

George Henderson

Activist, author and educator; Henderson made an impression amidst cultural diversity.

Chapter 1 – 1:08

Introduction

Announcer: Dr. George Henderson joined the University of Oklahoma faculty in 1967. He and his wife Barbara Henderson were the first African-American couple to purchase a home in Norman. In this interview he will tell you how difficult it was to make that purchase. Dr. Henderson is the author of 28 books and has served as Dean of OU's College of Liberal Studies. Dr. Henderson was the first African-American in the state of Oklahoma to hold an endowed professorship. Our discussion with Dr. Henderson includes his friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Bud Wilkinson, Dick Gregory and Bill Russell. He talks about his decision to support nonviolence while seeking equality for African-Americans. A visit to Oklahoma's "Little Dixie" made him realize he was ready to die for racial equality. Dr. Henderson and his fellow activists set in motion many institutional changes that continue to this day. His book, *Race and the University* may be purchased in our bookstore. We are grateful for the generosity of our funders and listeners like you who believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com

Chapter 2 – 8:48

Escape Lynching

John Erling: Today's date is May 18, 2011. Dr. Henderson would you state your full name please and your date of birth and your present age?

George Henderson: George Henderson. My date of birth is June 18, 1932 and I am now 78.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

GH: In the conference room at the Department of Human Relations at The University of Oklahoma.

JE: Where were you born?

GH: I was born in Hurtsboro, Alabama. According to my mother it was a glorious event.

JE: Were you the first born?

GH: I was the only born for my mother and father.

JE: Your mother's name?

GH: My mother's name was Lula Mae Crawford who married Kidd Henderson. So the Crawfords and the Hendersons in Hurtsboro, Alabama started a dynasty.

JE: What did your father do?

GH: They were sharecroppers.

JE: Tell us what a sharecropper is.

GH: Sharecroppers are individuals who rent property and farm and try to earn a living that way. The proceeds they split between the owners of the property and themselves. Usually the owner of the property got most of the monies. For their sharecropping they got a shack to live in, credit at the store that was owned usually by the owners of the land, which meant that their debt was never paid off. My father was very discouraged by the fact that he would work all summer and prepare all winter and still end up poor.

JE: So there was no way he could ever overcome that hurdle apparently.

GH: There was absolutely no way—in fact, he projected that if he worked to be 100 years old he would still owe the owner of the land some money and the debt would be passed on to me because I would have the obligation to pay his debt. He told me that years later and I am glad that he made the decision to leave, because I didn't look forward to paying his debt.

JE: The education of your parents?

GH: Less than 7th grade education. They dropped out of school for obvious reasons. If you are taking care of crops and trying to maintain some semblance of farming, you simply don't have time to go to school.

JE: You said a shack to live in—do you remember the shack?

GH: Yes I do, because my mother had pictures of it. It was a very small wooden shelter. It had three generations of us living in a two-bedroom place: my parents, my father's parents and me. That was not a very good situation to live in, but it was a wonderful situation I've been told for a child to grow up in because I had adults very close and they were very touchable and they loved me very much.

JE: You probably only had outdoor facilities?

GH: Yes, we had an outdoor toilet really. My mother said I enjoyed playing with the chickens because they would follow me wherever I would go. I even took them into the privy. My mother stopped that habit. She said that wasn't very good. After all we were going to eat those chickens one day. (Chuckle)

JE: What kind of crops?

GH: Cotton—my mother described very vividly that she would wake up in the morning and she would take me with her when I was old enough to be carried and she would pick cotton. They didn't have a mule incidentally, so in essence she served as a mule and a picker.

JE: And that's terribly tough work isn't it, picking cotton?

GH: Indeed it was.

JE: Did you have to—

GH: No. I left before I was seven years of age, but my mother described all of this to me. She did not ever want me to grow up and be like them. She said, "There has to be more in life than picking cotton."

JE: She probably saw education then as your way out?

GH: The only way out. Our little plot of land was several miles a way from a place called Tuskegee Institute. My mother remembered going to Tuskegee and seeing the well dressed, well educated young men and young women. She said to herself, she told me, over and over and over again, this is where I want me child to grow up and go to, the Tuskegee Institute. She brainwashed me. Let me describe that situation if I may. When I was old enough to request dessert after dinner, my mother would ask me, "What are you going to be when you grow up baby and what are you going to do?" I would say nonsensical things and I didn't get dessert. Then I realized, I had to tell my mother I was going to Tuskegee. Well, my mother could have worked an as interrogator for the CIA—she was good at it. She never knew what a college was, but she did know that that place where she saw those men and women going in and out of was the only opportunity that she perceived for me to better myself and my family.

JE: Yes. So you did move to Indiana?

GH: My father was run out of Hurtsboro by the Ku Klux Klan. I know about the details, he explained them to me. The norm in that community, as most southern communities, is if the white people have the privilege of walking on the wooden plank when it was raining so they would remain relatively dry. It wasn't a sidewalk—it was a plank-walk really. One day my father decided that he wasn't going to yield a plank to a white male. He was just tired of walking in the mud. So my father being my father, decided that eh would claim his portion of the plank for himself and he knocked a white male into the mud. Well, you can promptly guess what was going to happen to him. Ironies of all ironies—my father was a black mason. A white mason came to our shed and said, "Kidd, you had better get out of here because tonight we are coming to lynch you." A white mason extended a courtesy to a black mason and saved my family. My father didn't tell me that part of it until after I was grown. I grew up hating white people because as he told half of the story, because of white people, we had to leave our home and I hated white people with a passion.

JE: Did you leave in the dark of night?

GH: Yes.

JE: Now you remember this part?

GH: My mother told me that part and my father told me that part. They told me separately the stories. I guess they had to tell—they wanted to unburden themselves of why we were living in Chicago and not Hurtsboro. They gathered everything they could in two suitcases and paper sacks and got a ride from some friends to a bus station. From the bus station we then traveled to East Chicago, Indiana where my mother had some relatives and my father had some relatives. We lived with my mother's eldest sister until they could find a place of their own. That situation was interesting because I had in that household my two first cousins, my aunt, my mother and my father and me in one bedroom. Well, guess what? They converted part of a kitchen into another bedroom for my mother. That meant that George Henderson and his two cousins, two males and a female slept in what was the equivalent to the living room. It was really a pull out bed. My cousin Kate had her own separate cot and Robert, my first cousin and I had the large pullout. That was not a good situation obviously. The first toilet that I remember in that place and I will always remember that one, it was a separate room with a hole in the floor. That was our bathroom. We used newspaper because we couldn't afford toilet paper on a regular basis. We did what we had to do and then wiped ourselves with newspaper. That was my first toilet. I still remember taking a bath in those tin tubs. You don't want to be the last person taking a bath in a tin tub. The water is cold and it's dirty and it's just not a good situation. I usually ended up the last person in the tin tub. You also have to clean it out if you're the last person. I think about those years and I say to myself "that was horrible" but it wasn't, because I was with my cousins and I was with my relatives and as far as I knew everybody lived like that. The norm was poverty in my community, but I was happy. My mother and her sister cooked on a wood stove and some of the best food I have ever eaten in my life was cooked on that wood stove. Family for us was very important. We laughed and joked. My cousin and I created our own games. We played cowboys and Indians. The irony there is that we always wanted to be the cowboys. We didn't see the irony of the situation that here we were black boys wanting to be cowboys. Well, if I had known about the Buffalo soldiers and the other things, perhaps I would want to be the Indians.

JE: Right.

GH: But I just didn't know.

Chapter 3 – 9:30**“This Little Light”**

John Erling: Did you receive assistance from the government in living at that time?

George Henderson: We were on welfare. I do remember welfare and I remember every year we would get a voucher and there were two stores in my hometown that took the vouchers. That meant that I was able to get the equivalent of one pair of jeans, some shirts and some socks. I got meager clothing with the vouchers and those things had to last me for a full year—impossible. By the middle of the first half of the academic year my shoes had holes in them. My socks had holes in them where the shoes had holes in them. My shirts were worn out and my shorts were grungy. I was a mess. My mother made the best of it. My mother was a very good seamstress. She did all that she could to take care of my shirts and my pants, but she couldn't take care of my shoes. There was nothing she could do about the holes in the shoes, so I decided that I would put cardboard and paper and newspapers in them to keep the snow and the rain out. It was a very futile activity.

JE: Then you were going to school—you were in the first grade?

