

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Born near Chelsea, Oklahoma, Gerome Riley attended a rural all-black school through the Eighth grade. And because of segregation he had to choose between going to Claremore, Nowata, or Vinita for high school. He selected Claremore Lincoln and became a member of Claremore's only boys' basketball state championship team in 1952.

Gerome was a member of the Claremore Clowns, a local baseball team of all-Black players who played teams in Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, and Kansas. The Clowns were considered a semi-pro team. The end of school segregation in the early 1960s meant the end of the Claremore Clowns.

Riley worked 37 years for Phillips Oil Company. He started out as a porter at the Will Rogers Turnpike station at the Claremore gate and became the station's final manager. He retired in 1995.

Gerome became a student of Black history, and as a living part of that history, he contributed his knowledge to the Claremore Museum of History.

Listen to Gerome tell his story of experiencing all the indignities of growing up in segregated Claremore, Oklahoma, on the Oral History website and podcast VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 10:07

Family

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling and today's date is December 1st, 2021. Gerome, would you state your full name, please?

Gerome Riley (GR): My full name is Gerome Riley.

JE: No middle name?

GR: No middle name and it's spelled with a "G" and not a "J."

JE: Right, and why was it spelled with a “G?”

GR: Well, I really don’t know; but on my birth certificate, I had to have it amended because they had my name spelled wrong, and my sex was female instead of male. And what happened back then, during those days, we didn’t get to go to doctors. They were midwives. Of course, they were registered in the state to deliver babies and so forth. And their spelling and dates weren’t all that accurate and I guess that’s why mine ended up with “G” instead of “J.” Most “Jerome”s this day and time are spelled with a “J.”

JE: What is your date of birth?

GR: October 18th, 1934.

JE: And your present age?

GR: My present age is 87 years old.

JE: 87 years old.

GR: 87 years old.

JE: And you’re blowin’ and goin’, aren’t ya?

GR: Yeah, blowin’ and goin’ by the help of my walker here. (Laughing)

JE: Did you have family members that lived to this age?

GR: Yeah. You know, out of my family, my brothers and sisters and mom and dad and all of ‘ems gone. I’m the only one left. Unfortunately, all of ‘em died of cancer. My two brothers, my dad, and my sister. Of course, my mother lived to be 92 and she just died of old age. She didn’t have a real sickness or something like that that would have taken her down.

JE: We are recording this interview here in Claremore in the law office of Stratton Taylor. You’re a good friend of Stratton Taylor.

GR: Right.

JE: We’re in the sports conference room and he’s a big baseball fan, as you are, I am too, by the way.

GR: Right.

JE: ... and I see a picture there of Chicago Cubs' stadium with Mickey Mantle over there. We have Will Rodgers there and some other sports memorabilia and we're glad that Stratton made this room available to us for this very important interview.

Where were you born?

GR: I was born in Chelsea, Oklahoma. Chelsea, Oklahoma is a small town on Highway 66, about 40 miles north of Tulsa, Oklahoma — about 18 miles north of Claremore.

JE: Tell me your mother's name.

GR: My mother's name was Georgie Carter. That was her maiden name: Georgie Theresa Carter.

JE: Where did she grow up?

GR: She grew up also in the Chelsea area.

JE: And she was a mother, homemaker, I suppose?

GR: Just a homemaker.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

GR: I had two brothers and one sister.

JE: And as you've already said, they are deceased now.

GR: They're all deceased.

JE: What was your mother's personality like?

GR: Mom was loving person, a Christian lady, everybody loved her, she never met a stranger, and she was just an all-out Christian lady. She opened the doors to anyone — strangers, not strangers — and sometimes we would be a friend. Somebody would stop by and want a meal or something to eat or drink; she never turned them down. She always invited them in. And that was her trait. She was always a loving person — a people ...

I think that's where I got a lot of my giving and loving and not expecting anything in return — just being a good human being, a God-loving person.

That's the way that Mom was and I praised her and so proud of her, and hope to see her one day up yonder.

JE: Yes. Your father's name?

GR: Sylvester Robert Riley, Sr.

JE: Did he come from the Chelsea area?

GR: He came also from the Chelsea area.

JE: And he grew up there. What was his personality like?

GR: He was also a loving person. Everybody respected my dad. They all called him "Syl." Everybody in Chelsea there, they just loved him; they loved my dad. They did so much for us because my dad was a loving person. He was also one that never met a stranger. Did things for people. Everybody in Chelsea just loved our family and my dad. And he's the one that set the stage for all of us, because he was such a loving person and everybody there in Chelsea knew him and respected him and it was just amazing a lot of the things that people did for us there in Chelsea, back in the day, before integration.

JE: What did he do for a living?

GR: Well... (Chuckling) Well, the first job that I knew he had was shining shoes. And back in those days, there was a lot of blacks that did that — shine shoes. Shoe shine was 15 cents. And there was me, and my two brothers, and mom, and we were living on that. We also cleaned up the bank in Chelsea and they paid us \$15 a month. That's what we lived on. But, back in those days, things was so cheap that it's just as much money then as it is now — as far as being able to buy things. Like, bread was a nickel a loaf and this type of thing. So, the money part of it wasn't a big factor. You got just as much out of it then as — maybe more than you do now. But he shined shoes and we cleaned up the bank every evening. And later on, he left the shoe shine parlor and went to work for C&L Chevrolet in Chelsea, Oklahoma. He worked there for a number of years. After they closed down, he moved to Vinita. He didn't move to Vinita; he drove back and forth. He'd come home every Wednesday and on weekends. He worked at the Chevrolet garage over there in Vinita until he came back home and started

doing other work. And then he spent the rest of his days there at home in Chelsea.

JE: We should point out that we're hearing the sound of the trains off in the distance. We're here in Claremore and they come through. So you'll hear the train whistle, which I always enjoy hearing.

GR: Yeah.

JE: There's something kind of neat about it. Anyway, that's going on in the background for those who are listening. Alright, so, as you grew up in Chelsea, talk about your schooling there. Did you go to Chelsea public schools?

GR: The schools in Chelsea, back in those days, they were segregated. You had a certain area that blacks — as you do now — the blacks and whites were separated. There was always a separation point between the black community and the white community. And most times the railroad tracks divide the black and white communities, but it didn't in Chelsea. We just had a certain dividing line that we knew where the black community lived. And during that time there were quite a few blacks that lived in Chelsea and a lot of us were kin.

And we had a one-room school; it only went to the 8th grade. We had 1st through 8th grades there. That's where I went to school: Paul Lawrence Dunmore was the name of the school. Once you finished the 8th grade, you had to come to Claremore, Vinita or Nowata to go to high school — which they had black high schools — and the schools hadn't integrated; that's why you had to go.

But it was a one-room school; everybody was in the same classroom. What made is so interesting was all of the students had to help fix lunch. We didn't have a cook, we didn't have a lunchroom; the students took off about 11 o'clock and started preparing lunch for the whole school. That's how we got our lunch fixed. But the teacher would advise us on a lot of stuff, and we learned how to cook. One thing that I think about is me and my classmate: It was our turn to fix a dinner. And we had beans and cornbread for lunch; and the teacher told my classmates: "Make sure they put some fat in that cornbread," you know, like cooking all of this and that. And, of course, I didn't know what was going on; and when I turned

around, he had chopped up a lot of little small pieces of bacon and put in the cornbread and stirred it in. But it turned out to be really good; it turned out to be really good. In fact — I mean, he didn't know it — but that was out before what we call "cracklin' bread."

JE: Now...

GR: It's cornbread with pork rind skins in it; and it's good. But that's how that happened. And during Christmas time — back then we made our own toys, our own decorations for our Christmas tree. In December — I think a couple two or three weeks before Christmas — the boys would take off and go cut a Christmas tree. We'd have to walk about a couple of miles but we always looked forward to that time to getting off to go and get that Christmas tree. We'd go cut a big Christmas tree and bring it back. And it was just plain ol' cedar trees that grow wild out here. But we would bring it back and we would make our own decorations for it and put on that tree.

The teachers that we had there — our first teacher — he name was Mrs. Carolyn Gray. She lived here in Claremore but she taught in Chelsea there; she taught us in Chelsea. And at one time, she lived with us. She lived with us while she was teaching up there. We lived in a house — it only had four rooms in it. It had two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. She took one of the main bedrooms there. And me, and my brothers, and my mom and dad and them all crowded in the other bedroom. After that, she retired, got sick.

Another teacher came in; her name was Mrs. Brewster. She was from Nowata. She lived there in Chelsea but she moved in a house there and renovated it; and that's where she lived. She taught us a lot about cooking. That lady taught us about how to make cakes: how to beat 'em and how to make 'em to where there wouldn't be air bubbles in 'em, you know, and so forth. We learned a lot from her at home watching mom. Being there watching her cook and prepare meals and everything.

Chapter 3 – 7:18
Austere Living

Gerome Riley (GR): The house that we lived in. There wasn't any insulation there. And there were only two stoves in the house: one in the living room and the kitchen — the cook stove. Us boys, each of us had the morning to make the fire. We had to get up in the morning and make the fire. What we did — we always make sure we had plenty of kindling and plenty of dry wood. Because if it got wet, boy I tell ya, it was a problem. But anyhow, we always made sure we brought in plenty of wood and it was dry. We'd get up and make the fire.

