a fun year for you, wasn't it?

RG: Fun year for me, it wasn't for the team. I think we had a poor year that year. But statistically for me it was a good year.

JE: O. J. Simpson was a teammate of yours?

RG: Yes he was.

JE: What sort of person was he then?

RG: Down to earth, you would not have imagined, just meeting him, that he was a megastar, he was just another one of the guys.

JE: Didn't require special treatment on the team?

RG: No.

JE: None of that?

RG: None of that.

JE: And were you impressed with his athletic ability?

RG: Very much so, very much so.

JE: And the Bills in the years you were and he was there, what did they—

RG: Oh well, we made the playoffs every year he was there. So we made the playoffs the first three years, and then he got traded to the San Francisco 49ers. The next two years we didn't fair too well in terms of record. And then the next three years we were back in the playoff picture again.

JE: About O. J., when he's charged in this murder of his ex-wife, what were your first thoughts about all that.

RG: Well, my initial thoughts were, "Couldn't happen. Untrue." And I still believe that to this day. If most people know what we knew of O. J. it couldn't happen because he had this phobia about blood. And every year at training camp when we had to take physicals, when they drew blood from his arm he would pass out. So if he actually committed this crime, O. J. would have been laying on the ground right next to his victims. That's my belief. To me, it just wasn't in his character to do that. All this centered around a woman, really, his wife. Ex-wife.

JE: Nicole, Nicole Brown Simpson.

RG: Right. But, I mean, I've been in situations in training camp where I've answered the phone and on the other end is a female dignitary from another country, wanting to speak to O. J. And then wanted to fly him to where she is over the weekend just to spend the weekend. And I'm talking not just across the street. But sent a plane and fly him back to where she is.

JE: To another country.

RG: To another country, just for the weekend.

JE: Did that happen?

RG: No 'cause it was training camp. (laugh) Then she said, "Well, you come too." Well, we couldn't do that, but a guy who really had his choice of any woman that he wanted, why would he go bonkers over one? That doesn't make very much sense to me.

JE: In 1995 he was acquitted of the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. While the public has never accepted that acquittal and they just talk about him as a murderer to this day, you don't believe he was a murderer?

RG: No I don't, I really don't. Now does he have some kind of part in what happened? Maybe. I don't know. What part did he play? I don't know. Did he actually commit the crime? I don't think so.

JE: To this day he is serving a prison sentence. He was arrested in Las Vegas in 2007, numerous felonies including armed robbery and kidnapping, and he's doing nine years. They found him guilty in October 3rd of 2008. We're now in 2010. He's in Lovelock, Nevada. That whole scene there, did that surprise you that he would get in that way?

RG: That kind of surprised me, but in some respects, it didn't. Again, if you knew O. J. or know O. J. he feeds off of, or fed off of attention. Being in the limelight, being in the news. He just had this ego thing. That was his way of staying in the limelight. Ill-conceived, but that was it.

Chapter 10 - 3:35

Oakland Raiders

John Erling: Overall, did you enjoy your time with the Bills? Did you ever think, "I wish I'd been drafted by a different team" or "I could have been in warmer climate"?

Reuben Gant: That's another funny story. I actually thought I was going to be drafted by the Oakland Raiders. Week before the draft, Pete Bether, who was a scout for the Raiders, came down. I worked out for him and leaving, taking him to the airport, he told me right then, "We're going to purchase you a ticket and on draft day when we call you, get on a plane and come on out."

The Raiders draft number was 19, the Bills was 18. So I missed going to the Raiders by five minutes. It was pretty much a slam dunk that I would have gone to the Raiders because leading up to the draft, preparing to draft me, they traded probably one of the premiere tight ends in the NFL at the time, a guy named Raymond Chester. They traded him.

JE: So they were blindsided by Buffalo. And did you feel interest from Buffalo?

RG: No, not at all, until draft day.

JE: And you probably told Oakland. They knew that nobody else had shown the interest they had.

RG: It really didn't come up. It was just, "We're going to draft you in the first round. Here's the deal." And so I got a call from Lou Sabin, who was the head coach of the Bills at the time, the day of the draft, and he asked me if I was interested in playing for the Bills.

Well, I couldn't say no. So I told him, "I just want to play ball. Doesn't matter where it is."