GH: Yes. I was in the equivalent to special education. They didn't call it special education then, but we were called dummies.

JE: Why?

GH: The teacher said that we were not going anyplace.

JE: So this was a white school that you were attending?

GH: All of my teachers, from elementary school through four years of college were white, so the good, the bad and the ugly were white. I lived in a predominantly black neighborhood in my elementary and secondary school years, but my teachers were white. Now in those days you have to remember that being a teacher was a very good job. It was a well-respected job and a high-paying job in fact by comparative standards.

JE: So because you were black she considered you a dummy?

GH: Several of my teachers considered those in my room a dummy. There were some other teachers who did not however and they were the ones who rescued me, who saved me.

JE: Some teachers gave up on you?

GH: One teacher as I wrote in my book, told my mother that I was a “no-learner”. That I wasn't going to learn anything anyway. She told my mother that the best thing that could happen to me was to drop out of school as soon as I could and get a factory job and earn a living that way.

JE: Do you recall as a student, did you enjoy school?

GH: No, no. It was not a very pleasant time for me. Initially, I didn't learn to read and every child had to read. No matter what class you were in you had to read and trying to read

publicly or pretend to read publicly was embarrassing. I was ridiculed by my classmates. The teachers for some reason would always ask me to read first knowing that I could not read. So my other classmates, most of them who couldn't read themselves, would stare at the embarrassment. So at one point I just stop responding—I shut down completely.

JE: During your first year?

GH: During my first three years.

JE: So when do you think you started to really learn how to read?

GH: At the end of third grade.

JE: But they promoted you?

GH: Oh yes. After all you can't hold all of these kids back. You've got another group coming through so you just push them on.

JE: So you went through the second grade and couldn't read?

GH: That's right. It was only midway through the third grade where a teacher "found me" as she described the situation, and you know, I don't remember her name but i do remember conversations with her and thank goodness for the teacher. I gave her lots of reasons why I couldn't read. She said, "George I can't so anything about you being a negro. I can't do anything about you being poor. I can't do anything about where you live. But I can do something about your education in this room. You are not going to be that pity-poor-me the negro. I'm not falling for that. I will provide you with remedial education. I'll come in early in the morning and I will stay after school and you will learn if you want to learn. She called a meeting with my mother and she explained to my mother what she was going to do. My mother agreed. She sent me to school 15 or 20 minutes early to be tutored and my mother understood that most of the time I would stay late with this teacher and I learned. Oh, did I learn.

JE: You enjoyed it?

GH: I enjoyed it! You spend all of those years pretending to read or detesting reading and now suddenly you are looking at the words and they are making sense. For the first time I was alive educationally and there was a potential there that I didn't realize that I had—this teacher knew it. If I may I would like to tell you how she described herself. She came to my high school graduation and she pulled me aside and she said, "George, I am so proud of you. I am a miner and I know that buried in schools like ours are some educational gems like you. My job is to find you and dig you out and dust you off and dust off the ignorance and the illiteracy and polish you and let you shine. And she did it—she absolutely did it. I remember she sat behind me at graduation and she was humming *This Little Light of Mine, I'm going to let it shine* and oh my goodness, she did—she absolutely did. I'm glad that miner found me.

JE: What was the name of the high school you graduated from?

GH: Washington High School in East Chicago, Indiana in 1950.

JE: Was your high school experience good for you?

GH: High school experience was very good for me. When I moved from the equivalent of special education, by the time I graduated from high school I was a member of the National Honor Society. The potential was there. That teacher passed me on to other teachers. It was as if I was their project of the decade it seemed like (chuckle). One teacher after another worked with me. No excuses however, the only major rule, no excuses was do the work. If you do the work you'll get the grades and if you don't, you will not. I understood and I appreciated that. They set the boundaries.

JE: You probably remember the moment then when you walked across the stage to get your diploma.

GH: Oh, do I ever! Yes.

JE: There must have been a big uproar.

GH: The first person in your family to graduate from high school that was quite an accomplishment.

JE: Yes. Were you involved in sports?

GH: I was on the East Chicago Washington High School Track Team. I was billed as the fastest kid in high school. I ran the sprints, 100 and 220 yards—they didn't do meters then, they did yards. But I want to tell you why I called myself the second-fastest kid in East Chicago. After one track met I was feeling really full of myself and I had my medals for winning the 100-yard dash and the 220-yard run and I had anchored the winning relay team and a girl named Naomi said, "George Henderson, fastest kid in East Chicago huh?" I said, "You'd better believe it babe." She said, "Let's have a race and see who really is the fastest." I said, "I don't want to embarrass you." She said, "Oh, come one!" I said, "Okay, if this will shut you up. I'm going to beat you and will this be the end of it?" She said, "Yes." I said, "How far do you want to run?" She gave me the distance. I said, "Now, you can even tell us when to go." She said, "On your mark, get set," and I cheated and I went and I had two steps on her. One-quarter of the way through she was about 4 steps behind me. Half-way she was about 1 step behind me. Three-quarters of the way she even with me and I stopped running. I said, "I don't want to embarrass you anymore." She said, "Now we both know, don't we!" (Laughter) And we did! That was my first realization of what sexism did for the males that it did not do for the females. Naomi was faster than I was.

JE: Was she on the track team?

GH: No, there were no track teams for girls then.

JE: Then it was embarrassing to you that a female beat you? (Chuckle)

GH: Yes! (Laughter) but she kept that secret! I was embarrassed. I kind of wished that she had indeed told at least one other person. Because of my running ability I was able to escape

an awful lot of physical abuse. All of us belonged to a gang of some kind. There was an awful lot of fighting and sometimes we didn't do so well in mortal combat as we referred to it—it wasn't really. But I could outrun everybody. I won lots of medals. It was track that got me to Michigan State Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1950.

Chapter 4 – 2:55**His Bride**

John Erling: At Michigan State you met an important person?

George Henderson: I met the most important person in my life nit the first year I was there but the second year. The first year at Michigan State the enrollment was about 12,500 or 12,000 students. Less than 100 were African-Americans and most of us were athletes or graduate students from the South, because the graduate students couldn't get their graduate education in the southern states. Of the 95 African-Americans, there were about seven black females. That was not a very good year. The next year, five more black females came and the odds were looking better for me. Among that group was a beautiful young woman named Barbara Beard from Covert, Michigan. I looked at her and I knew. Once I saw her I stopped even looking and seeing the others. I walked up to her and I said, "You know you love me." (Laughter) She said, "I detest you!" (Laughter) When she told her dorm mother who this brash young man was, because I was captain of the track team, her dorm mother says, "Oh, George Henderson is one of the nicest men on campus." Well, Barbara didn't believe that. I was very aggressive in pursuing her because I had never seen anyone who touched my heart the way she did. The way the situation was with the black males and the few black females was that you got your dates by seniority. I was a sophomore and the graduate students obviously had top seniority and then you had the seniors and the juniors. Well, my goodness, by my estimation I wasn't going to get a date with Barbara until maybe the last quarter of my senior year, (chuckle) but fate intervened. One of my roommates, an African graduate student, had a date with Barbara, but he got the flu. He could not keep the date and he asked Barbara if I could take his place. She thought about it. She asked, "Who is it? Is it George Henderson?" He said, "Nope." He persuaded her to go to the movie. So here's how George and Barbara had their first date. She said on the phone to me, "I'll got to the movie with you, but here are the conditions. I'll buy my own ticket." I said, "Yes!" to myself. She said, "I'll buy my own popcorn." I said, oh boy this is really gonna be good. And she said, "The third condition is you keep your hands to yourself." I said, oops. We had our first date and we

laughed about my silliness. She was able to laugh about her avoidance of me without even knowing me. We got married two years later and it lasted and it's still going on. We've stopped counting.

Chapter 5 – 4:50

Public Service

John Erling: So then while you were in school the Korean Conflict comes along.