In those days, when the fire went out and you went to bed, there wasn't no fire in the house. And it went down to freezing and below so you can just imagine what we went through those days. Sometimes we would wake up in the morning — we always had a bucket there for drinking water and a dipper in it. Sometimes there would be ice on the water in our drinking water bucket. So you know how cold it was in that house. So what we would do a lot of times, before we went to bed when it was real cold, we would warm bricks on the stove and then we would put 'em to our feet at night in the bed to try and keep us warm. That's the living conditions. And like I say, those houses weren't insulated. You could see cracks and cracks there. And in the winter time, we would take around the windows — we'd stuff old stockings or rags or anything in there to keep that cold air out.

I'll tell ya what: Those were the days. And I don't know whether the youngsters of this day and time could have went through that. I wonder about it sometimes. I talk to my kids about it and they can't believe the things that I was telling them, but that's the way it was and I lived it.

By the way, the school — once we graduated from Dunmore in Chelsea, we came to Claremore to go to school.

John Erling (JE): Yup. And I want to get into that. In your house, did you have electricity and plumbing?

GR: I'm glad you mentioned that. There wasn't any electricity. There wasn't any water. There wasn't any plumbing. There wasn't any telephone. We had to

carry our water a couple of blocks away. There was a white lady who lived a couple of blocks from us in the black community there. Her name was Mrs. Martin. She had a hydrant outside. We didn't have a hydrant. All of the utilities only went to the white part of town; it didn't come to the black community, which was still in the city limits. But they did not put electricity and water down there until a long period after that. We would pack water from Mrs. Martin's house for drinking water and, when we did our washing, there was a creek that run down through the community. And that creek had nice, clear water in it. We used that to wash; and we used homemade soap — lye soap. We always butchered a hog every year and you'd take that grease and lye, put it in a big pot, and put it outside. You'd make a fire and you'd put this big pot over it, and you'd put this lye and pork drippings in there, and stir it, and I don't know what else Mom put in there. We'd even take a bath with that soap. That was lye soap. But we'd even take a bath with that soap.

By the way: During that time we were up there at Chelsea, I like to talk about that, you know, and give all the information I can about it because there's a lot of things that happened that a lot of people don't believe. But what we did, every winter we butchered a hog. And when we butchered that hog, we didn't have a smokehouse or anything to smoke 'em like we do now, you know. We had a shed. Well, when we would butcher that hog, we would take that salt and salt it down. That's to preserve it; it would stay there and keep all winter until spring. But when you salted it, whenever you went to eat it, you had to boil the salt out of it before you cooked the meat, because you couldn't eat it with all that salt in there.

Sometimes we would go out there to the shed to get some meat, and when we'd go out there, we'd seen where rats had been eating on one end of it. Well, all we did was just cut that part off and go ahead on with it. It didn't affect it, because they couldn't stand it. It was too salty for them, too! But we boiled the salt out of ours.

But anyhow, those days were — back in the days where food and everything was rationing. You had to have war ration stamps to buy anything: gas, groceries, everything. You had to have stamps. I've got some of those stamp books that I've kept. We used 'em back then. You couldn't buy anything — gasoline, clothes, anything. And that was back during the

war. Whenever you got loaves of bread back then, they didn't slice 'em. They came to you whole. They didn't slice the bread. If you didn't have a bread knife or some way to slice it, we just tore it off in chunks. That's the way we did it at the table. And margarine — your oleo that we used — it wasn't colored like it is now. It was like Criso shortening. They put a packet of yellow food coloring in there and you had to stir it in there to make it yellow. That's the way the margarine came then, back during the war.

JE: December 7th, 1941. Do you remember that day? Pearl Harbor?

GR: That was the Pearl Harbor bombing, yeah. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor then we got into war with them. That's when these war rations and all this stuff came out, where everything was rationed.

In Pryor they had what they called "a powder plant," over there in Pryor, where they made ammunition and [unintelligible] for service. And a lot of people worked there.

And gas was rationed. You could only get so much gas. Now all the guys that was working, they got more gas than anyone; then the farmers — they got a share of it more; then the people that wasn't working, they just got barely enough to keep them going. They didn't get a whole lot of gas. But everybody had a sticker on their window when they went to the service station — well, they call 'em gas stations then — they had a sticker on the window like an "E", and "F," a "G" — that let the attendant know how much gas that he could get. He also had his stamp with him. That's how that was.

And, by the way, there was a creek that ran through the community. Oh, I don't know, it didn't have a name that I know of. It wasn't a deep creek. But it had some fairly deep places in it, about waist deep, and we used to fish in there, catch perch in there and this and that to eat. And we made our own fishing poles. We didn't buy no hooks and all of that stuff. We made our own.

But if it rained a lot, this creek would rise and we'd have to get out. Now, of course, it never did get in our house but it got all around our house.

I never shall forget: Our uncle lived there, too, beside us. We all got in his

car and we'd drive uptown where the higher ground was until the water went down. He always have a little pig that he raised. We'd put the pig in the floorboard in the back seat. We'd be in the back seat with the pig and everything, and we'd go uptown to the white community until the water went down, and then we'd come back home. But it never did get inside our house. That's a blessing that it never did get inside the house. But it would rise, it would get up — because it wasn't very deep. And all of that runoff water that came from uptown and above — it couldn't hold it. And it just flooded everything.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 4 – 9:50

Baseball

John Erling (JE): Back in those days — you were born in '34.

Gerome Riley (GR): Right.

JE: We think of the '30s and the '40s — did you listen to radio?

GR: That's all we had back then was the radio, and I'll tell you what: Back in those days, my dad kept the radio on. On the weekends, it was Grand Ole' Opry; and through the week, it was Cardinal baseball. And that's all we — and when he was away from home, we could get something else. But back then, in those days, the baseball team — the Cardinals — all of those teams, I could just about name you all of those players on almost all of those teams.

JE: The St. Louis Cardinals

GR: The St. Louis Cardinals — all of those outstanding players they had, and the other teams too in the National League that they played. I could just about name you all of those, because that's what it was on. The radio was on the St. Louis Cardinals station there and they played 3 or 4 games, you know, a night. And then on the weekends it was Grand Ole' Opry. I can name you so many of those; and I'm fond of country and western and bluegrass. I'm fond of it; I was raised up with it. Bill Munroe and all of those

guys: Little Jimmy Dickens and all of those different guys and all of the music that those guys make, and I was talking to a friend of mine... All the music from these country and western guys: it tells a story. It's always something and I love it. I keep my radio on 99.5 all the time.

JE: Yeah.

GR: I love country and western; I was raised up with it.

JE: Did you ever listen to Bob Wills and the Playboys?

GR: Bob Wills and Johnnie Lee Wills and them — that's what I was going to tell you. I'm glad you mentioned that. Every year, in Chelsea, they had a "jamboree", they called it. Jamboree was where the carnival would come to town; they would have rides, they'd have terrapin races, they'd have all kinds of events. Johnnie Lee Wills, Bob Wills, Leon McAuliffe, they had a bandstand and all those guys came at different times of the other. They'd have one this year and Bob Wills, Johnnie Lee Wills, and all of those guys came up there. I remember 'em well. Real well, you know? Like I said, I was raised up country and western, you know, and that's all I knew at that time, until later on. But I love it today. I love country and western.

JE: Let's go back to baseball. Do you remember any names of baseball players that you rooted for in the '30s and '40s?

GR: Well, there was Red Schoendienst, there was Murry Dickson, there was Harry Brecheen, there was Stan Musial, there was Red Munger who, he was a pitcher. A lot of them that played on the team but weren't quite as famous as some of them — and I didn't remember them well — but back in the day, I could name all of those guys, their position and everything.

JE: Then you were rooting for the St. Louis Cardinals, but then there was a time you started rooting and cheering for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

GR: Yeah.

JE: And why was that?

GR: Well, I tell ya what. Back in those days, before integration, the black athletes and so forth weren't recognized. They didn't get the exposure, and, of course, one thing that kinda turned me against the Cardinals and made me pull for the Dodgers — because of Jackie Robinson — because

the way he was treated. The way he was treated during his time when he came in. And the first incident that happened: Red Schoendienst, he was second baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals; and he was the one who brought a black cat out on the field, headed toward Jackie Robinson. And even though we didn't know and understand segregation at the time, all about it; as time went on, we got to know and realize what it was all about, we didn't pay it that much attention.

We thought it was some kind of a joke, but after later years, we realized what it was all about and I switched sides. I said, "Well, I don't wanna have anything to do with a team that has that type of a, you know — segregates against players and this and that..."

Of course, back then, there was a lot of that that went on. It was a lot of it that went on and black players, athletes, whatever, went through a lot and endured a lot but overall they stayed in there and everything began to change over a period of time and I'm glad it did; but it was really tough sledding back in those days.

JE: You played baseball yourself as a child, as a youngster. About when do you think you started playing baseball?