JE: So why—

RG: They blackballed you at the time. Today players that aren't satisfied with who drafts them, they can sit out the draft. They can sit out until the next year and get drafted again. We didn't have that choice back then. It was, "You play for who drafts you or you don't play at all."

JE: So if you'd said no to Lou Sabin?

RG: Then it would have gotten out amongst the teams that Reuben Gant doesn't want to play.

JE: And it would have gone out pretty fast?

RG: Pretty fast 'cause they're all in the same room. So I said, "I just want to play ball."

Well, Lou called me back in five minutes and said, "Welcome to the Buffalo Bills."

JE: And you were?

RG: Dumbfounded.

JE: Dumbfounded.

RG: Right.

JE: So as you look back with the Buffalo Bills can you say, "Well, maybe it was good that I went with there. Some good things came of it and it was all right"?

RG: It was all right. Some good things did come of it because I learned and I grew a lot as an adult. Buffalo is a town not unlike Tulsa, very segregated, a little bit more diverse than Tulsa, but, you know, I learned a lot from the experience. Made good friends, so I got something out of it. More than just a paycheck.

JE: Did you feel racial discrimination there?

RG: Absolutely. (laugh) Absolutely.

JE: I thought that went away when somebody proves himself in a sport. Then it seems like the color goes away.

RG: Uh, no, not necessarily. You command and you receive a higher level of respect, publicly. But it's all the same, you still feel the old racism and discrimination in some form or fashion.

JE: So as you went about Buffalo a lot of people knew you and a lot of people didn't.

RG: Right.

JE: And so you felt racial discrimination—

RG: Right.

JE: ...as you've just said.

RG: Right.

Chapter 11 - 3:45

Football Not Fun

John Erling: After 1980, you leave the Bills.

Reuben Gant: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Is that because you didn't want to go with anybody else?

RG: Actually, I was put on waivers. They called me in and talked to me about trade. I wasn't interested in that and I'd made a commitment that I wasn't going to play anymore than ten years, if I played that long. I made it seven and football got to be not fun anymore. To me it was getting a paycheck for doing an extracurricular activity.

JE: In 1980, and as you left then, you were in a good stead financially?

RG: Uh, I was okay, sure.

JE: What did you do when you left the Bills?

RG: I used my OSU alumni network and got in the cable television business.

JE: What cable company?

RG: Uh, actually I worked for a company here in Tulsa called Southern Satellite Systems owned by Ed Taylor. Then I accepted a job with a company called United Video with Roy Bliss.

JE: Yeah.

RG: And worked for United Video for thirteen years.

JE: In what capacity?

RG: Ended up when I left United Video I was Vice President of Sales for the corporate office.

JE: Your personality carried you a lot through that, I mean, you weren't necessarily trained for sales but apparently you were a natural salesman.

RG: (laughing) I don't know if I was a natural salesman or not. I've always been sociable. I would like to think that I've always had a personality and I've always been approachable and that worked in my favor. Having some name recognition, some notoriety, certainly opened a lot of doors, so making a sales call for me was a little different because my name was recognizable. I would automatically get an appointment.

JE: Had to feel good?

RG: Right.

JE: Then you left United Video.

RG: I left United Video after thirteen years and took a position in Detroit, Michigan, as the assistant general manager and director of marketing and sales for a regional sports network called Passports.

JE: Yeah.

RG: And it was owned by the Washington Post. Washington Post owned Post Newsweek. And Post Newsweek owned Broadcast Entities. They owned the NBC affiliate in Detroit. The NBC affiliate in Detroit bought a regional sports network. I was hired to turn it around, so to speak, and transition it from a hybrid cable network to a full basic network.

I wanted to get into sports marketing, I thought I did, anyway. And I wanted to be in a sports town. Detroit offered the opportunity so I took the job. I spent two years in Detroit. I watched the Detroit Red Wings win the Stanley Cup. I had luxury suites at every sports arena, so I watched the Detroit Pistons play and the Detroit Lions, Barry Sanders was there and the Detroit Red Wings and the Detroit Tigers, I mean, it was just a fun time for two years. Every week I was in a luxury suite watching an athletic event, entertaining clients.

JE: Two years there, then what?

RG: We sold the sports network to what is now Fox Sports Detroit.