George Henderson: Yes, oh yes, the Korean Conflict. Being in a land-grant college, all of the males indeed who were able, unless there was some physical disability were in ROTC. I was in ROTC-Infantry. Michigan State would bring its graduates who were in the military back to speak to us. A young captain came and he said, "The life expectancy of a First Lieutenant is not very good but let me tell you what the life expectancy of a second lieutenant in combat is—about 15 to 20 seconds." He was exaggerating of course, but that was enough to get my attention. I said, "I'm out of here." I dropped out of ROTC and my draft board sent me a notice: Greetings. To beat going into the Army, I'll be very honest about it, I joined the Air Force and went to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, which was culture shock for me in many ways. I didn't know any white males college-age from the South. Well, at Lackland Air Force Base most of the individuals that I started out with were from the South. One of them in particular, a guy named Harvey from Oklahoma—Harvey and I didn't particularly get along. He liked Country and Western music and I liked Motown. After listening to Country and Western music for several months I learned to like Country and Western. And thanks to Harvey or no thanks to Harvey, depending upon one's perspective, I am the only person in my family today who loves Country and Western. Not another person in my family will listen to my Country and Western music with me. One of my daughters says, "Dad, we need to have a DNA test to make sure that you're a brother." (Laughter) From Lackland Air Force Base I then went to Scott Air Force Base to train as a radio repairman. From Scott Air Force Base I was sent to French Morocco out in the desert. I spent two years, two months and 14 days there. During that time the Air Force had a regulation in particular that if you were over surplus in terms of your specialty, you could get an early out if you were going to college. Well, I was the worst radio repairman they had in the Air Force I do believe. My commanding officer was glad to certify that George Henderson is not needed at this installation and he is going to college and he recommended an early release for me.

JE: That would have been what year?

GH: 1953.

JE: Then you went on to which university?

GH: Michigan State was where I started but I went back then to Wayne State. I didn't go back to Michigan State because by that time Barbara and I had two children and we thought it would be better if I would go to Detroit and get a job and I did. I went to Detroit and I worked full-time and I went to school full-time and did indeed finish a Bachelor's in Sociology and a Master's in Sociology and a Doctorate in Educational Sociology all from Wayne State University.

JE: Color didn't make a difference there?

GH: No. I am glad that I did go to Wayne State University because it was a metropolitan commuter school that exposed me to the widest possible range of individuals in terms of social class and jobs. In any given class that I enrolled in there would be street people just wandering in auditing the class. Those of us enrolled were executives from Chrysler and General Motors and office workers—you name it. There was the widest range of people employed in our classrooms. So the education I got at Wayne State encouraged me and inspired me to consider public service and working in community service. I got a job as a social caseworker. My first job was with Big Brothers and Big Sisters in Detroit. From there, I then became the first black social economist in the Detroit Housing Commission, then from there, to the Detroit Urban League and that's when George Henderson really started growing as an activist. As an employee in the Detroit Urban League I started out initially as an assistant director of community services and later became director of community services. My boss at the Urban League was Whitney Young Junior, who did some fantastic things in terms of civil rights. But because of Whitney young, I then was introduced to Martin Luther King, Junior and Malcolm X.

JE: In Detroit?

GH: Yes.

Chapter 6 – 7:40

King Jr. & X

John Erling: Tell us about that meeting and about him.

George Henderson: My job when I became director of community services was to coordinate the community-related activities between the NAACP and the Southern Leadership Conference and the Urban League and facilitate in any way that I could the first march in Detroit with Dr. King. It provided me with the opportunity to talk with him and to talk

about the civil rights activities. What kind of man was he? We were about the same age truthfully. But I viewed him not just as a peer, but as a role model and later as a mentor. I had never been exposed to an African-American with the kind of charisma that he exuded. Two men had that kind of charisma that I've been exposed to, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. When Martin or Malcolm walked into a room they tended to suck all of the air out and the rest of us were just hanging on for whatever oxygen and whatever they would give us in terms of words of wisdom and encouragement. It's an experience that I will treasure forever and remember forever. Martin Luther King, Jr. really loved children and I guess that really appealed to me also. But he had something else going for him. My mother made sure when I was growing up that I attended a Baptist church. Initially, I didn't want to go to church. Then when my mother finally told me that all the girls were there, that was enough inducement for me. So at first I went to church and I would fish around and try to get any kind of date. Then gradually I started listening to the minister, and when I heard these words: God is love, not indifference, not hate, God is love. That stayed with me years later meeting Martin Luther King Junior who was talking about love and suffering being redemptive. All of his messages fit with my early Baptist Church activities so it was a natural fit for me.

JE: You had one-on-one conversations with him?

GH: Yes.

JE: Was he warm and gentle?

GH: Very warm and very gentle, but also with a sense of humor.

JE: About Malcolm X then, and his personality...

GH: Martin was sophisticated. Let's face it he was a child of privilege. Malcolm was streetwise. What I got in sophistication from Martin was complemented by what I got in street knowledge and concern about the poor, the uneducated and unprivileged blacks from Malcolm X. Malcolm said, "George, I don't own property now and I don't intend to own property. If I own property that means that the person who has loaned me the money has some leverage over me. Therefore I don't do those things. I am concerned about poor people." I started observing the two men. Martin stayed in the best hotels or motels and Malcolm stayed with someone in the community. Both were effective. Malcolm tried to get me to join his movement. He said, "Without young black intellectuals I don't have a significant movement." He was absolutely correct. I told him that I was already committed to Martin. Truly I didn't believe in violence. I bought into suffering is redemptive and nonviolence—I bought into all of it. But I did tell him that maybe in another time and another life I would have been one of his most ardent supporters. The conversation that we had was man-to-man, in a way that I grew up through that conversation. He asked me, "If you cannot support me, would you try not to do anything to hurt me?" I said, "Yes." I

realized that I didn't have to subscribe to all of his principles, but I didn't have to dislike him either nor do anything to try and destroy him. At the end of that conversation I said, "Now, do you promise not to do anything to hurt me?" He laughed and he said, "I'll think about it." Then finally he said, "Yes."

JE: Did he argue against the approach of Dr. King?

GH: Yes.

JE: What was his argument?

GH: Now, I did hear him speak several times and we talked about it. He said, "Any man that is a minister or a pastor, or shepherd, who has the responsibility of guarding his sheep, who will not teach you to run from the wolf and will not teach you to fight the wolf, is effectively killing you." I didn't have a good answer for that one,

JE: That's a strong argument wasn't it?

GH: I wrestled with that for years.

JE: But it didn't persuade you from changing?

GH: No, because that seed was already planted, Malcolm X moved me from being a negro to a black man. Prior to his teachings, black was considered negative. Everything or almost everything in the literature, if it was black it had the connotation of being evil and devious. Malcolm turned that around. He said, "Black is beautiful. The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice" and on and on. The first time I heard him speak to a large audience in Detroit, he got up on the platform and said, "Brothers and sisters, this is a meeting of black people. If there are any negroes in here would you please leave?" None of us left, but that then was the transformation from being a negro to being a black man. I then was proud of saying that I am black.

JE: And Malcolm X did that?

GH: Malcolm X did that.

JE: He also promoted Black Panthers?

GH: Most people didn't understand or bother to read the three components of black power, which is what we are really talking about, black pride, black commerce, in other words, supporting black business, and black self-defense. It was the last part of it that most people did not appreciate. When you mention the Panthers, the Black Panthers at the time was the most effective group of getting individuals who were doing drugs to stop doing drugs because they said if you are going to be involved in our movement you can't have that stuff in your system—you need a clear head. The Black Panthers started free breakfast and providing food for poor black children. Most people either don't remember that or give them credit for that. What indeed was the nail that shut tight the minds and the eyes and ears of people who were looking at the Panthers, was this, they said, "If the Police will not defend our children and our women and our defenseless males, we will."

It was the carrying of the guns and all of that symbolized in terms of self-defense that turned a lot of people off. The first two, in terms of pride and supporting black business and encouraging individuals to do those things was very positive. Self-defense was a negative aspect with the violence potential.

JE: Did Malcolm X bring to the forefront the term African-American?

GH: He was more concerned with black, but he was also concerned with Africans. He wanted us to understand, those that he was addressing, that we indeed had a heritage and it started in Africa. So there was nothing wrong with being an African-American. The term black however was to combat the negative aspects of our identity. So he promoted blackness more than he did African-Americanness.

Chapter 7 – 11:00

Oklahoma University

John Erling: How did the term “African-American” come to the forefront of American thinking? Where did that happen?

George Henderson: That happened...oh we were many things. We were colored, then we were negro, then we were black and then African-American came later, about the 1980s.

JE: But didn't Malcolm X also promote the identity of blacks and their heritage. The afro, did that come from Malcolm X?

GH: No, no, no that was all part of promoting the African identity, but, the afro was a creative way...there were no Africans running around with what some of us were wearing, but it was a creative way of establishing our own identity.