GR: I tell ya what: I started playing baseball in Chelsea. Like I said, we didn't have any baseball ... I didn't know anything about baseball, and basketball, and football, and so forth because we were just an elementary school and we didn't have any sports or anything. But what we did — Chelsea High School. They had basketball, baseball, football, and all of that. And then they had a Legion team. There was a baseball park that Mrs. Sallie McSpadden — Will Roger's sister — we used to work for those people. She donated some land for this park and baseball field, football field, and so forth and that's where we used to go and play. We weren't integrated, but I had some good friends. We played recreational ball. And they used to pull up to McSpadden Park and play ball. We would play ball from sunup to sundown. Me and my a good friend of mine that I was raised up with, he's a good friend of mine, Ralph Terry. I was raised up with Ralph Terry. He used to come to my house and sit down at my table and eat. I think we lived about 2 or 3 blocks away from him. He'd come to our house; we'd hunt, and fish, and so forth. Best friend I ever had. Best white friend and black — either — that I had ever had. And I still commune with him today.

He lives in Larned, Kansas. And he was the 1962 MVP for the New York Yankees and he was a pitcher and I used to catch him. We used to go up to McSpadden Park. And, of course, Ralph Terry was a finesse pitcher. He wasn't a hard-throwing pitcher, but he was a control pitcher. And he was always concerned about how the ball broke, or how this happened, and so forth. He got good at it. And he, like I said, played for the Yankees for those years. I played with a lot of other guys that were good baseball players. In fact, there was a friend of ours that played with us, his name was Gaylen Hudspack. Of course, he would turn you around with a baseball. That guy could throw so hard, I tell you what. But he wasn't a control type of pitcher, but he was a good pitcher. I played with all of those guys up there — recreational ball — and during the time whenever they had American Legion ball up there... The coach up there at Chelsea was a wonderful fella. He was about 5'5", I imagine, 5'6" or so. He was the baseball coach, the basketball coach, and the football coach at Chelsea High. And his name was Rupert Cross — wonderful fella. What he would do, during the time we were playing Legion ball, in the last inning, he would let us get in there in the last inning — me and my brothers, you know — in the last inning and get some exposure. But he was an outstanding individual. Now, as time went on, Ralph Terry, and I, and the guys graduated from high school and went on to college and so forth. I kept up with Ralph. Of course, during the time that I was catching him there at Chelsea, he was a Yankee fan at that time; I was a Dodger fan. And he said, "Riley, I'ma play with the Yankees one of these days."

I said, "Man, you gotta be kidding."

You know how you kid like that? So as time went on, I came down here to go to the high school in Claremore, but I kept up with him. And as time went on, the next thing that I knew, he was in the Yankees farm club.

JE: Well, we should mention that he was born in Big Cabin and he was 17 years old when he signed with the Yankees.

GR: Yeah.

JE: And 20 years old when he broke into the majors in 1956.

GR: Starting rotation for The New York Yankees during that time.

JE: And a little bit more about him: He became a two-time All-Star, a World Series Most Valuable Player, and the top right-hander in what many say was the greatest baseball team of all time, the 1961 Yankees.

GR: Yeah.

JE: The only pitcher to throw the final pitch in two World Series Game 7s. And, of course, Mickey Mantle was on, Roger Marris, Yogi Berra, Bobby Richardson...

GR: ... Bobby Richardson ...

JE: How's that team?

GR: Bobby Richardson... They have here in Claremore what they call a "Field of Dreams Baseball Banquet" every year. They have a lot of the sports writers here — different ones from out of Tulsa, celebrities, all of those television guys, and radio guys that come over here, and it supports Claremore baseball and Rodgers State baseball. Well, they have those speakers every year. Bobby Richardson was the 1961 MVP on the Yankees team, and Ralph Terry was the 1962 MVP. I've got some baseballs; I've got pictures and autographs that we took together during these banquets we had, you know, during different times — autographed baseballs and so forth. But they used to call Kansas City the Yankees' farm club, because a lot of those guys that left the Yankees ended up in Kansas City. After a period of time, Ralph Terry ended up there. Well, my brothers lived up in Kansas City during that time. They used to go to the baseball game and they got in touch to see Ralph Terry. Well, Ralph Terry met with them and gave them some tickets, and he'd say, "Where's my buddy 'Romey'?"

That's what they used to call me: "Romey". They used to call me "Romeo," "Geronimo," and everything else. (Laughing)

But anyhow, he said, "I got some tickets here." He said, "If you guys want to come to the game or this and that and get in touch with him and tell him..." But I never did get up there to see him play.

JE: Yeah.

GR: But he was an outstanding, outstanding player and he was really serious. He worked on it. He worked hard at it.

JE: Yeah.

GR: He really worked hard at that.

Chapter 5 – 10:34

Back Seat

John Erling (JE): You, in your schooling, left Chelsea for high school in Claremore.

Gerome Riley (GR): Yeah.

JE: How did you get there?

GR: Well, we used to come to Claremore. Before we moved down here to come to school, we used to come down here. My grandmother lived here, I had an uncle and aunt that lived here. So, we really chose Claremore, you know, to come and go to school. We stayed with our grandmother when we came down here to go to school.

But before we came to school, we used to come down here on the weekends and stay at Grandmother's house over the weekend and we'd go back on Sunday evening. We used to ride the bus. It was 50 cents round trip. The back seat was for blacks. That was the only place you could sit was in the back seat. And if it was full, you stood up. Of course, it was only 18 miles and we were young and it didn't bother us. But I stood up on the bus many a time, you know.

But every time we'd board the bus to come to Claremore, the bus driver — he was the same bus driver most of the time — it was a Greyhound. And there was 3 buses that came out of Chelsea: They Greyhound, the [unintelligible], and Continental. We rode the Greyhound. There was a fella that had the bus station that had a Greyhound was named George Goosmann. He was a German. He had the Greyhound bus line ticket office.

This bus drive, every time we loaded the bus, he stood up and made sure

— and watched down that aisle and made sure — that we went to that back seat and sat down. But that didn't bother us that much. It only happened when we would ride that bus, then on Sunday evenings, we would come back home.

As far as going to school down here, we didn't ride the bus. We drove back and forth every day from Chelsea to Claremore. We drove my dad's car. In fact, the state of Oklahoma paid my dad so much per month to use this car to bus us back and forth to school.

JE: What kind of car was that?

GR: It was a Plymouth. It was an old Plymouth. I don't remember... Well, you know if was back in the 50s, so it had to be a 40-something model or so because we didn't buy any new cars. But I do know, whenever we got that grant to drive us back and forth, my dad had a new motor put in the car. And it'd run... Boy, it'd really run like a sewing machine. It was really nice. We drove back and forth every day and they paid him.

JE: In Claremore, what school did you go to?

GR: Well, when we came to Claremore, it was Lincoln School. And Lincoln School is there now over on North Owalla street here in Claremore. It's still intact and they still keep it up because it's the Lincoln Service Center. That's where they service the buses and the school equipment. They keep it up. The floors and things are just as shiny as when we were going to school there. The lockers and things are all in place. And I got to over there and visit with me and the mayor here in Claremore, a couple of years ago. I found my old locker, number 44, and that was my basketball uniform, my number in basketball, 44.

JE: Lincoln School wasn't integrated, was it?

GR: It was not integrated. It was not integrated. Claremore High School had their high school and grade schools and whatever, but Lincoln School... The high school, when I came down here, was only 4 rooms when I first came to school here in 1949. There were only 4 rooms and after a period of time they built 6 more rooms with heat, and air, and lockers, and man, we

thought we were just really uptown at that time.

Now the elementary part of the school, there was another building on the backside of the high school, and it was also the hot lunch room and elementary classroom.

JE: Did you play sports in Lincoln School?

GR: Yeah. When I came down here in 1949 to go to school in Lincoln, I hadn't never played basketball. Now, what we did, we had a basketball goal out back of the school where we would shoot. It didn't have a net on it, so we didn't know if it went through or not, you know? But when we came to Chelsea, that's when we had seen basketball and we was trying to learn it and play it. But when I came to Claremore in 1949 to go to school, I didn't know anything about basketball. But I tried out for the team I wanted to play. And whenever I came down here and got to play, I started my first practice. Everybody laughed at me because of the way I shot the ball, because it wasn't normal. Everybody just got a kick out of how I shot the basketball.

JE: How did you shoot the ball?

GR: Well, it wasn't like they shoot it now. It's just kind of a straight motion. I mean, I left the floor and was shooting more like that than I was in this regular shooting position that they do now. Everybody just got a kick out of that. But, as time went on, I practiced, I worked on it, and worked on it, and worked on it, and I got to be a pretty decent player. In fact, I could dunk a basketball at that time.

JE: You could dunk it?

GR: Yeah; a few times I could dunk it. I could jump higher than anybody on the team. But I made the team; I started in 1952. We won the state championship. And then in 1953, we were runner-up to the state. In 1951, we went to the semis before we were eliminated. But we had some outstanding teams. In 1952, we won 30 games and lost 3. In 1953, we won 25 games and lost 2. So, in those two years, we won 50-some-odd games and lost 5.

JE: Wow. How tall are you?