Chapter 12 – 8:18**Race Riot**

John Erling: Again, we're in the building here at the corner of Archer and Greenwood. As I came up to your building to come upstairs here, there are plaques in the sidewalk commemorating businesses that were burned down—

Reuben Gant: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: ...in the 1921 race riot. Have you wondered if Tulsa would be any different today? We know buildings and houses would still be here, but do you think the race riot has effect today? If we didn't have a race riot would it have made any difference in our community today?

RG: Oh, I would have to think that it would have. I posed this question a lot to a lot of people when question of the race riot comes up. I hear all the time, you know, "Why do you want to commemorate a race riot?" Or "Who wants to relive the past?" Well, you've got to know where you came from in order to understand where you're going.

Think about all of the wealth that was in Tulsa, in Greenwood, of African Americans before the riot. Had it not been for the riot that wealth would still be here. You had prominent families flee Tulsa because of the riot and never return.

One example is an entrepreneur by the name of J. B. Strafford. Was an attorney here in town, owned a hotel, probably one of the grandest hotels in this city, anyway, if not in this part of the country. His descendents, his daughters and sons, they're all judges and lawyers. They're people of means in Chicago. Think about what that would have meant if that family had stayed here.

And that's just one example.

JE: Yeah. Do you remember as you were growing up in Tulsa, when you first heard of the riot?

RG: I didn't hear about the riot until I was well into my adult years.

JE: Meaning you'd gone beyond OSU?

RG: I was out of college, in the professional world, had already gone through my football career in Buffalo. Moved back to Tulsa in '81, took a job in cable. In the early '80s is when I learned about the riot.

JE: Because then you were kind of getting associated with the Chamber here in Greenwood?

RG: Right.

JE: At the same time as you were working.

RG: Right.

JE: So then, for the first time you learned of it?

RG: Right. I was thirty-three, something like that.

JE: So I can only imagine, "What? I've lived here all these years."

RG: Right.

JE: “And nobody told us about it.”

RG: Nobody told us about it, nobody talked about it. And what’s interesting is two of my relatives, great uncle, great aunt, were victims of the riot, and they never talked about it.

JE: You ever wondered why they didn’t talk about it?

RG: I know why, because just recently I asked the question why. I have a great uncle that’s a survivor who’s still alive in his nineties. His answer was, “We didn’t talk about it because we didn’t want to incite the younger generation to repeat history. We didn’t want to see another riot. And we felt like talking about it would bring up so much anger in the younger generation that it could be repeated.” So that’s why they didn’t talk about it.

JE: So if they were any interaction between blacks and whites they didn’t want to have that, “Hey, you guys started in ’21 and we’ll finish it now,” those kind of thoughts.

RG: Right, right, right.

JE: By 1921 the whole nation knew about it. Philadelphia newspapers, “The bloody scenes in Tulsa, Oklahoma, are hardly conceivable as happening in American civilization present day.” Kentucky state journalist’s characterization, “An Oklahoma disgrace.” Kansas City journalist’s, “Tulsa horror.” And the Christian Recorder, “Tulsa’s become a name of shame upon America.” And at the same time, the Tulsa Tribune said, “Acres of ashes lie smoldering in what but yesterday was nigger town.” That’s the way it was treated in Tulsa and the whole nation certainly knew about it then.

RG: Right.

JE: Swept under the carpet. You went to high school here and many, many people that I have talked to pretty much had the same experience you did. White high schools or whatever, it was not in a history book at all.

RG: Correct.

JE: Isn’t it amazing how that could have been so controlled? Those who wrote history books didn’t feel it was needed. It was almost like everybody got together and said, “Okay, we’re going to hush up. We’re going to keep this quiet.” Because newspapers didn’t write about it beyond the days that it happened.

RG: That’s right.

JE: They didn’t write about it, historians didn’t write about it. What are your thoughts about that?

RG: Well, I think it’s a travesty because we’re denying our own history. It’s not as though the riot of ’21 is the only blemish in American history. American history is full of blemishes. A good example of late, what’s the difference in memorializing the bombing of the Murray building and memorializing the 1921 race riot? What’s the difference in the legislature passing a law or mandating that the Murray bombing be in textbooks for public school systems and the race riot not?

JE: So you're saying, to your knowledge in 2010, high school history books are not dealing with the '21 race riot?

RG: No. No. They're not. They are absolutely not. I mean, maybe a mention, a paragraph, or two sentences, but you might as well say not at all.