JE: And some dress too?

GH: Yes, some dress.

JE: That was just fun within your culture?

GH: Not so much fun, but (we were) trying to establish an identity that was different and that was uniquely ours, the elaborate handshakes also, with the claps and the taps and all of the other things—we were creative people and this allowed us to be very expressive.

JE: In 1967 you received a job offer from The University of Oklahoma. How did that come about?

GH: I received my doctorate in 1965.

JE: And that was in the field of?

GH: Educational sociology. My mentor who was chair of the anthropology-sociology department, Professor Leonard Moss, started me teaching as an adjunct professor at Wayne State—Introduction to Sociology, Social Psychology and anything else that he

thought that I could teach, because in his mind I was a teacher—not in my mind—teaching was a way to earn extra money. But he said, “George you are our best adjunct instructor. So whenever we are scheduling our courses, you tell us when you want to teach and what course you want to teach and we’ll schedule the other adjuncts.” I was good at it. That was my calling and I didn’t realize it. After I received my doctorate in 1965, he called me into his office and said, “You ought to seriously consider becoming a professor.” Well, I didn’t listen initially. Finally he said, “George, I’m not going to schedule you as an adjunct professor anymore because you can do better than an adjunct.” This was in 1967. He said, “You’ve got to decide if you are going to be a teacher, or do those other things that you’re doing in terms of community activism. It doesn’t have to be either/or, but you need to decide what’s going to be most important, the activism or the teaching?” I thought about it. I said, “Let me at least try teaching.” He did some things with me. He took me to the national conferences and paid my way and introduced me to some of the foremost sociologists in the field. I was impressed and I thought maybe I will try this teaching. Well, he put the word out before I officially announced that I was going to try to become at least a full-time teacher. One of the individuals who called me was Professor Richard Hilbert of the Sociology Department of The University of Oklahoma. He had heard through Leonard Moss that I was available to consider a full-time teaching position. Oh, do I remember that call. I was assistant to the superintendent of Detroit Public Schools at the time. My secretary said, “There’s an individual from The University of Oklahoma who’s been trying to reach you for a week and I’ve been stalling him because I don’t want to lose you—you’re the best boss I’ve ever had. Will you talk to him and tell him no so that he will stop bothering us?” Well, I talked to Richard Hilbert and he introduced himself and said, “The University of Oklahoma would like for you to come and consider a position in education and sociology. I didn’t have enough money in my budget, but the College of Education and I got together and we pooled a position and we’d like for you to interview for it.” At the end of that conversation I said in my most arrogant voice, I said, “Professor Hilbert, there’s something you need to know about me.” He said, “What is it?” I said, “I’m a negro.” He said, “That’s your problem. Would you like to come to The University of Oklahoma?” (Laughter) I said to myself, that place can’t be all bad. I knew nothing about Oklahoma. I’ll be very honest. I quickly went to the library and I looked up Oklahoma and the first thing I saw was that they had lots of Indians. But I knew this much, they had a football team because I had been following those Sooners. So I was going to go to Oklahoma, not to be a serious candidate for that position, because I would let them pay for a vacation for me to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to see Indians and I wanted to see the football stadium where Bud Wilkinson had won all those games. I came, and the rest is history.

JE: So you committed then to come and you moved to Norman? What did you and Barbara encounter when you came to Norman?

GH: I was extremely naive. I didn't do my homework really. My professor incidentally was in the Navy at the time and he was stationed in Oklahoma. I thought he was kidding me about being in the Navy and being stationed in Oklahoma. "Where's the water?" I kept asking him. He said, "Believe me it's there." But he told me that it's a social milieu that would not be acceptable and that they would not welcome me with my point of view and my activism. He begged me not to come to Oklahoma and accept a job. I didn't know that it was a "once the sun went down" kind of town. If I had done my research I would have found that out.

JE: Tell us what that meant.

GH: That meant that black people could work here during the day, but they had to be out of town and out of sight when the sun went down. It was also a place that had a history of driving blacks out of town after dark. One of the grand wizards of the KKK lived here at one time, so it has a long history, but I didn't know the history. What was it like? The realtors had a legally unenforceable covenant that none of them would sell a house to a black family, to a person of African descent was how it reads. I was ready to teach, but I wasn't ready to be exposed and have my family exposed to some of the things that happened to them and to me and to us—to have garbage thrown on your lawn, to have your car egged, to have people drive by at odd hours shouting epithets, to have the police stop you from time to time to ask you why you are in the neighborhood; Obscene phone calls at all hours. That was our exposure to Norman, Oklahoma. Hello? But the other side to that story and the one that I find equally important happened to be Sally's Real Estate. Sam and Sally Matthews and Mokie Webb, the realtors who broke that covenant and had the audacity to sell a house to an African-American family, they broke the code.

JE: But you had tried to buy a couple of other houses?

GH: Yes, we did. The first house, Barbara loved it and she took pictures of it. Let me tell you that she was the one who came to look for a house. My job was such that in 1967 in June and July we had an altercation in Detroit called a race riot. So my job at the time was to try and put back together the Detroit Public Schools as best we could. So Barbara came after I accepted the job at OU to look for a house. She found a house that was absolutely a dream and made the down payment. Shortly thereafter I received a call from the owner and he said, "I forgot to tell you that we made significant improvements on the house and I will need additional monies." I said, "How much? I will send you a check." And that's when I realized what a pregnant silence was. The phone seemed to have gone dead but I could hear him breathing. He said, "Brother Henderson, I've got to level with you. A prominent

political family lives in the area and they don't want you there. Property values will go down and it will not look good for them. Would you please not buy the house?" I listened to my heart and not my head. We had a binding agreement. I said, "You can keep your house." Because Barbara and I had a contingency plan. She had two other houses that she had picked out in case this one didn't work out in rank order of preference. Within a week we received calls from those owners saying that those houses were sold when they were not. So the word was out to not under any circumstance sell a house to that family. Well, Sally's Real Estate did.

JE: How many children did you have at that time?

GH: Seven. Now, The University of Oklahoma was an illogical, irrational decision for me. Why would any man, father, person responsible for a family as large as mine accept a \$5,000 pay cut to go to a place called Oklahoma where we had no relatives and no connections and teach? I say with all sincerity to anyone who will believe me, the decision to come to Oklahoma was a decision that God made—it wasn't one that George made. It wasn't rational, this was where I was supposed to be.

JE: What were you thinking? Why did you? What was driving you inside that you thought you needed to be here?

GH: I requested that I have two hours of time with students, and I don't know why I made that request. But the College of Education and the Department of Sociology agreed. So they did indeed provide me with two hours of free, unscheduled time in terms of an agenda, with students from sociology and education. The students said to me, "Dr. Henderson, we have courses both in sociology and education that pertain to urban education and urban sociology. They are on the books, but they haven't been taught in a long time. You could bring a perspective that we would not get unless someone like you did indeed come here." That made sense to me. They said, "We know that you'll be given offers that are much, much larger and perhaps better than what you are going to get from the University of Oklahoma," They were absolutely correct on that one. But they said, "But we want you, would you please come?"

JE: Then you were the first black professor?

GH: I was the third African-American professor at the University of Oklahoma. Professor Melvin B. Tolson, Jr. was the first—professor of French and modern languages and Professor Lennie Marie Toliver of Social Work was the second, I was the third. Melvin rented an apartment and Lennie Marie lived in Oklahoma City, so they were not confronted with having to buy property in Norman—we were.

Chapter 8 – 3:47**Racism**

John Erling: A lot of people moved from Oklahoma City where it was desegregated to Norman?

George Henderson: Yes, because they did not want their children to be exposed to desegregated schools. And here we are. The beauty of this and what I like about it is when you talk about the fickle finger of fate—for many of parents who came to Norman to escape black children, the Henderson's came with seven black children. Their children found themselves in classes with my children. So, they ran into what they were trying to avoid—an encounter with black children.

JE: How did your children get along and how were they treated?

GH: Initially, our children were enrolled in what was referred to as the University School, and it was run by the College of Education. Some of the most liberal, or progressive, depending on one's perspective—some of the most highly educated and talented teachers were in the University School. So consequently, our children found an environment that was conducive, so there were relatively few individuals at the University School who indeed were fleeing racial desegregation. But, the University School closed about three years after that. So that meant that our children were scattered throughout the norm in public schools. How were they received? Our children found friends, lifelong friends there. There were always enough children, always enough students whose parents were saying, "It's about time." They taught Martin Luther King's message—don't judge a child by the color of his or her skin but by the quality of their character. Those children did. So, our children had a smoother transition than Barbara and I did as adults.