GR: Well, I was 5'8", but now doctors say I'm 5'7.5" now. You know how it is, how you don't stand as straight as you age and so forth. But if they had have been keeping up with rebounds back in the day — like rebounds, and assists, and all of that stuff like they do now — I would probably have 12, 15 rebounds a game or so. An average of that.

JE: Did you play the Claremore High School?

GR: No. Claremore High School never did play us. We never did play Claremore High School. Now, I'll tell ya what we did do: We scrimmaged the OMA that used to be here in Claremore. Military academy. The OMA military academy, they had a basketball team. We scrimmaged with them. And we beat them. That was the college: OMA. They had swimming pools up there — heated swimming pools. After the game, we'd go swimming. Boy, we enjoyed that so much because we weren't used to anything like that. What happened — Red Cross organized the benefit game at the armory here in Claremore between Oklahoma Military Academy and us. They beat us out in that game by, about, I'd say, 5 or 6 points.

JE: Claremore High School... More than likely, if you'd have played them, you would have defeated them.

GR: I'm sure that we would have. That's why I think — I imagine that they didn't want to play. But we had so many... We had so many white supporters that followed us and came to our games. I had two fellas that I could name that was outstanding individuals that are out here today. One of them is, and one of them isn't. Jim Marshall was one of my top supporters — a white guy. There was another fella, Bob Webber. He was a supporter of ours. Didn't miss a game.

JE: So when you say, "state championships, what did you mean by that? Black school?

GR: Black schools. I'll explain that to ya. Back during those days when I was playing, there was only two teams that went to the state tournament. You

had the district tournament. The first first and second place teams that won the district tournament, they're the ones that got to go to the state. But, also, if you won the most games, even if you didn't win the state, you got to go. We won the most games every year; and every year, before the district tournament, they gave a percentage trophy. The percentage trophy was a trophy for the team that won the most games in the conference. We did that 3 years in a row, so we got the percentage trophy and the district trophy. I don't remember but 3 teams that ever went to the state. I remember Pawhuska was the one that gave us the most problems — when we played Pawhuska. Pawhuska went to the state a couple of times, I believe. Nowata went one year, and Bartlesville went one year. In our conference was: Claremore, Vinita, Nowata, Bartlesville, Pawhuska, and Lenapah.

JE: And those are all black school?

GR: ... and Hominy. All black schools.

JE: Yeah.

GR: Also, we went to Kansas City and played. We played two teams up there. We won one game and lost one. We beat Northeast High School up there in Kansas City. That was in Missouri. The next night, we went and played the largest school in Kansas City, Kansas: Sumner High. Sumner High is still there today. It was an all-black high school, the largest school in Kansas City. And they beat us — I think it was 5 or 6 points. But, the thing about it is, what happened, the refereeing was bad. There was only 3 fouls called on Sumner High School through the whole game. 3 fouls called on Sumner High. But the thing about it is, Sumner High was a large school; they didn't wanna see a little country school like Claremore with 82 students come and beat them, so, naturally, there was some, you know, calling that should have been made that wasn't made; because they just wasn't gonna have a little school like us beat 'em.

What was really interesting about it was, after we got back home from the Kansas City trip, the athletic director up there at Northeast High School in Kansas City, he wrote a letter back to the city of Claremore. I've got that letter — I've got a lot of stuff that I didn't bring with me that I was going to

show you. But, anyhow, he wrote a letter back to the city of Claremore and Lincoln School. He said, "Your team that we've ever seen in many-a-years. And if the officiating had have been better, the outcome would have been different."

JE: Were those referees black?

GR: Yeah. (Chuckling) But they wasn't going to have a little city of 5,000 and a little school of 82 students come out and 60% of 'em was elementary... (Laughing)

JE: Yeah. (Chuckling)

GR: They wasn't going to have a little ol' team out the country come up there and beat them. They couldn't have lived it down, you know? (Laughing)

Chapter 6 – 8:40

Claremore Clowns

John Erling (JE): When did you graduate from high school?

Gerome Riley (GR): I graduated in 1953.

JE: You were playing baseball too, weren't you, in this time period?

GR: Yeah, well... During the time that we was in high school, yeah. We played baseball, but we didn't play with the Clowns. We had a junior baseball team during that time. A guy named Ange Lee Alexander got us together. He's on that picture over there. And he got us together, bought us some uniforms, and we were called The Hotshots. We was a junior baseball team and we always played the game before the Clowns did, you know?

What he used to do, he used to haul us back and forth. Every town around here had a baseball team, recreational baseball team; all of these towns around here in Oklahoma: Vinita, Nowata, Bartlesville, Tulsa — T-Town

Clowns — Wagoner, Muskogee. Every town back then had a recreational team.

JE: Were they blacks and whites?

GR: Black. No, just black.

JE: Just black, okay.

GR: Now, we did play whites. We played a lot of white.

JE: Yeah.

GR: But later on, the whites began to come and play with us because they loved to win and wanted to play with us; and things began to change. Lots of guys here in Claremore — white guys — they came and played with us: The Hendricks brothers, Carl Coleman, and all of those guys came over across the tracks and played ball with us because they knew we winning when we played and they wanted to win. But, before then, they didn't want to play with us. Tulsa — T-Town Clowns — some of those guys on there, if times would have been different, they could have played professional ball, numerous guys.

JE: You're talking about the Clowns. You're talking about the Claremore Clowns?

GR: Claremore Clowns.

JE: ... and they were a semi-pro...

GR: Semi. I'll tell you about that. Anytime you go professional, you get paid for your services or whatever during that time. We were called "semi-pro." They didn't get a salary, but, what happened is whenever they had a game, whenever they took up the gate receipts — they charged a quarter, 50 cents for people to come in — and of course, you could stand out on the street and watch it just as well as you could (chuckling), but you didn't have a place to sit down. We did have some little bleachers there and a little pop stand and so forth so everybody could buy a pop... But the money that they took up, they played on a 60/40 basis. The home team got 60% of

the gate receipts and the visiting team got 40. That's why they call them semi-pro because they were getting — not a salary — but we ballers got enough to buy beer and refreshments and this type of thing, and enjoyed that.

JE: But the Clowns... they did a comic routine, didn't they?

GR: Yeah, they did a lot of different antics, you know, and this and that during those days. That's why they were called the Clowns; and, also, the T-Town Clowns, they were the same way. Them and other Clown acts, you know — different things, you know.

JE: So they would come around and play these home teams that you just talked about?

GR: Yeah.

JE: Did you play then with the Claremore Clowns?

GR: Yeah, in later years, yeah. The original Clowns, they were playing ball in '47 and '48. That's when they were the original Clowns. Those were the original Clowns. Now the original Claremore Clowns... most of those guys, after they aged, some of their kids played and that's how we kept it going.

See, we kept that going plumb on up to '57 or '58 — somewhere in that neighborhood — we still were playing. We'd go to Joplin; Paragould, Arkansas; play up in Missouri; all of the teams in Oklahoma around here we'd play ball. We used to go over to Salina and play, over to Kenwood, and they played up there with a settlement called Four Corners over there in Salina. And that's why they had a baseball [unintelligible] there and I guess that's why they called it "Four Corners." And we played the Native American Indian guys. I know those guys. They love to play baseball. We were playing one game, and if it wasn't dark or getting late, they'd wanna play another (Chuckling), and so we'd play another game. But they loved — they loved — to play baseball. They were always nice to us and we'd go swimming over there in that lake, you know, over those lakes that are all over in there. We'd go swimming in them holes down there where the water was getting cold. We'd just have a big time over there. There was 2 or

3 guys on that team right there that could have made major league players. Of course, just like I say, there wasn't any exposure — you know what I'm saying.

JE: But you were in your 20s — early 20s — when you were playing.

GR: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I was a fairly good baseball player. When I left Chelsea, I was catching, because I caught Ralph Terry in recreational this-and-that. And when I came to Claremore, I quit catching and moved to third base. And that's where I stayed most of the time. I did a little pitching; I wasn't a real good pitcher, but they put me in there and, you know, and so forth. But third base is where I played most of the time. I had that down pretty good. I had some clipping that Ralph Terry, whenever he came down here to do a Field of Dreams baseball event, where he was talking about I was the best catcher he'd ever had, had ever seen.

JE: Wow.

GR: I've got all of those clippings when we were playing and what happened.

JE: Around this time, too — I think out of Kansas — professional teams came down and they'd play in Muskogee, and Jackie Robinson also was in the Negro League at the time that was going on. Were you familiar with the Negro League and those players?

GR: Are you talking about the Kansas City Monarchs?

JE: Yes.

GR: We didn't get up into that league and I don't remember much of them playing; but, you know, the Negro League back then, they had Josh Gibson and all of those guys. And then you had the Kansas City Monarchs, the Chicago Black Sox, and all of those different teams which were outstanding players, but they wasn't recognized in the white leagues, you know? And out of those guys — Satchel Paige and all of those guys that played with the Kansas City Monarchs, Josh Gibson and all of those guys are outstanding players.

JE: Yup.

GR: But they didn't get the exposure because they weren't in the white league. They were black.

JE: It's interesting how you said the whites came and they wanted to play on the black team. So, isn't that called "integration"? (Chuckling) So, here we go: They didn't care if you were black...

GR: That's right.

JE: ... they just wanted to play ball because you guys were good.