JE: They lay of the land back then, and I'm quoting partly here, you said that in 1921 lynching and riots were a normal part of life in the South. And the worst one happened in Tulsa. So this, not to get Tulsa off the hook, it happened here but it was an attitude that spread through the South.

RG: It was all over the country, no question about that. There are accounts of what they call the Red Summer of 1919, where a lot of riots occurred, and lynchings. But the most devastating one was in 1921.

JE: Walter F. White, an official with the NAACP visited Tulsa there in the immediate aftermath of the riot called the circumstances leading up to it, "Typical of conditions in many towns and cities of America, North and South." And then he wrote about "Corrupt and inefficient rule in municipal affairs. Total lack of understanding between white and colored." As he wrote, "Citizens in the growth of racial prejudice nurtured for economic gain." They all exist to a greater or lesser degree in many American cities. He wrote that in 1921 in an edition of the New York Evening Post.

When I read that I thought, "You know? Some of that could be applied to today."

RG: I was just thinking the same thing. Absolutely. And I think what's even more important is it's at the forefront now, the issue of race relations and the importance of respecting other cultures and looking at someone that doesn't look like you as an equal. I mean, that's at the forefront now, and why? Because we have an African American president. I think it's a sad commentary that we had to elect an African American president in order for this issue to all of a sudden become a priority issue for the country. Not just for any one locale, but for the country. I mean, I don't know what else I can say about that. It's just a sad commentary.

Chapter 13 - 9:52

Race Riot Looting

Reuben Gant: You know, I spent some time in Turkey a couple of years ago. Coming back to the United States I was asked to speak at a dinner about the trip. And one of the comments I made was, "I felt more welcome in Turkey, as a black man, than I do in my own country." That's something that we all should pay some attention to.

John Erling: A federal report from 2005, the final reconnaissance survey report on the race riot by the US Department of Interiors National Park Service is a pretty telling report. Yeah, there were blacks and whites who didn't understand each other. I think you've already referred to this, "Other whites were jealous of the material success of Greenwood's leading citizens, feelings that were undoubtedly exacerbated by the sharp drop in the price of crude oil and the subsequent layoffs in the oil fields." So while the whites, I suppose, looked down on the blacks, yet they saw blacks being entrepreneurial and very successful too. So all of this was going through their mind as May 31st and June 1st were happening.

RG: Right. And you have to look back at, I think, the accounts of the riot as well. It was not just a riot, so to speak. Before these buildings were burned down they were looted. The rioters took the time to go into the buildings to take out things of value before they burned the buildings down. Now, I mean, that seems kind of calculated to me. Uh, I mean, it just wasn't a riot that was incited and the end result was a bunch of burned up buildings. It was calculated because before they burned the building down with the valuables in there, they went in and took them out.

JE: So they knew there was a lot of wealth up here?

RG: Absolutely.

JE: "Let's go in and get it."

RG: Absolutely.

JE: I'm reading from this report. "Many of those leading Greenwood citizens had only a few years earlier fought as bravely and honorably as any white man in the First World War. Only to return to be treated as second or third class citizens by the country they'd bled to defend."

RG: Absolutely.

JE: You just talked about Turkey, and here, you're still feeling some of that—

RG: Today.

JE: ...to this day.

RG: Right.

JE: "Since statehood there have been twenty-seven African Americans lynched in Oklahoma, the latest occurring in Tulsa only nine months earlier than the race riot." There are places for our listeners to go to get a total account of what happened in the race riot. We perhaps don't have time to get into all of that, but then eventually, shots were fired, the mob opened fire, the Greenwood contingent fired back, and the war was on.

RG: Right.

JE: I interviewed Otis Clark and he talks about how he stood in front of this funeral home and while militia men were shooting at him his friend's hand was shot. You can only

imagine at nineteen years old what the feelings are. As you know, he just got out of town and the fear that had run through him. "By the time the last shots were fired shortly after noon the next day hundreds lay dead." What are your thoughts as you hear these stories?

RG: What I can't imagine, man's inhumanity to man occurring. It's hard to fathom. But I think what's more devastating to me is that this rampage involved killing young kids who are innocent as you can imagine, shooting and killing kids. Doesn't make any sense. I don't know how to describe it, really. I don't really know how to describe someone feeling the necessity of civil unrest. I just don't. I wasn't raised that way.