JE: What about the predominantly white faculty at OU—how did they accept you and Barbara in 1967?

GH: Most of them, this is faculty and staff, reflected the community attitude that we shouldn't be here. But there were enough of them who wanted us, but there was an interesting kind of norm at the University—it was avoidance. Those who didn't want me or Barbara to be here simply avoided us. Those who wanted us reached out to us. We attended more parties and social activities in a year than we had attended in Detroit in four years, because of those who were positive in terms of our coming.

JE: The first two black professors—they were here when you came?

GH: Yes.

JE: So were you able to visit with them? Did they tell you these are the land mine and this is what you are going to encounter?

GH: Each of them independently asked me, “Why did you come here? Didn’t you know what you are moving into? Your sociologists—you should know these things!” (Chuckle) I did not. But both Melvin and Lennie Marie said, “We are very glad you are here.” I was an activist in Detroit and I became an instant activist in Oklahoma. So I was the voice that both of those professors felt uncomfortable being. So they channeled their messages and their thoughts through me and they supported me.

JE: You talked about all of the many dinner parties—there was one dinner party where you met your idol but Wilkinson?

GH: Bud Wilkinson! Yes.

JE: Tell asked about that meeting and conversations you had and what kind of person he was.

GH: David and Carol Burr had us as dinner guests several times.

JE: Who were they to the University?

GH: David Burr served in many capacities as a vice president and a Dean. He was assistant to the president, George Cross. So David Burr was a very instrumental person in the Norman community and The University of Oklahoma.

Chapter 9 – 5:46

Bud & Prentice

George Henderson: Barbara received a call from Carol saying, “Would you and George come to dinner because but Wilkinson would like to meet you.” It was his request. He had heard about us and he just wanted to meet us and he wanted to thank us for coming. That gave me a chance to talk with Bud about the courageous thing that he the head, and it gave him an opportunity to thank us for the courageous things that we were doing. We were kindred souls in many ways.

John Erling: You asked him about an African-American football player?

GH: Prentice Gautt, who became my very close, dear friend. He was an outstanding athlete. It was Prentice Gautt who indeed got me interested in the Sooners when I realized and I found out that he was an African-American, the first scholarship athlete at the University of Oklahoma doing such wonderful things. Actually I told by, I said, “I honestly believe that there are individuals here that did not want you to make Prentice a starter on your team.” He said, “You are right. But we wanted to win more than we wanted to maintain some kind of racial boundaries and barriers.” Winning wasn’t just winning—it was beating Texas. He put it into perspective. Prentice allowed him to do that. But Bud said, “The players were ahead of me. They practiced with him. I was trying to watch everything going on, but the

players who were indeed in contact with him when I wasn't watching, and even when I was watching, knew how gifted he was as an athlete." They wanted him out there. In fact the person that Prentice was competing with for a position acknowledge that Prentice was the man and he taught him plays and he helped him period but said, "The players wanted him long before I got on board." The players said, "Coach we have a better chance of winning more games with Prentice out there than within sitting on the bench." Bud said, "I was willing to try it."

JE: So then that encouraged him to recruit more blacks?

GH: Yes.

JE: Did he talk about resentment from the white crowd for starting Prentice?

GH: Oh yes!

JE: He took a lot of flak from that.

GH: He took a lot of flak from that. But he said, "That flak melted after a couple of victories." In fact, it wasn't in my book, but he said, "Most of those individuals who didn't want Prentice later said they were the ones who encouraged him to recruit Prentice and to put him out in the field. So winning does that in Oklahoma.

JE: Tell us about the demeanor and the spirit of Bud as you would talk to him. What was he like?

GH: Very humble for a man who had achieved so much prestige, very unassuming, willing to credit others for the accomplishments as opposed to saying, "look what I've done." He always said, "Look what we've done as a team." He spoke so highly of Prentice. He said, "You've got to meet him." And he did indeed call Prentice.

Chapter 10 – 8:00

Denied Services

John Erling: Back in the neighborhood for you, how did people in the neighborhood treat you and your family?

George Henderson: Some of them moved out immediately. One couple next door to us would not allow their children to play with our children. Others welcomed us. One neighbor in particular was a welcome wagon. She brought over food and refreshments and said, "I'm glad that you're here." Dr. Mary Abbott, one of the foremost pediatricians in the neighborhood said, "I don't know if you have someone for your children, but I'm volunteering." So all in all, the neighbors who remained, were very good friends.

JE: Then when you went out to get services in the community, like go to a barber or a beautician?

GH: They were not there. Barbers and beauticians said that they couldn't do anything with black hair.

JE: They wouldn't even cut it?

GH: No. They said they didn't know how to do it.

JE: How did you take that?

GH: I went to OKC as the students did. It was more problematic for the black females. If they didn't do it themselves, it didn't get done in Norman—they would have to go to OKC. If it was a special event they would make a special trip to one of the beauticians in OKC. We were a self-contained community here. We had to be. There were campus corner restaurants and bars that would not serve us or serve the black students. There were so many episodes where they would go and sit and sit and sit and not be waited on. So finally they decided they would have their own equivalents of restaurants and they cooked up their meals and they had their parties and we became an extended family that way.

JE: So the restaurants actually moved to backyards for barbecues and things like that?

GH: Absolutely.

JE: Do you remember seeing signs that said "no colored here?"

GH: They didn't have to do that. They were more sophisticated than that. You can go and sit and not be waited on. Or, they could take your order and by the time you got it it was cold or it wasn't what you ordered, or you were charged extra, or some rude and crude individual would say, "Get out of here!" and use the "n" word.

JE: But amongst the white folk, racism really wasn't talked about as it?

GH: No, no. This was a university town you remember and we were more sophisticated than that. We find ways. "We" meaning the individuals who didn't want us. We find ways of keeping you out and denying you by not even acknowledging you. Or if we talk about you, we talk about you where you can't hear us.

JE: The Supreme Court dealt with Oklahoma race cases. That's by law, but what's going on in a person's heart can't be regulated by The Supreme Court.

GH: No, but you can regulate behavior. At some point you have to serve me. You don't have to like it, but you must serve me.

JE: And that was corrected?

GH: That was corrected because finally when the loonies who were denying us service realized that our money spends just like anybody else's money and the more of our money that they took while we were occupying that seat meant that they had more profit, they finally came around and said, "Okay. We don't like it, but money is money."

JE: The first black student admitted to The University of Oklahoma was?

GH: Admitted by law was Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher. The first one who enrolled was George McLaurin.

JE: Where you here when that happened?

GH: No, that was before.

JE: And she was the first black law school student?

GH: Yes. Ada Lois and I became good, very, very close friends.

JE: Real quick, her story is very interesting—how she was admitted, but she had to sit outside? Can you tell me that story?

GH: (Chuckle) Both Ada Lois and George McLaurin, when they were admitted they had special areas that they were assigned to. Well, the students said quickly, “this is nonsense” and they broke those barriers. to have a corner of a room partitioned off—

JE: Partitioned off?

GH: Yes.

JE: So it was like a wall?

GH: Yes.

JE: So it was like its own little office within a classroom?

GH: Yes. That was McLaurin’s experience in particular.

JE: So you could hear and see the professor?

GH: Yes. Then the students said, “no, no, no this will not work.”

JE: So it came from the students?

GH: Yes.

JE: So they broke down those walls?

GH: Right.

GH: Hatred dies hard if it dies at all.

JE: So the whites were not accepting blacks as equal throughout—I mean we talk about Norman but it was throughout the state.

GH: It was throughout the state.

JE: I always like to say that Oklahoma is where the South begins.

GH: Read our state constitution before it was changed. There was very little difference between the Oklahoma Constitution and Mississippi, Alabama or any other Southern state you could pick—the constitution was about the same.

JE: But there were prominent blacks living in Oklahoma City?

GH: In northeast Oklahoma City.

JE: I think they were counting on you to do great things in Norman and on the campus?

GH: They had decided that George Henderson was going to be their champion before George Henderson realized that he was going to be their champion. They invited Barbara and me to many activities. In that relationship they made it very clear that their expectations were that I would do whatever I could to open up opportunities for the black students, Barbara would do whatever she could to open up opportunities for non-students. We did that with their support and with their cheering.