GR: That's right. And I'll tell you what: You take the black communities... All of the blacks here in Oklahoma... Mostly, there was a dividing line between them and whites and what I'm trying to say is this: They were segregated and discriminated against on living where they lived, because most all of these blacks... It's just like Chouteau, Oklahoma — over on Highway 69, south of Pryor — there was a black community down there south of Chouteau, it's called Brushy Creek. And all of the blacks in these communities, they lived on these creeks: Brushy Creek; Lightning Creek up in Nowata; Panther Creek over on the other side of Chelsea; Bowling Springs in Pryor Creek over there on the other side of Chelsea. They lived all in those areas. Over here on Brushy Creek that I'm talking about, south of Chouteau over there, there was a black community and a lot of those guys came on up here because we had a baseball team and played ball with them. Outstanding individuals. Heck of a baseball player. John Rider, Shawn Rider, Laurie Sails, Willy Liggum's brothers and all of those guys, the Van brothers, Charles Ray, and all of those individuals that we played baseball with — outstanding baseball players.

Charles Ray played on our team. He was an outstanding player, and most of the time, on our teams, we played multiples of positions, the guys did. They could play any position, and that's what happened. Charles Ray was an outstanding player. I hated it so bad: He got killed, him and his son, going home. It was raining, and I don't know where they had been, but they was going down 69, south of Chouteau there. You turn off to go where the community was. It was raining and this truck hit 'em. And he was

killed, him and his son. But his other son, Johnny Ray ... Johnny Ray went and played professional ball with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He played 10 years for those Pirates.

JE: Yup.

GR: And when he left the Pirates, I think he went overseas and played a couple of years there or something; he came back to Chouteau where he makes his home, now... Well, they called it Chouteau, but it's Brushy Creek. And, of course, they have a Johnny Ray Day and they have a street named after Johnny Ray over there in Chouteau. And that was Charles Ray's son, so, he come out of a good family as far as baseball. And those guys were outstanding baseball players in their own right, and they came up here to play with us because they didn't have a team and they all came out here and played with us.

Chapter 7 – 10:20

Just a Way of Life

John Erling (JE): Was it confusing to you that, when the white ball players came to play on your team, that — “What is this about racism? And why are you playing with us when, in other ways of life, we can't even eat in your restaurants; we can't even use your restrooms?”

Gerome Riley (GR): You're exactly right. I'll say this, John: I'm so proud to be here from Chelsea in Rogers County and Claremore. There never was a lot of racial fanfare or anything that went on here. Oh, I imagine there may have been a few little words or skirmishes, but nothing that would cause attention. But the guys were accepted here so well — the white guys, we had a lot of Indian guys that played with us — on that team. They just wanted to play ball. In Claremore white communities, they didn't have a city team; and those guys that could play ball in high school and legion ball, they wanted to continue playing ball. They came over and played with us. They just came on over and started playing with us without fanfare. They were accepted just like one of us. They had some good ball players there that came over, too.

JE: But in Oklahoma, there were restaurants that denied service to blacks.

GR: Yeah.

JE: Did that happen here in Claremore?

GR: Yes. I will tell you this: You hear that blacks had a place in life. That's the way they always said it. But blacks could not go to restaurants. They couldn't eat in the restaurants. They always had a place back in the kitchen for 'em. You couldn't go to the movies. Well, we did go to one movie here at the Yale Theatre and we sat up in the balcony. But you couldn't use the restrooms; you paid your money to go to the show, but you couldn't use the restroom. And why it would make any difference if people were using the restrooms?

What we did, whenever we had to go to the restroom, we had to go over to the Rogers County courthouse and use the restroom. The Rogers County courthouse — the basement stayed open all the time and there was a restroom there. The Rogers County courthouse had black and colored stalls that was wrote on the doors. I can remember it so well. They had two stalls that said, "Colored" and "White;" two stalls for colored and the rest for whites. And why, in a restroom ... (Chuckling) ... when you go to the restroom — that it would be discriminated and segregated in a restroom...

And I'll tell ya one thing: Back in those days, they used to use the "n"-word frequently. Openly. It wasn't hid or nothing; it was openly. I never will forget. I used to ride the bus back and forth to Claremore — from Chelsea to Claremore. All up and down Highway 66... You know the road signs they have for restaurants and businesses and so forth? All that? There was a cafe called The Grand Cafe. They had signs up and down with the word "'N' - Chicken."

JE: "N"...

GR: "Nigger Chicken."

JE: ... chicken.

GR: All up and down these signs. And in the window? It's right up there in Vinita now. It's Clanton's Cafe now.

JE: Yeah.

GR: It used to be The Grand and that's where they had the word "'N'- Chicken", because they always branded it "black man" as far as fried chicken, you know. And they had "'N'-word Fried Chicken" all up and down these signs up and down the road.

JE: Oh, so, that was a good thing for the whites to eat the "'N'-Chicken"?

GR: Well, right?

JE: Everybody thought, "Well..."

GR: Blacks...

JE: That was a good form of chicken.

GR: Connoisseurs of fried chicken. And now they eat more than we do!

JE: (Laughing)

GR: You know how it — (Laughing) It's ironic. You have to laugh about it, but that's the way it was.

And while we were on that basketball story here; I was wanting to tell you about winning the state championship and going to Nashville, Tennessee to the nationals. We were constructed like the NCAA tournament. It ain't like it is now. In the larger schools, they had A Class, B Class, and C Class.

Now, the largest schools were A Class: Booker T.; Oklahoma City Douglas; you know, Lawton — all of those big city and you know and that. They had students at over ... They were A-class. B-class was below: Sand Springs; Sapulpa; Muskogee. All of those teams had B-class. And C-class was tons of 'em. All of them in my conference and all of those other teams: Spiro, Weleetka, Wetumka... tons of C-class schools. And that's the way it was constructed.

And what happened: The 3 winners that won state in A, B, and C-class that one the state in that division, they went into a playoff. The A, the B, and the

C-class had to play each other to get to go to Nashville, Tennessee to the national tournament where there was teams all over the United States — out of Texas, out of Kansas, out of Missouri, out of Kentucky — it was constructed like the NCAA.

When we went into the playoffs which was down at Langston University — that's where we had the playoffs — we beat Sand Springs; and Sand Springs was a B-Class team. That's where Marcus Haynes came from out of Sand Springs.

JE: Yes.

GR: He wasn't there when we played them and beat 'em, but there was another fella whose name was Daniel. He was an outstanding player. But we beat Sand Springs and then, Saturday night, we played Booker T. Booker T beat us by about 6 or 8 points to get to go to Nashville to play in the national. Of course, we went down there. And I'll tell ya how we got there.

After we had had such good years playing the city of Claremore, the black community got together and they rented us a station wagon and gave us expense money to go down to the national tournament; and that was quite a treat. That was quite a deal for us — all of us basketball players — to go down there. And, of course, we'd get down there in that part of the country and in a lot of places they wouldn't let us back in to use the restrooms or anything, you know, being black. And we couldn't buy food. We couldn't do that. They didn't tell us if we couldn't find a black restaurant or some store where we could buy bologna and cheese like they had...

JE: I guess you just accepted that because it was a way of life. Didn't it make you mad?

GR: Well, no. And that's back to what I'm saying: It didn't make us mad. It didn't make us mad. It was just a way of life; that was just the way it was.

JE: Yeah.

GR: You know, people get upset more now about it because of what it was when they realize what it was all about. But back then, we just accepted it. It was just a way of life with us.

JE: Yeah. You traveled in the south. How about the deep south?

GR: No. The only places we went were Nashville and Memphis. We went to Memphis; we spent the night in Memphis. It so happened that there was a pastor used to be here at my church. I belong to Bethel A.M.E. Church here in Claremore.

And there was a pastor back in those days that pastored Bethel and his name was Reverend Grandberry. And he moved to Memphis; and that's how we stayed overnight in Memphis. Our coach and all of them, they knowed him really well and this and that, and he has us come to his home. He had a nice, big home. Well, what he'd done, we'd fixed pallets on the floor and we all slept on the floor, you know, of his house.

Of course, we got out and went down on Beale Street, and fooled around, and visited and so forth. And we got up and went on in to Nashville. But it was quite an amusing trip; and I wish that some of the guys would have taken cameras and had pictures where we went to those different places. We went to Fisk University — beautiful black campuses down there — Fisk University and Tennessee State, all of those.

The finals were held at Tennessee State University. All the rest of the games were held in a high school called Pearl High that was in Nashville. That's where we went to watch most of the games until the finals; they had it at Tennessee State.

But, anyhow, as we were going down there, they wouldn't let us use the restrooms or sell us food. And what happened, as we drove out through the countryside, we would find a grocery store that had bologna and cheese, you know, meat kinda like that and all them lunch meats — good lunch meat back then. The coach, Mr. Morris, would go in and check with the guy and asked him could he bring us in, and slice up some lunch meat, and sell it, and so forth.

And he said, "Yeah, bring 'em in!"

They had some of them ol' wooden booths. And he'd slice up a bunch of bologna, and a lot of that longhorn cheese, and different types of lunch meat and so forth, and crackers. We'd get us some pop. That's what we ate

if we couldn't find one of the very few black restaurants that were down there. But, we enjoyed that and went on. We didn't pay any attention.