We have a gray cloud hanging over our heads as a city, but that doesn't mean we can't move beyond that.

JE: Right. We can quickly say that the thing that set this off, the young man, Dick Roland, who was nineteen, he goes in the elevator in the Drexler building, uses the elevator. Sarah Page is the white elevator operator. When he comes off the elevator, supposedly a clerk from Renburg's hears a shout, and then that's when it all started festering. It could be pointed out that Sarah Page never did bring charges against him at all.

RG: Right. There are so many accounts of what happened that who knows what's true and what's not.

JE: What I just said, is that what you know?

RG: That's what I know.

JE: If I were to ask you, you would have said the same thing?

RG: I would have said the same thing.

JE: Okay.

RG: Following that though is the question, "Well, if something actually occurred on the elevator why weren't there charges brought?" Why didn't she? And then Dick Roland ends up moving to Kansas City, Kansas. Guess what? So does Sarah Page.

JE: There's a story I've been told that the two actually got married.

RG: I've heard that too. There is an account of Dick Roland and Sarah Page being together in Kansas by Dick Roland's relatives who live in Kansas. Who knows what's true and what's not? What's true is the riot was unnecessary. That's what's true.

JE: Right. It represented feelings throughout the entire South.

RG: Right.

JE: And it probably still does to this day.

RG: Right.

JE: Do you feel like you're fighting a losing battle?

RG: No. I don't. I mean, it's not that we haven't made progress, because we have. Progress hadn't been as forthcoming as it should be or should have been, but still yet, we're making progress. Have made and I think we'll continue to make progress.

JE: Young blacks of today coming out of college, is it fair to say that they are having an easier time of it than even say, for you, or those blacks of the '30s, '40s, '50s?

RG: I would like to think that they are having or would have an easier time, but who knows? I think what it boils down to at the end of the day is attitudes and behaviors. These people doing the hiring, CEOs, really are in a position to determine the culture of any business or any organization. So it depends on the attitude of who's at the top. And if there's this open, welcoming, humane attitude that's going to filter down to the rest of the organization.

You know as well as I do, you're most comfortable talking to, being around, living next to people that look like you. Until you get to know them. Human nature is pretty unknown. How do we get over that hump? We've got to get outside the box.

And a good question for a lot of whites, not just here but anywhere, is how many people of color do you consider your friend? You can ask a black person that, "How many white people do you consider your friend?" and more than likely you're going to get an answer 99 percent of the time. But you put it on the other foot and you're going to get some hesitation, they have to think about it.

JE: Is it a matter of exposure? I mean, whites can live in their world and maybe not even see a black person, certainly in a week or two weeks? Maybe, I don't know. Depending on where they live. So at work they're not exposed to having blacks on their staff. I'm not trying to defend them but you're hearing what I'm saying?

RG: Why do they not have blacks on their staff?

JE: Okay.

RG: that's the question.

JE: Right.

RG: Why do they not have blacks on their staff?

JE: Right. Give them an opportunity to even be around blacks, right?

RG: Exactly. It's all about exposure. And again, it's overcoming this fear of the unknown. I hear it all the time, I hear it every day, people giving their opinions and perceptions about North Tulsa, the black community, Greenwood, and they've never been north of Orchard. So how can you speak intelligently about a situation if it's not from experience? You're speaking on what you've heard, what you've read, not what you've experienced.

And a lot of minds are changed once they get here. Once they've had that exposure. And I've been through that too. I mean, when I was in cable I was the only black in management. I had a white secretary. Her parents wanted her to quit her job because she worked for a black man. And I had clients asking me on the phone, "Are you white or black?" What difference does it make? Do you want my product or not? Why do you care who's selling it to you? If I told you I were black does that mean you're not going to buy my product? That doesn't make any sense.

And then I've had them say, "You don't sound black." Well, how do black people sound? Stereotypes.

JE: I wonder if it helps once we know somebody by name? Reuben Gant, Reuben Gant becomes a person to me, and then, oh yeah, he happens to be black. And even in the sporting world, Tiger Woods was a black person to many people. But when he became Tiger Woods he was Tiger Woods.

RG: He was Tiger Woods, right.

JE: So what I just said in a moment takes a real leap to happen. But once they become the name to us—

RG: Right.