JE: You did meet Clara Luper?

GH: Oh good gracious yes!

JE: Briefly tell us about her.

GH: Once again I was extremely naive. I knew I was having meetings with individuals whom I perceived to be prominent black Oklahomans, but I didn't know that they were *the* prominent black people in Oklahoma. Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, Clare Luper—it just goes on and on. You think of someone—like *Who's Who* in Black Oklahoma City at that time—they were the ones who invited the Hendersons to have parties and go to church with them.

JE: So in a way you did not know how fortunate you were?

GH: I did not know it but I found out quickly.

JE: Summarize Clara Luper and what she meant to the state.

GH: Clara Luper was indeed the foremost advocate and proponent of civil rights, not just in Oklahoma City, but in Oklahoma, who with children, with a youth group of the NAACP opened up the restaurants and the other public places and then challenged the adults to fight for equal opportunities in jobs and other things. Clara Luper is really our champion and our Miss Civil Rights of Oklahoma.

JE: Our Rosa Parks.

GH: Indeed. They decided that they were going to go and sit until someone served them—knowing that no one was going to serve them. She got the children she said because she realized that if you can convince young people that they are involved in a cause greater than themselves. And because they are young, they are willing to sacrifice what they don't realize that they are sacrificing. Therefore, in talking to scores of individuals that I met later when they were adults, they said, "Yes, we were willing to go wherever Clara said that we should go and we were willing to suffer whatever we thought was going to happen to us, but we had no idea what was going to happen to us because we were young. Once the negative things happened to them, they said they became even more convinced that this was the right thing to do.

JE: That became a national story then when she sat at the lunch counter with the children and would not move.

GH: Yes.

JE: She was eventually served or—?

GH: Eventually the store said yes, we can't have this—it's hurting business. The bottom line—why is it that it always comes down to business—and it does—let's move on and move past this. The patron and storeowners said, "We've taken our position and we've made our stand, but now is the time to get back to making money."

Chapter 11 – 2:50
Academic Casualties

John Erling: On campus then, there probably were as we called them academic casualties?

George Henderson: Many of them. They were primarily black students, but not all of them were black students because there were indeed a growing number of white students who verbally expressed displeasure with racial segregation and discrimination—not just outside of OU but within OU. The professors who did not agree with them punished them in ways that no one should have done. They would either fail the students or they gave them lower grades than they had earned, or they publicly embarrassed them for speaking out, or they did all of those things simultaneously. Those students did not break. Some of them left the university, but they did not break.

JE: We are talking about 1967 and 1968, how many blacks do you think were at OU? We signed a petition with about 120 black students, but we didn't have 120 black students. We had individuals who were not students who signed a petition. President (inaudible) was rude enough to go through the list and he culled out the students who had signed in advance. We had about 60 black students.

JE: When black students would complain to administrators—

GH: The administrators were apologist. They either dismissed the complaints or they made excuses for the complaints, or they said they were going to do something about them and did not.

JE: But you were a champion to the black students and so black students would be attracted to you. Would they just come to you? Or come to your home?

GH: They came to my office. They came to our home. Our home was open. Being the black community of Norman for about three or four years, that's what our house was. We were the black community of Norman. The students came to our house for food, for emotional shelter and to have an opportunity to have a father figure, a mother figure and a grandmother figure in that household and have the equivalent of a little brother and little sisters who were our children that they could play with. Our home was a multipurpose home for them in addition to being a safe harbor it was also a family center for them.

JE: So they could come to you and some of them were broken more than likely. They had a bad experience with a professor or whatever and they were emotional, you would offer them support?

GH: Not only that kind of support, but I then would lodge complaints on their behalf.

JE: If it came from you, how was that accepted?

GH: Much better, for this reason, I wasn't going to go away. You see, you can wait students out

if they are undergraduates for four years, or three years, or even less—they are gone. But this George Henderson guy is even more problematic, so let's at least try to deal with the situation so he won't talk about this issue.

Chapter 12 – 3:35**Chavez & Parks**

John Erling: When you lived in Detroit, you heard a speech by Cesar Chavez?

George Henderson: Oh yes.

JE: He gave you some ideas. Tell us about that speech.

GH: He said several things that served me well. He said, "First you have to believe in what you are doing. Then you have to be willing to pay whatever price is going to be extracted from you for acting on your beliefs, but in-between those things you have to have a well thought out strategy and you need support. You need people of privilege and power to support you and you need to find some of those and put it all together. Then you have to be willing to do it for the long haul. If you think this thing is going to end in a year or two, you are mistaken. You have to be willing to stay with it year in and year out. Good luck."

JE: We should point out that he obviously was an activist in California for better working conditions for migrant workers.

GH: Yes.

JE: But his tactics, you could use, but then you also met Rosa Parks?

GH: Oh gosh, you know. Rosa Parks lived not too far from where we lived in Detroit.

When I was with the Urban League, I was helping with Block Clubs. Block Clubs were neighborhood organizations that were very big throughout the city. Most Block Clubs had neighborhood beautification contests. I was one of the judges for one of the contests and the other judge was a lady named Rosa Parks. Once again, maybe I'm a slow-learner or no learner, maybe my teachers were correct, but after the judging we sat down and she introduced herself. She never told me that she was *the* Rosa Parks, but when I found out that it was *the* Rosa Parks—you talk about charisma. There's a kind of quiet, unassuming charisma that's more regal, more attention getting, that's what I got in the presence of Rosa. While she said she was involved in what was going on in the Civil Rights Movement in the South she didn't say, "this is what I did," she said, "this is what needed to happen."

JE: And you were meeting her in the 1960s?

GH: Yes.

JE: And she in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama decided that she did not want to move to the back of the bus.

GH: She wasn't the first one to do that, but she was the one that was selected because of her temperament. Once again we are back to Prentice Gault and Jackie Robinson kind of things. She was the one that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference decided that they were going to push as the role model for this activity because of her temperament.

JE: Oh, so that day she wasn't really on her own?

GH: No, she was involved with Civil Rights.

JE: So they all knew that Rosa was going to do something special on this day?

GH: Yes.

JE: And then it exploded into national headlines all across the nation?

GH: That's right. The Press doesn't just get this accidentally. Someone has to tip them off that this is going to happen.

JE: But she was just that sweet, spirited lady?

GH: Yes. The truth of the matter is, she was tired of moving, but also most people don't give her credit. She was also very actively involved in civil rights issues before the act itself.

Chapter 13 – 7:26

Non-Violence

John Erling: Along about this time, you were deciding on the tactics you were going to use.

George Henderson: Yes.

JE: Because I think the quote was "people are not morally bad, we are ambivalent which leads to dehumanizing people, we need to get to know each other."

GH: That's it exactly. Most people who were denying African-Americans, black people, or negroes opportunities didn't know them. They were denying stereotypes. They were denying over-generalizations, or whatever, but not people. It was important in my mind that we humanize in the minds of our oppressors ourselves. We were already human. We wanted them to see us in a way that would make it very difficult for them to say that we're like those monsters that we're fighting.

JE: So on campus you chose the nonviolent plan?

GH: Yes.

JE: But within the black community, not everyone agreed with you?

GH: Nonviolence is something that you have to really, especially when you are a black male, decide that when you grit your teeth that I'm going to try this thing. Because when you're

growing up as a black male, one of the first thing that your father or father-surrogate does is teach you to fight. In fact, when we were playing sports, there was this saying—if you lose the game, win the fight. So we're now talking about me coming into a campus and convincing...It was easier for the black females to buy into this for a lot of reasons. To get the black males to stay on board, it was difficult. From time to time they wanted to jump ship. They could use something other than their voices to make their points—their two fists—but they did stay with it. Most of them stayed with the plan.

JE: So then you had nonviolent victories, but then that led some to maybe challenge their egos?

GH: What did one lose by indeed fighting this way? This was not a manly way. Nonviolent victories also brought about the guilt of beating someone, even if you beat them verbally, even if you beat them morally—you've beaten them. And if you've bought into nonviolence you understand therefore that was not the purpose. Because if your opponent at the end of this battle feels that he or she has been crushed in some way, and if you gloat over this, you've won, but you've lost.

JE: At times there was some disorder.

GH: Yes there was.

JE: Cite some examples of student unrest, people hurt physically.