But we did, when we were on our way back from down there — I think it was on Sunday. Yeah. We found a black restaurant that had a lot of soul food.

JE: And what would you call "soul food?"

GR: Soul food is fried chicken, black-eyed peas, candied yams, pigs feet, all of this type of stuff that blacks — that they brand blacks to love to eat, you know? But everybody eats it now, though. Short ribs, cabbage, cornbread, cobbler and all of this type of stuff.

They had a music box. We called 'em "jukeboxes," and you'd put quarters in or whatever to play music. We went in there to eat and they had a little dance floor there where you could dance. But they wouldn't turn on the music box until after church was over in the afternoon (Chuckling). You couldn't dance or turn on the jukebox until after 12 o'clock, after church was over, then they'd turn on the jukebox and you could dance and play music.

But, Booker T. — I tell ya — Booker T. Washington... The year that we went down there, that's when Booker T. went down there and Booker T. played, in the finals, a team out of Kentucky, Paris, Kentucky, beat them. And, of course, Christian was our main rivals. Christian was C-class. See, Christian won the state 2 or 3 times. And they went to the nationals 2 or 3 times. Now, the guy told me that Christian won the nationals down there one time. I don't know for sure; I don't have the information that they did, but he told me about that.

Chapter 8 – 9:30
Snake in Car

John Erling (JE): Well, let me take you a few years down the road. What did you begin to do when you weren't playing baseball and basketball and all of that? What was your life? What did you do?

Gerome Riley (GR): After my baseball and basketball career, I joined the Marine Corps in 1954. Me and a friend of mine on that championship '53 basketball team — Alonzo Rogers, Jr. — we went and joined the Marines.

I stayed in there for awhile and he stayed in there and made a career of it, Alonzo Rogers, Jr. I came out, and fell in love, and got married. He stayed 20-some-odd years. He got involved in volleyball. I kept up with him, you know, and communicated with him and he began to referee volleyball games. He got interested in volleyball. And then, after that, he became the head volleyball coach in Washington — the girls volleyball coach in Washington.

JE: Okay. But ... You were married...

GR: I married. I came back and married. I married my schoolmate, Marie Johnson, and we had 4 children: 3 boys and a girl. When we were married, for a while, I went to work for Phillips Petroleum Company. That's where I really had some rough times, as far as being black — things that happened.

JE: You tried to integrate Phillips 66 Station?

GR: Phillips Petroleum Company, at that time, didn't hire many blacks — at that time — in 1958, when I started with them. My brother first started with 'em and I imagine that's what he went and joined the service because it was kind of rough and he might not have could withstood the pressure on him. And he went and joined the Army. My younger brother worked for 'em before I did. He got out and worked for 'em in '57; and I worked for 'em in '58, and I think that what happened is that he went and joined the service to get out of it and then they hired me in his place.

Back in those days, Phillips didn't hire many blacks. Well, I don't know how

many black managers they had in their retail outlets — very few. I would probably be second or third in line for managing one of the retail outlets they...

JE: And which one? Where was it located?

GR: Out here on Highway 20, east of town. There was a Howard Johnson restaurant and a Phillips 66 service station that set over on the Will Rogers Turnpike. That's where I started out in 1958. I started out as a porter; I was the lowest man on the totem pole, and that was cleaning the place, keeping things clean, cleaning restrooms, and this and that.

And in peak times, I did work the driveway some where they serviced cars and so forth. And after I worked at porter, for that time, they made me driveway salesman. I worked on up. In fact, it took a while for me to make driveway salesman. And I sold more merchandise on that driveway than most of those guys out there — those driveway salesmen. Tires, batteries — I'd go out there and sell a set of tires. I'd sell 2 a day just like that. It's just about knowing how to talk to people and how to present yourself.

I did that and then after that they needed an assistant manager. One of the friends of mine said, "Well, Riley would make a good assistant manager."

He said, "Well, he couldn't handle that!" That's what the manager said.

They got into conversation about it and that friend of mine said, "Well, why not? He knows everything that the other guys do and everything."

So, after that, they finally made me assistant manager. Then after assistant manager, they made me manager. So I went from porter, driveway salesman, assistant manager, and manager. And it was a hard fight. There was times that I started to quit.

JE: Why?

GR: Because of the pressure and the things that they did.

JE: What did they do?

GR: The first thing that happened is I started in November. It was November. I never should have. It was November of '58. And all of the stations at that time, they had a Christmas party. And I wasn't invited. They didn't invite me to the Christmas party. It didn't bother me.

It's what we were talking about: It was just the way of life and you didn't really realize what was going on until later and later in life. The manager at that time, he didn't tell me that I was not invited. It was one of the employees that had come to me and said, "Riley, they're having a Christmas party," at such and such a date, and this and that. He just told me that I wasn't invited. I just took it right on the chin — didn't say anything.

JE: Did they do anything else to you?

GR: That was the first incident of racial injustice that happened. Then, as time went on, every employee had a key to the cash box — you know, made change, people paying for gas, and this and that. It wasn't modern. We had a cash box that would set out there, locked in. And everybody had a key. Every employee that waited on people had a key. You didn't have just one key and could just wait on somebody, because busy times, you couldn't do it. But everybody had a key.

And what happened... You'd check out every shift. We had three shifts: 7 to 3, 3 to 11, 11 to 7. Each shift checked out. You know, check out of your shift to see if there was any shortage and you'd check the next shift and leave 'em even. And they began to have shortage. They employed so many different people that came in there — employees, you know. They'd work 6 months and leave, or 3 months and leave, like that. And you never really knew who you were hiring. They didn't do background checks; they didn't do drug testing and all that like they do now.

But anyhow, the cash box did come up short and they began to point fingers at me. And that's the way it's always been. In fact, that reminds me of back in the day of slavery. That the black man didn't have a voice, he didn't have a say-so, or nothing. And if a white person pointed his finger at a black person, that the black person did that, they'd take his word for it. You didn't have no say-so. You were just guilty.

But all of this shortage began to happen and I wouldn't take a penny in the world from nobody — never would, never will. That kinda got next to me when I knew that I wasn't doing it. The pressure got really, really bad. In fact, there was one time that I went to go home, and they had put a snake in my car. And they know a lot of people are afraid of snakes, you know, and I was too. A big black snake, about 6-foot long. They didn't turn him loose, but they tied him to my steering wheel to where he couldn't get loose. And when I went in and I'd seen this big snake wrapped around, out of the corner of my eye, I closed the door and run in there.

And one of the guys come out there and got it out. Now, I didn't report none of this. I didn't report none of this stuff.

JE: You could have, to Phillips' people.

GR: Well, maybe I didn't report it or anything at the higher up or anything, and I don't know whether they know it today.

JE: Yeah.

GR: But, anyhow, as time went on, I had a good friend that worked with me and his name was Wayne McDaniel. He was a good friend of mine, a Christian fella. We were talking at what we called the "doghouse." It was a house on the driveway where you stayed and waited on customers. Well, the station was up a little further — the main station — but we stayed down there in the "doghouse," we called it and wait on customers.

And I was talking to him about quitting. And he said, "Riley, listen: You're a good employee." He said, "Don't quit." He said, "Things are going to get better." He said, "I guarantee you." So he might have had some input in reporting things.

But, anyhow, I stayed on; and as time went on, things did begin to get better and, in fact, the manager that was there when all of this was going on, they moved him — because they used to move managers around. And when he left, things really did get better. Things began to break. Things began to open up.

JE: Did you work for Phillips for many years?

GR: I started work for Phillips in 1958 and I retired in '95. I worked 37 years for 'em.

JE: Oh, wow! In retail places?

GR: In retail. In retail.

JE: In gas stations?

GR: Yeah. In fact, I started out here on the Will Rogers Turnpike, east of town, off of Highway 20 on the Turnpike. They had a big Howard Johnson's restaurant and Phillips Station there. I worked there for 20-some-odd years.

When I first started to work out there on the turnpike, there was a lot of business up and down that turnpike. But after years passed, over there at Catoosa, they opened that up and they built that 244 — 144 — through there and they began to build truck stops, and it all bloomed up over there. Whenever they got those all established over there and built, then the turnpike traffic for service stations went down.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement).

GR: And so, after a period of time, I don't remember what year it was, they closed that station out there on Highway 20 where I first started and moved me up to Vinita. Midway, up there where the big McDonald's is. Phillips took over those stations. Conoco did have those. But Phillips took 'em over. I managed the station on the eastbound lane for 8 years and then I retired out of there. I drove back and forth every day — 72 miles round trip.

Chapter 9 – 7:40

Sallie Rogers McSpadden

John Erling (JE): Did you ever encounter any Ku Klux Klan in this area?

Gerome Riley (GR): No. No, we never did. We never did. And that's back to what I'm saying: They did in Tulsa, but as far as here, there wasn't any of

that action around here; and that's why I say Chelsea and Claremore... I'm so proud to me here and from here because there was really any real-real extreme situations that came about from segregation.