JE: ...we like them and so forth.

RG: Right.

JE: And that's what we're trying to accomplish.

RG: That's right.

Chapter 14 - 10:40

John Hope Franklin Park

John Erling: To remember the riot, the construction of the John Hope Franklin Memorial of Reconciliation, it's a three-acre park right here in the heart of Greenwood District, not far from where we are. As I drove past it this morning I see the building has begun. The Tulsa Race Riot Memorial includes two outdoor monuments, the Tower of Reconciliation depicting African American's broader history. At this point, is that the tallest one that's out there?

Reuben Gant: Yes.

JE: And it's covered up with blue—

RG: Yes.

JE: ...at the moment.

RG: Yes.

JE: Tell us a little bit of what that is.

RG: Actually what it does it chronicles the African American experience in Oklahoma, Tulsa in particular, from 1541 to present. African Americans were in Oklahoma before Oklahoma was a state. That goes for African Americans and Native Americans. And so this Tower of Reconciliation gives you a snapshot of that experience in Oklahoma, particularly in Tulsa.

It is climaxed at the top by discernable bodies, unidentifiable, reaching down helping other bodies up. It's symbolmatic of people helping other people reach the top.

B. C. Franklin, John Hope Franklin's dad, I just found this out, on his headstone, has the same lifting others as we climb. Which is appropriate. We had no clue of that until last week.

JE: Didn't know that was on his grave?

RG: Didn't know that was on his headstone.

JE: The three-piece sculpture in Hope Plaza—

RG: Yes.

JE: ...focuses on the race riot itself.

RG: That's correct.

JE: Talk to us about that.

RG: This is statues depicting photos taken from the riot of hope, hostility, and humiliation. And it's a depiction of a white man armed at the beginning of the riot, that's hostility. Humiliation is a black man walking down the middle of the street, like in a surrender mode with his hands up in the air, that's the humiliation part. And the hope part is the then-director of the American Red Cross holding a black baby. That's hope. White guy holding a black baby.

JE: Then eventually the construction of the John Hope Franklin Memorial Museum and the B. C. Franklin Square.

RG: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But as we've already alluded to, the riot was not something to be talking about until 1997 in our state legislature when Representative Don Ross, Senator Maxine Horner passed a resolution calling for creation of an eleven-member commission to study the riot. That was a defining moment, wasn't it? In—

RG: Correct.

JE: ...recognizing—

RG: Absolutely.

JE: Then out of that came the discussion about reparations.

RG: Right.

JE: How do you feel about reparations?

RG: Do surviving victims of the riot deserve some type of reparation? Absolutely. Because they suffered a loss, tremendous loss. Reparations can take the form of many different things, it doesn't necessarily have to momentary. What we're doing with the John Hope Franklin Park and the Center is a form of reparations. Because what we've done and intend to do is going to outlive you and I and the victims of the riot. It will be here for generations to come to help them understand, not just Tulsa's history, or not just an African American history, but Oklahoma's history as well. That's significant.

JE: I believe the state appropriated five million dollars—

RG: Right.

JE: ...to build this. But it wasn't like you got the five million dollars in one lock, stock, and barrel.

RG: No, there was a lot of resistance. And had it not been for Don Ross and Maxine Horner while they were still in office, we would not have received the money we did receive. Even though there was a five million dollar commitment we only received 3.7 million of the five million. It was appropriated on an annual basis, supposed to have been appropriated annually for five years, to reach the five million dollars.

Well, the state started having budget issues and the appropriations started shrinking, so after seven or eight years we'd only reached 3.7 million dollars. And then the state decided not to fund it anymore.

JE: So here it is 2010, while it is under construction now you still have not received the full five million.

RG: Not from the state. What we did was we made a commitment to see it through. We went on and raised private funds to complete the park. So we were successful at doing that. With the state's 3.7 million and then we raised the balance through private donations from foundations and individuals locally and just all over the country, really. But principally locally. There were people here that understood the significance of the project, understood the need, and made a commitment to see it finished.

JE: While we've talked about racism that you feel even today, on a positive side, there were white foundations.

RG: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So it was like, yeah, the message is getting through here, these foundations know that this needs to be remembered.