GH: How many times can a student or students be subjected to waking up in the morning and going on campuses and seeing racial slurs written all over the sidewalk. How many times can you not respond violently when you are purposefully shoved. And you hear students walking behind you talking about you or making fun of you. How many of those campus special activities can you watch them mimicking slaves and doing dark-face and not be violent? How do you remain nonviolent when it gets beyond that point and people are indeed shooting at you? And we had some incidents of shooting at buildings. It's understandable therefore that two things happen to you: you decide that you are going to not respond in kind, or you decide that you are going to be violent. Either way, it costs you. You are going to pay a price emotionally. If you decide that you are going to be nonviolent, there's always this feeling of why didn't I do more? And if you decide that you are going to be violent, you then have to live with the guilt of not living up to the credo of being nonviolent. So either way, it's a difficult situation.

JE: Because I guess the argument would be, if we act weak, they will do it more, but if I fight back, maybe they won't do this as much.

GH: Yes. And the reality was in our situation in Oklahoma, I decided at least for me, nonviolence was the most feasible way for the same reason that Gandhi decided that nonresistance was the most feasible way for the Indians. You can't win violently. Who does indeed control in Oklahoma? The National Guard, the campus police, and you go on and on and on and the surrounding towns—who does indeed have the firepower to beat

you? We would have lost that one. We would have lost that one in a way that we would have been really—I shudder to think about what could have happened—

JE: I don't know if this applies here, but doesn't a bully after a while get tired of bullying somebody who doesn't fight back?

GH: Usually what happens is that they say, "oh you're crazy—you're not worth it". In other words, they've been beaten, but they won't acknowledge it. And our case, we needed not so much for the bullies and the racists to see how dastardly their deeds were, but for the uncommitted—for the bystanders at some point to say "enough" and they did on this campus.

JE: You wrote that you had to "compress words, hold them inside you and release the right ones—

GH: —at the right time."

JE: That's a strong statement.

GH: I didn't believe that I had the luxury of just acting. I had to indeed analyze before acting what the outcome might have been. That meant that I always had my mind in neutral before I decided to drive forward or go in reverse in terms of action. Emotionally draining, and always second guessing myself—what if I'm wrong? I don't have a good answer for that. I do believe that the results of what we accomplish have vindicated the action itself.

JE: But as you talked about the students and the insults that were hurled at them—certainly you too had to face that yourself?

GH: I was rid out of the black people's party at one point. There's an incident in the book where I describe where a meeting of black people was called and one young man named Calvin said, "We are tired of you Uncle Toms" —individuals who would not be forceful leaders is what in effect he was saying. They had reached a turning point in that group that they were going to indeed fight violence with violence and they knew that I was not going to support that. So I was rid out of the black people's party. I said, "Obviously you don't think that I belong here." And I left.

JE: Was this the African-American Student Union that was formed on campus?

GH: It was a fragmented group of those individuals.

JE: But that organization was formed and it was the first time any organization had been formed for blacks, ASU?

GH: Yes, in Oklahoma.

JE: In the entire state?

GH: Yes.

JE: That had never been attempted at other campuses?

GH: It had not. They had their fraternities and their sororities and they had their cliques and their clubs, but what they did not have was a concerted single organization that would

be their voice with a common strategy and a common approach. Their strength came from numbers, as small as they were, but it also came from a collective resolve. ASU, the African-American Student Union provided them with all of those things.

Chapter 14 – 5:10**April 4, 1968**

John Erling: The Greek houses on campus were segregated in a so-called desegregated campus?

George Henderson: Not only for Greek houses, but the on-campus housing was also segregated. Blacks roomed with blacks and whites roomed with whites and that's just the way that it was.

JE: There was the Loyal Knights of Old Trusty?

GH: It was an engineering honor society. It sounds safe and very noble. The only problem is they wore black hoods and a black robe with eyeholes in the hood and it was indeed a black replica of the KKK and our minds. That the only image that you could conjure up with this group.

JE: And they made themselves very public?

GH: Oh yes.

JE: Did you question them or talk to them and ask them why they had to be dressed this way?

GH: I talked to the administration and they said it's always been like this and that it's not racial—it was just a tradition. This was the only student organization in Oklahoma that had legal rights to indeed dress up with a black hood and a rope. It obviously had some connection or at least some resemblance to the KKK. There are good traditions and bad traditions, and we thought this was a bad tradition.

JE: So I guess you just move on to other fights. Then April 4, 1968—talk to us about that day. Telling us what it meant.

GH: Oh my. Martin Luther King Jr.

JE: Martin Luther King Jr. was killed that day.

GH: Yes.

JE: Tell asked about what you remember and how you heard about it and how you felt.

GH: I was driving to campus to finish a report. I heard on the radio that Martin Luther King had been assassinated and I thought to myself, wow, what had Martin Luther King, Jr.'s father done that someone had wanted to kill him. The announcer went on to say that the foremost civil rights leader in the United States—and I knew it was Martin Luther King Jr. I turned the car around and went home. When I got there, Barbara at our daughters

who were home and they were huddled around the television watching the news. They were crying and they were distraught. It meant that we had lost an individual who was more than one can describe in words. We lost our leader. My wife Barbara is the strongest person in our family in terms of emotions. She had already calmed the children down. Later that evening we decided that we would continue and we would be safe and whatever happened we were going to continue speaking out and trying to champion what we believed was right. I received a call from the University asking me if I would be really the equivalent of a keynote speaker for a memorial service. I stayed up almost all night writing and rewriting a brief memorial speech. When I went to campus I looked out and the black students had separated themselves from the others and they were distraught and I was too. I had what I thought was going to be a very, very fine consummatory presentation. I looked at the students and I decided that I would be their spokesperson and I would speak their anger and their disgust and I did. I said, "We are tired of you killing us. Martin Luther King Jr. is a nonviolent man and you" and I looked at the white students "you have killed him." The moment I spoke those words I realized that I should not. I had done but Martin would have said no, shame on you George Henderson and I said shame on myself. I blamed all white people for what some lunatic had done. But I spoke those words and I realized even more so after speaking those words that words have consequences. As careful as I had been in the past of measuring my words and thoughts before speaking them, I did not. The rest of my career I spent trying to be more careful about my words.

JE: What was the immediate reaction to those words?

GH: We lost—we, meaning those of us who were committed to civil rights improvements on campus, we lost a few loyal white students. In fact, I received an anonymous letter accusing me of being a bigot. It was absolutely correct in terms of my words. We gained some supporters who said, "You should have been in indignant." I still don't feel good about it and I've had several individuals say, "of course you were outraged and you were angry and you should have spoken as an angry man." But no, no, no I didn't have the luxury of losing my cool that way.

JE: But that incident probably served you the rest of your life—not to lose your cool? I mean you had to reflect on that many times.

GH: Yes, many, many times.

JE: And you could have—but you chose not to?

GH: I chose not to.

Chapter 15 – 2:56**Segregated Housing**

John Erling: You were talking about housing and the apartments in Norman were racially segregated.

George Henderson: The Eastside and the Westside.

JE: And the University was complicit about all this?

GH: The University was complicit. The University had an off-campus housing list and all of the apartment owners or individuals representing the owners had to sign a statement saying that they would indeed rent to any OU student who qualified and could afford it in essence is what it was. I did some research and I found out that almost all of the black students lived on the East side of town. Well, the Eastside was considered less prestigious than the West side where most movers and shakers and community leaders lived. I also found out that most of the black students lived in only a very few of those apartment complexes. I then said that the University is involved either in intentionally or unintentionally, and I thought it was unintentionally promoting racial segregation in housing. I told this to one of my classes and the students said, “No, no, no. You are mistaken. It just so happens that this is where they want to live.” They gave me all of the excuses. I said, “Okay. Let’s check it out as a class, form teams and have interracial teams, all-white teams, and all-black teams.” We got the housing list from the University and they went to all of the apartment complexes. After the survey, I was going to class and I knew that something had happened before I even got in the room because I could hear them about 20 paces away from the building. I mean—they were loud. What they found out is that all of the white students were assured that they could move into any of those apartment complexes. All of the black students were told, except for the apartment complexes that had already rented to blacks, all of the black students were told that they could not. And all of the mixed racial couples were told that they could not. Then the students realized, yes, this list is perpetuating racial segregation. I asked, “What do you want to you?” One student said, “let’s bring them down!” Well they soon lost their thirst for arson. One student said, “Let’s picket!” Well they didn’t have the time, nor the energy for picketing. Another said, “Let’s take it to the administration and make and enforce this.” If it’s going to be open housing—make it open housing. Within a few days the University stopped having an apartment housing list. That was a small victory. It didn’t solve the discrimination problem, but I it at least got the University out of the business of supporting it.