One thing that I was going to mention when we lived in Chelsea: The people up there treated us so good. My daddy, they all loved him and respected him so much. Mrs. Sallie McSpadden — I was wanting to talk about her. Will Rogers' sister. Had a big home up there in Chelsea. And they just about took care of us.

See, my daddy, on the side, he chauffeured Mrs. Sallie McSpadden, and served parties, and we'd all go up there — she'd want us up there a lot of the time. And what we did, we worked up there in the yard in the summer — took care of the grass and mowing. They had another black man, his name was Gus Rogers, who took care of the cows and horses. We worked in the gardens.

Every time we'd go up there in the mornings, one of Mrs. McSpadden's daughters that lived there, her name was Helen Eaton, she'd tell us, "Come on in, boys, and getcha something to eat!"

We'd go in there in the mornings and they always had fixed a glass of milk, a peanut butter and jelly — some kinda sandwich, something. Every time we'd go to pick up milk, and they gave us milk, so we'd pick up the milk. We worked there in the summer out there in the yard and then in the garden. Daddy chauffeured and served parties. And when Will Rogers would come in, my grandmother worked in the kitchen and she always would tell us how Will Rogers would come in and put a 10 or 20-dollar bill in her apron pocket, because they had big get-togethers there at Mrs. McSpadden's place all the time.

And a lot of times, after Will Rogers' death, his buddies would come up there still and visit his sister, Mrs. McSpadden, because Will Rogers was raised up there around Chelsea, and Oologah, and Claremore and all about there.

They would fly in there — those guys in them planes that had them Piper Cubs. They wasn't no big planes, or jets, or nothing back then. You know

what I'm talking about. And they would fly in and they would land out there in the pasture. See, they had a lot of property out there. And they'd land out there in that field and we'd go out there around them planes and look. They always carried orange stakes; and they drove 'em in the ground and tied the plane to it to keep it from blowing away. Them Piper Cubs, they were made out of canvas. They were light. And they would always tie 'em down, anchor 'em down, to keep 'em from blowing away.

JE: Will Rogers died August 15th, 1935, when you were just a year old. But then you heard stories about him through his sister.

GR: Oh, yeah. Well, in fact, Mrs. McSpadden... I'll tell ya what was touching to me. Mrs. Sallie McSpadden's a wonderful lady. She was sick, terminally ill, and her daughter that lived with her, Helen Eaton, called us all in the house and said, "Momma wants to see ya."

Well, she had a big bedroom upstairs — two-story house up there; it's still there. And Mrs. McSpadden called the kids all in the bedroom and talked to us — me and my two brothers; my sister wasn't born. She called us boys in there and just hugged us and everything, talking about she loved us. It was so touching. We knowed that she was terminally ill, you know, and she wanted to see us and talk. She just hugged us and loved us so much.

They just about took care of us. They'd done so much for us, my dad and... Helen Eaton stayed with her — that was her daughter — and Helen had a daughter that was named Lucia. Lucia got married there in her house. Of course, my dad served that wedding. And we were up there. We were up there when Lucia got married, her granddaughter. We were all there: Her and all her relatives, Clem, and Beau, and all her brothers and things, you know, they were all up there.

JE: What was Will's sister's name again?

GR: Sallie McSpadden. Clem was her nephew.

JE: Clem McSpadden?

GR: Beau McSpadden was her brother and she had 2 or 3 brothers. They were all nice people; they treated us well. They had the cows and they gave us a gallon milk every day when we went up there to pick up the milk. They really were nice. They just about took care of us.

JE: Yeah.

GR: They were wonderful people and I can't say enough about 'em. I just love those people. That's why I say we never had any hard times up there. There was always gonna be a smart aleck in the bunch, in the crowd, that's going to draw attention. But all of the guys that I was associated with, Ralph Terry and all of those guys — decent guys, respectable guys — they were on our side.

JE: Yep.

GR: There's always some guy wanting to start trouble. We had one guy up there who was a smart aleck-y type of guy. There was a cafe up there in Chelsea. His name was Ed South. Him and his son, Clifford South, run it. We called it The Greasy Spoon (Laughing).

He used to make the best hamburgers, and homemade chili, and stew that you didn't know which way your lips were on. Them hamburgers — them greasy burgers — you'd put that meat on that grill and they'd mash them onions in it and cook it in 'em, you know, all over. Those were the best.

But we ate there. He had a place for us in the back, in the kitchen, where we'd sit down and ate. That's where they hung out, a lot of the guys did.

JE: And by the way, it's hard to imagine you are 87 years old. I mean, that mind of yours... Did you ever have any health issues or problems down through the years?

GR: Well, no. I never did have many. I do have, at this time, I am a diabetic; and I've got high blood pressure, but my blood pressure's mostly under control. I don't know about my blood sugar, because I'm eatin' some candy now, but I've had a good life. I haven't had any major issues or anything.

I do remember what happened when I was playing baseball. The only problem that I had, body-wise, at that time, was ... We had a ball game scheduled for a team and they didn't show up. We just chose sides in between the guys we had there and played a game, because people that came...

I was playing third base and we got a guy trapped between second base and third base. I was running him down and somehow, my spike hooked into the base or whatever it was — the ground — in the wrong direction and my leg twisted and broke all of the cartilage loose in that knee. Fortunately, I didn't have to have surgery. My doctor at that time, they didn't have all the techniques. That was in 1957 or '8. My doctor at that time, he said, "Riley, you broke all of those cartilage loose in your knee."

And what we he did, he put it in a cast. That leg was in a cast for 6 weeks. And after he took the cast off of it, that leg had shrunk so bad, you know, I didn't even recognize it. So he said, "Riley," he said, "I want you to do some therapy to bring this leg back to where it should be."

And he told me that, every morning, in the bathtub, run it full of hot water; and get in that bathtub and work that leg, and work that leg. And by George, it came on back over a period of time. It took about a month or so or something about like that. And it finally came on back to where I could play ball again. I mean, you know, just through that therapy that he showed me, this water, you know. Just sitting back and forth and exercising that leg back and forth, and it did an outstanding job, and I don't have any problem with it today.

JE: Good.

Chapter 10 – 8:12 Black Businesses

John Erling (JE): So you are a historian yourself. The Claremore Museum of History has installed a permanent black history exhibit.

And, according to their website, "building heritage, history, and hope to present an inclusive representation of Claremore's history. The exhibit had input from black members of the community," such as you, and made a major impact in that. Tell me about it.

Gerome Riley (GR): The first thing I want to say is we've got an organization that formed here in Claremore that picked a number of guys here at Claremore. They got a committee and it's called Claremore Athletic Hall of Fame. They had I don't know how many members on that committee to pick different guys who had performed well in sports and went on and did well, you know, to go into the Claremore Athletic Hall of Fame. That happened in 2018. I was in that first class. I'm in the Claremore Athletic Hall of Fame. Me and my coach and another black guy — his name was Kenny Kinard — we went in that first class of the Claremore Athletic Hall of Fame.

The next year, we had another year from that championship basketball team, and I'm trying to get them all in there. And this is where it all started. We should have — I thought about it afterward — the whole basketball team, we should have went in there all together, which would have been more than just taking them year, after year; it'd take so long. But we've only got 3 left, so I'm sure that I'm working on it to get them in this next class.

But, anyhow, this Claremore Museum of History started. They were recognizing the businesses here in Claremore, but they didn't recognize — and a lot of people still don't know to this day — all of the black businesses that was here right in Claremore. And they were just south of the courthouse here, right in the city limits, on South Missouri Street — all up and down there — on North Owala Street on this north side of town.

I had been doing some history on the Cherokee Nation, the Freedman, slavery... I'd go into schools. They'd get me to make speeches to them. I've been in schools and spoke to classes: history, historical societies, and this and that. Whenever they acquired this library, the old library here in Claremore from the city to make a museum of history, our former mayor Tom Poole — I never shall forget him; he was a big supporter of us when we were playing ball. He was in school at the same time; and he got to be mayor of Claremore. Well, when he retired, they made a museum out of this old library that they acquired from the city.

They got to working on it, and revived it, and it's a beautiful place. It's beautiful inside there. It really is a nice place. Tom talked to me one day when I was over there visiting. He said, "Riley, we need to get some

information about the black business and so forth here in Claremore.” He said, “Do you have anything?”

I didn’t have anything, but I went to work on it and if you look back and see the pictures and the businesses they talk about in Claremore, and all throughout Oklahoma, they didn’t include the black businesses — but they were here. But that’s the way it was back then. I guess they figured that they just wasn’t going to include them because of the way of segregation and discrimination.

But all of those businesses that they didn’t include or didn’t have pictures of, you’d have thought that they’d have some pictures of some of ‘em, like they did the white; but there wasn’t, so that tells ya something. Just south of the Rogers County courthouse down there on South Missouri, there was lots of black businesses. There was barbeque restaurants, beer. There was 3 black hotels here in Claremore. There was the Johnson Hotel, there was Cobb Bath and Hotel, there was the Beak’s Hotel, there was beauty shops, there were grocery stores, there were redlight joints — all of this type of stuff, all of those businesses — barber shops, beauty shops — all of those types of businesses were here in Claremore. And they were black-owned businesses.