RG: Here's what was the turning point for us. Julius Pegues and I were banging our heads up against a brick wall for quite a period of time. Everybody was centered around the riot. All the reactions were about the riot. With the help of a couple other folk we rebranded the project. It's not about the riot, even though a riot is a major component of the project, it's not about one event. It's about the need for us as a country and as a city to reconcile our differences when it comes to race, religion, gender. So it's all encompassing.

JE: Once you came with that message then people got it.

RG: People got it.

JE: And said, "Okay, I understand." The John Hope Franklin Memorial Museum, is there money in this for that to be built?

RG: Uh, no. That's like phase two of a campaign that we've begun or will begin shortly. And actually putting the center up, we've already gotten the land, donated right adjacent to the park. We've already started conceptually putting on paper what we want this center

to look like. We've begun to discuss internally the space utilization, what's going to be inside this building, what is it going to be used for? And it's not a museum, actually what it is is a center for education. It's some place where scholarly studies can be conducted. You can have open public discussions about race, like a living room type environment, where you can have just a group of people of different cultures sitting around talking about the differences in raising children, culturally. But the whole point is coming to some kind of understanding, not conformity, but understanding and respect of people and cultures that aren't the same as yours.

JE: So it's not just a museum for the race riot then?

RG: No.

JE: But it will be a component in there?

RG: It will be a component of the race riot, but overall, it's a center focused on educating our people about their history and accepting other cultures.

JE: I can only imagine schools throughout the eastern part of Oklahoma, maybe the rest, bringing students to that and having discussions and all.

RG: Absolutely. That's the point.

JE: And now isn't it kind of hard to believe as we've talked about Black Wall Street and all these building here that were burned down, I'm very aware of a baseball game being played right now not far from us on 1 Oak Field, right here in the heart of the Greenwood District down by 244, Archer and Elgin. And it's abutted right up to Greenwood Avenue and the businesses there. So something good is happening.

RG: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And our feelings about that development in particular is we have experienced lifelong Tulsans that have never been in the Greenwood District. Don't have a clue about Greenwood or what it is, where it is, even though they may have been here they didn't know they were in the Greenwood District. We saw this as an opportunity to educate the public at large. Never in the history of Greenwood have we had four hundred thousand pedestrians visiting this area in any given year. So we have a captured audience here. And with all the things that's going around here, the John Hope Franklin Park, the ambience of these buildings, people get curious and then they start asking questions.

I can't tell you how many people I see walking down the sidewalks reading the plaques that you talked about earlier. So it's given them a little history as well. So we're exposing this district to four hundred thousand people on an annual basis. Well, guess what? Word of mouth is the best advertisement and the cheapest advertisement anybody could get. People are going to go back and tell their friends and their family and their acquaintances about what they experience here. It's going to bring more people down. Because the experience has been a good one, so far. And it's dispelled a lot of perceptions about safety.

JE: Already. And here we are in the inaugural season but the ballpark's only been open two or three months.

RG: Right. It's a win-win for everybody.

JE: You bet.

Chapter 15 - 9:00

Race Riot Continued

John Erling: You've talked, obviously, to race riot survivors.

Reuben Gant: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: How many do we have living now? Do you know?

RG: I would say the number is in the sixties. Initially during the Race Riot Commission Study about 170. So in the last eight years that number has dwindled to sixty-some.

JE: Some of them can remember, I suppose, and some of them cannot.

RG: Right.

JE: Because of age. They were so young at the time. Can you recall some of your conversations, their comments, and what they may have said? Is there a theme? Is there anything that you can draw from those conversations?

RG: No. Other than all of them are elated that this whole riot thing now is coming out and is being talked about. And there is an effort to recognize history, all inclusive, not just selective. Most of them are appreciative of that fact.

I've talked to some who have said their interest is not monetary but their interest is more of having something here that's going to outlive them, for generations to come to learn. I think that's what we're accomplishing with the park and the center.

JE: Um-hmm (agreement).

RG: That they're more interested in bricks and mortar than they are in money.

JE: Here we are in June of 2010. The image of Tulsa is different somewhat today than it was back then in the '20s, '30s, and '40s because today minorities are not just blacks but now Hispanics live in the city as well. They believe that some time soon Hispanics, as minorities now, could become the new majority.

I attended a seminar, it was just for a meeting on the symposium—

RG: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...that was conducted here, John Hope Franklin Symposium. And I started thinking when I left there, could a race riot break out today?