Of course, over on North Owalla, just below the school, there was a grocery store: Sanford Taylor’s Grocery Store and Tavern & Pool Hall. All of that type of stuff was here in Claremore and a lot of the people, like I said, in Claremore, didn’t know that. A lot of the people didn’t know that and they lived right here. Because it never was brought up.

And so I began to work on it and bring it out. I picked up pictures, what I could, different information that I could get about a lot of this stuff. One thing about it is, is that I was one of the few people living — that lived in this. Because I was down there in it. And when I was a kid coming up here, in school, my grandmother and them didn’t allow us to go down in the south part of town we called it down there, because it would get kind of rough down there on Saturday night. They had gambling and they had all of this type of stuff down there, right here. That’s when all the people came out on Fridays and Saturday night, you know, down there. They didn’t allow us to go down there. In fact, my cousin got killed down there and I was

down there. I lived in all of this stuff and I've got documentation, and I've got pictures and things to show for a lot of this.

It's like the deed to my church that you were talking about. It's over there; we loaned it to the museum. It's a loaner. You know you can donate or you can loan. Now a lot of it's donated. I donated my diploma and my 8th grade arithmetic book is all over there and a lot of different stuff; pamphlets from my school for the state music festival. It's beautiful. It's a nice display — one of the best around.

And I worked on it and worked on it, but what happened after Tom had reached out to me for this, it wasn't long before he retired; but he was on the board. And they brought another fella in to take charge of it, and it didn't move under him very much at all. Then once he came in and got in, and then that COVID came in, and that put a damper on things.

So we're sitting here about 3 years with nothing. And I'm still talking about this thing and talking to people, "We need to get something done, because I'm not going to be here forever." Now, I've got a documentary over there now also at that museum.

But, anyhow, we got a new director that came in named Steve Robinson. Very fine, knowledgeable fella. They put him in touch with me, that I'd been working on this project and to get the information about the black community, the businesses, and the people that left here and went on.

We got guys that came out of Lincoln that went on to be doctors, lawyers, different ones — first black highway patrolman came out of there, Ronald Johnson, that played on that state basketball team with me. Bryce Van went on to play professional basketball with the Kansas City Steers, at that time, was the American Basketball League. Alonzo Rogers who went on and got to be head volleyball coach, like I was saying, after a while, out in Washington. Charles Williams got to be a dentist, he came out of there; he had a practice in Kansas City — died this last year or year before last. And Dr. John Algie, he came out of there. He was a black doctor that came out of there.

JE: Out of Lincoln School?

GR: Out of Lincoln School. Judge Darnell Jones; his mother taught up there. He went to elementary school there. He's a federal judge in Philadelphia now. Bush appointed him. He's there now, Judge Jones. And I'm in touch with all of those people. They were down here when we had our opening of the museum on Juneteenth.

But, anyhow, as time went on, Steve Robinson — very knowledgeable man — he's the director over there. He's on the board of directors and he got things moving. Outstanding job. We've done research to make sure that everything was true.

Chapter 11 – 7:23

Didn't Go to Doctors

John Erling (JE): Now, those black businesses you talked about. What happened to them? Did people just move away or did they die?

Gerome Riley (GR): Well, this is the problem. Most of 'em moved away, passed on, and they kids didn't keep 'em up or do anything, and they were all dissolved, you know, and so forth. That's the way the black businesses are. That's just like here in Oklahoma: all the black towns. Oklahoma has more black towns than any state in the union. And most of 'em are dissolved now. All of those towns that used to be: Red Bird, Porter, Tallahassee, Summit, Clearview — all of these black towns — Boley — all of those black towns, a lot of them aren't there anymore. And I've been to a lot of 'em, you know. Them and the black businesses.

But that's what happened. The population here in Claremore, the black population, there used to be lots of blacks here. And, as the older people died out, the younger generation didn't keep things. They moved away. Most of 'em went off to college and they didn't really come back to settle here because the opportunities and assurances were greater in other places.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement).

GR: With this being a small town... Now, the opportunities they had, a broader scope that they could work from and get things done, and to accomplish things that they wanted to accomplish.

JE: Yep. Here we are in 2021. How many blacks — or percentage of blacks — in Claremore?

GR: Oh, my god... There's very few. There's very few blacks that live here that are originally from here. Now, there's quite a few blacks around here that I see around here. I guess that work at [unintelligible] or live out on the edge of town. I see 'em all of the time. And some of 'em may be from up to the college — Rogers State — but there are very few original blacks that are here.

JE: Yeah.

GR: I'd imagine there's not 15 or 20 families of original Claremore people, blacks, that are native, you know, that were raised up here.

JE: Yeah.

GR: But there are some still that's moved away in Texas and different places that are living there that I am in contact with occasionally. I can tell you right now there's about 10 people living that went to Lincoln School, that finished over there, right now — only about 10. And a ladyfriend of mine, Mildred Holland, she is the first black to attend Claremore High School when it integrated.

JE: Oh.

GR: Mildred Holland, she's a ladyfriend of mine. They integrated schools in 1955 and Mildred Holland, and Mary Snoddy, and William Snoddy were the first three blacks to attend Claremore High School and graduate.

JE: How about that?

GR: They're over there in that museum.

JE: Yup.

GR: And that museum is very interesting. There's photos there. There's pictures of the basketball and baseball teams, the 1953 state championship trophy, and all of the information over there is 99.99% true.

JE: Yup. I wanna thank you for what you've done here. Your mind is so clear at 87. Did you do anything special to be able to live to 87?

GR: Nah. I listen to my doctors, I stay active. You know, as a kid coming up, it's strange how we came up back then and I'll say this: We didn't go to doctors if we had an accident. We used to go barefooted in the summer, you know, and we'd cut our feet on rusty nails ... We had no tetanus shots; we didn't know anything about it. We pour some kerosene on it and keep going. We didn't go to doctors. If we got a cold, or that old-time influenza, Mom would fix us some broomweed tea — you don't know what that is, but it's up there in the pastures right now. Get that broomweed, boil it, and make tea out of it, rub us down with mentholatum or Vicks.

The main thing was the good Lord looked after us, because we didn't have no other way. We didn't go to doctors. Doctors — white doctors — they didn't doctor on blacks. That's the way it was back then and you had to improvise, and that's what we did. But here we are, today, a lot of us strong and still going, and never went to doctors.

JE: Yup.

GR: All of that flu and pneumonia and stuff you had — your body resisted it.

JE: And now you've gone through a pandemic.

GR: Yeah, yeah.

JE: And COVID.

GR: COVID... Well, I've had my shots. I just try to do what my doctors say. A lot of people will — I know my wife that passed away a few years ago, she used to have a problem about the doctors. Talking about these doctors

might not know everything, but they keep us living. Modern technology, and medicine, and doctors keeps us living longer.

JE: Yeah, exactly.

GR: We're living longer now than we ever have. I'd tell that to her; I'd say, "Why don't you quit going to the doctor and spending money. Just give that money to me or whatever you going to do and quit going to the doctor if you're not going to do what they say." (Chuckling)

But, I tell ya what: When you treat people right... And that's what I teach my kids: Treat people right, and believing in the good Lord, and trying to do the things that's right... It has lots to do with that. If you treat people right, don't misuse people, you know, and live a good life and do for people whatever you can, and wanna make people happy — it's a good life. It makes you feel good.

JE: So, I was going to ask you then: Your advice to young people listening to this. That would be it, right?

GR: Yes. Yes. To be truthful. Just like I tell my kids: I said, "Listen, if you tell a person something, you hold to it. I mean, if you tell a person you're going to do something..." I said, "That means a lot in this day and time."

It used to be, years and years ago, I don't know if you've heard it; if a man's word wasn't any good, he wasn't any good. And that's what they used to live by and just like I told them, I said, "Back then, a handshake mattered." Most people lived by handshakes. They didn't have no lot of contracts and this and that. Them guys shook hands on what they believed in, and what they said, and they was true.

That's what I tell my kids: "If you tell someone something, you hold to it." I said, "If you can't, don't tell 'em." And I said, "Don't say nothing." It's the best way in the world. And I said, "Be a person of your word, so people can depend on you."

JE: Do you think your children are listening to you?

GR: Yeah. They're listening to me.

JE: Good.

GR: They're listening to me.

JE: And what are their names, by the way?

GR: My oldest's name is Maxine. My second is Gerome Jr., and then Howard, and then Steve, and then Marlise. I've got 2 girls and 3 boys.

JE: And grandchildren now?

GR: Yeah. Yeah. I've got — I'll have to count 'em. 2, 3, 5... I've got 9.

JE: Wow.

GR: I've got 9 grandkids and 4 great-grandkids. (Chuckling)

JE: Well, how proud you should be of them and your life.

GR: I'll tell ya what: If I had put a price tag on all of the stuff that I've did for people and all of the money that I've spent, I'd be in pretty decent shape. But I'll get mine above. I get mine in the end. That's where I'm looking to get my glory.

JE: But, it made you feel good too.

GR: Yeah. That's exactly right. I don't feel bad about not anything.

JE: No. It was my honor to interview you today and to talk. You're a great speaker, a great historian, and Claremore is fortunate to have you. So, thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate it very much.

GR: You're welcome.

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