RG: It's not out of the realm of possibility, I would say, simply because, well, if you look at riots in

general and the reasons they're different from the early 1900s to the time of the rock slide, for instance, it just occurred for different reasons. There could be a different reason that a riot could start today. Where the early 1900s it had more to do with color than anything.

Today, Ardoyne and Watts might have more to do with lack of opportunity or historical denial or historical neglect. You know, we're a prosperous city here in Tulsa. There's no real significant reason why one part of town looks markedly different than another. And one part of town doesn't have the proper infrastructure as the other. So being denied what a lot of citizens believe and is a right of citizenship could start a riot, could.

JE: You know, you're so well-known in our whole town but particularly in North Tulsa. Why have you not run, say for city council, run for office, state legislature? I'm sure you've been asked but you haven't done so. Think you could have been effective doing that?

RG: That's a good question. I think I am or have been more effective doing what I'm doing and I've been able to do more, be more vocal than if I were an elected official. I've often thought about that. I don't think running for city council or state legislature would put me in a position to have an impact. The numbers just don't work on your side.

JE: Right.

RG: You're always in the minority. But some higher office, for instance, mayor, you could make an impact as a mayor, but I don't think Tulsa's ready for that. I don't think Tulsa's ready to elect an African American mayor. I also thought the United States wasn't ready to elect an African American president, you know. I'm more in tune with Tulsa with the country at large and I just don't think they're ready. They may be and I may be fooling myself.

JE: Only way I would see it is if you have some of these young people today come along and they're so charismatic that people are able to connect with them immediately and I like your message, I like your style, I like the way you are, that that could happen but it hasn't.

RG: It could happen but then—

JE: It would be unusual.

RG: ...you know, I have to reflect back on some of the things that are said about Barak Obama are just ridiculous. I mean, they are totally ridiculous, and it's all centered around the fact that he's black.

JE: The questioning of his birth, you mean, and things?

RG: Right. And that he's a Muslim because his name is Barak Obama or his dad was a Muslim. Well, he's a Christian, but some of the stuff I've heard is just ridiculous, it's just totally ridiculous.

JE: Well, we have a feeling of rightwing, of antigovernment, we have militiamen talking, we have all this that's happening right now. You think it is because he's black?

RG: Oh yeah. Think about this, you've heard and read and seen of these militia and these people showing up at these rallies with AK-47s and, you know, as a citizen they have a right

to carry these guns. What do you think would happen if those people doing that were black? They would have never been able to get off the bus carrying an AK-47 in public, dressing like a militia armed. They wouldn't have gotten off the bus, they would have immediately been taken to jail, immediately. So you draw your own conclusions from that.

JE: Are you resigned to the fact that racism will always exist until the very end of time? And all we can do is try to reduce it somewhat?

RG: Racism will not be eradicated in my lifetime or yours. Maybe in generations to come, maybe, because we may end up some day not as a white society or a black society or a yellow society but a mixed society. But that won't happen in my lifetime.

JE: Because of technology today and website like we're talking on right now there could be generations to come, they'll listen to this. Do you have a message to youngsters of all races that you might like to impart to them?

RG: It's important to understand not just your history personally, but the history of those around you. And by around you I mean they don't have to be a close personal friend. They don't have to be an acquaintance in particular, but it's inevitable that your paths will cross. What's important is that you respect those that show you like respect. It's earned, not given.

I like to reflect upon what a football coach told me once. "What you do speaks so loud don't need to hear what you say."

JE: So how would you like to be remembered by those generations that are not born yet?

RG: As a person who cared. A person who committed himself to making a difference, to understanding other cultures and respect them, whether I agree with them or not. It's okay to agree to disagree. And as long as you live by that life should be pretty well for most of us. We're not going to always find agreement with everybody. But that's okay, 'cause the greatest gift we're given is the gift of choice. And that's what it boils down to: You have a choice, exercise it to a point or in a way that's not only going to benefit you but it's going to benefit your community, it's going to benefit your friends, your family, make a better world.

JE: Very good. Well, I thank you very much for doing this.

RG: Thank you.

JE: I've found it very interesting and we've captured this now for this website and those who listen in I'm sure will learn a lot. And insight that probably some are going to drop their jaws and say, "Wow, I can't believe that."

RG: Well, it's all true.

Chapter 16 - 0:33**Conclusion**

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