JE: So then you took years or so for this to become open that they would rent to anybody?

GH: Yes, years later—a few actually—when the Norman Human Rights Commission was established in the first chairperson of that commission was a person named Barbara Henderson. That commission then opened up the housing and apartment complexes for Norman.

Chapter 16 – 1:40

Dick Gregory

John Erling: Black comedian and activist Dick Gregory spoke on campus and as a matter of fact he stayed in your home. What was he like and how was his speech received?

George Henderson: Dick Gregory, when he was funny, was one of the funniest human beings I've ever heard. He had a way of making you laugh at things that are so obvious, then telling you in effect while you're laughing, this isn't funny, because lives are at stake. So, he would get us to laugh and then he would point out that it's too easy to laugh at things as opposed to doing something about them. So he pricked our conscience in ways that I thought were very helpful, very useful for us. It's okay to laugh, but laugh after you've changed things and not before you've changed things.

JE: What was he like as a houseguest?

GH: He was a great houseguest, a funny houseguest. He was a quiet man. He went through some changes and we had him as a houseguest twice. The second time that he came he was a vegetarian. He didn't eat meat. The first time he ate lots of meat. I mean, he was really carnivorous and he enjoyed meat. The second time Barbara thought she knew she wanted and she prepared his favorite meal she thought. He apologized and said, "Barbara I can't eat much of what you've prepared because I'm a vegetarian now." Well, he never stopped loving sweet potato pies. Barbara caught him in the kitchen, she wasn't really trying to catch him but she walked into the kitchen and there was Dick Gregory stuffing his face with a sweet potato pie. (Chuckle) So that was kind of humorous. They both laughed. She called me in and we laughed together because he had stopped eating meat that he hadn't stopped eating Barbara's sweet potato pie.

Chapter 17 – 2:55**Student Demands**

John Erling: The African-American Student Union made some demands of the President Dr. J. Herbert Hollomon. Can you talk about some of the demands that they asked for?

George Henderson: The preamble was either, provide us with the integration and the equal opportunity that the University said that it's committed to, or let us have our own separate student government and our own separate student housing. And if you're not willing to do that, we want a black coach in basketball and we want to have a black history department with a degree and they went on with several of the demands. What they were really saying is that we wanted to be included in the mainstream of university life, and if you will not do that—then separate us. The president said, "We are not going to separate you. We are not going to overnight achieve 20% of the university's population as being African-American. And as far as employment, that will take its own course. We are just not simply going to get rid of the white coach and hire a black coach." The University generally said we understand that you are angry and you are hurt, but it's going to take time. The students didn't have time. They didn't have time because most of them were going to be graduating and leaving the University. Once again, Chavez's is words came back to me. This is going to be a long haul. When the students are gone you're going to have to support the next generation and you're going to have to stay with those demands.

JE: So the students did meet with Holloman and they wanted to meet with him again and that meeting?

GH: It took awhile. He was upset because they went public with their demands.

JE: And the mood in Oklahoma at this time, wasn't it determined that Oklahoma City, Tulsa and Lawton were ripe for riots about this time?

GH: They were ripe for riots. Not only that, the legislature had already decided that the governor could use whatever force was necessary to put it down if a riot erupted. Shades of 1921, the Race Riot in Tulsa—that was on my mind. We were ripe for that. It could have happened that way if in fact we had engaged in violence.

JE: This unrest was being felt on the campus of OU, but at OSU, do you know—were they feeling the same thing? Did they have the same struggles?

GH: They had the same struggles. OSU and OU—we had a great relationship because in all of our activities, and we were the leaders—the students were the leaders—in planning student meetings and student conferences. OSU would always send the largest contingency of black students to our meetings to talk about ways of democratizing the

campus. But they also shared their own fears and feelings about if they indeed engaged in violence in Stillwater, if it was bad and Norman, they could only imagine what it would have been like in Stillwater. So consequently, they too gravitated toward nonviolence as the approach.

Chapter 18 – 5:17

Ready to Die

John Erling: You took on a speaking assignment in Durant, Oklahoma, which is known as “Little Dixie”?

George Henderson: (Chuckle) It didn’t mean anything to me. Once again, this guy didn’t know much about Oklahoma. I said, “Sure—I’ll speak anywhere—I’ll go to Little Dixie.”

JE: Tell asked what happened.

GH: Well, I got into my own vehicle. I had an affinity for cars that worked sometimes. We didn’t have the interstate. I drove on thin old winding roads down into Southeast Oklahoma. The closer I got to Durant, the more I noticed things changing. Vehicles gave way to pick up trucks. Pickup trucks started having rifle racks or gun racks in the back. I found out later that most of those were loaded. And there were more cowboy hats—city hats were disappearing. Where I got to the place where I was going to talk about open housing in Durant, it was in the basement of a funeral home. Behind me, where I was speaking, was an open casket. Oh gosh, the symbolism here was just really something. I gave what I thought was my most well reasoned best presentation for open housing anywhere and the only people who seemed to agree with me and laughed at my jokes when there were a few jokes sprinkled in there were the three or four people who invited me to speak. The rest of the room full of individuals were very stone-faced. There was a break after my presentation before they went into questions and answers. An elderly gentleman walked up to me and he asked me if I knew what happens to people like me who came down there to talk about race relations and open housing. He pulled his suit jacket back and he was packing—he had a pistol. Then he closed it. He gave me the message. After that I wasn’t really able to concentrate much on what was happening I just wanted to get out of there. When the meeting ended I was driving back to Norman and I noticed in my rearview mirror that a vehicle was following me and had been following me for quite a distance. I said to myself—what if it’s that man? That’s when I had my epiphany and I knew that I was ready to live up to my principles of civil rights and nonviolence. I remember when I said—it might be him. Then I also said to myself out loud, if it’s him and he does

indeed kill me—it happens. I knew then. I had talked about being ready, but I knew that I was ready to die for my beliefs then. Surely many of the other freedom rioters and the others must have also had a similar epiphany as they went about their business. If it happens, it happens. You pray that it doesn't, but if it does it's going to. I got home and I told my wife about it. She just shook her head and we never spoke of it again.

JE: Was there any kind of freedom that came from that realization? If it happens, it happens—I'll know I'm dying for a good cause that came from that?

GH: Yes, it did. What it did for me, it allowed me to say to myself that I have at least put my marker down. I have stated what my values and beliefs are. If my life is considered the ultimate, I am willing to give the ultimate to stand by my beliefs and values.

JE: The United Methodist Church rented a small house, which was next to the chapel and you were having a meal there and something happened?

GH: It was Thanksgiving. We had a presentation and we had talked about some things in the living room and we adjourned to the dining area. A few seconds after we adjourned to the dining area, to eat turkey and some other things to celebrate Thanksgiving before the students went on break, someone shot a bullet threw the window in the area where we had had the meeting. If we indeed had that meeting a few seconds longer, one or more of us might have been injured. We were ecstatic to have the building. We were indeed not sure how happy we were with the meeting, but that wasn't even our decision because then the Methodist group decided that it was not in our best interest or their best interest to continue meeting there.

JE: Was it then difficult to preach nonviolence to students after that happened?

GH: Yes. It wasn't difficult for me to preach, it was difficult for them to accept. For those who accepted it, it was difficult for them to adhere to it, because the violence seemed to escalate on campus after that. There were fights. This is when the ranks really started breaking because there were fights between black athletes and non-black athletes with fraternity houses—one house in particular had indeed verbally assaulted some black females walking past the house. They came back and shared what did happen to them and the black males then, en masse, a group of them, went and there was a fight between black males and white males. That spilled over into the athletic contests and the intramural games. We were spinning out of control and I became more frustrated and more anxiety-ridden as things seemed to be as the song goes, slip sliding away.

Chapter 19 – 5:54**Bill Russell**

John Erling: Black Heritage Week was observed and Bill Russell was a speaker and he stayed in your home? He of course played center for the Boston Celtics, was a five-time winner of the NBA's Most Valuable Player Award. Tell us what he was like to have as a houseguest.

George Henderson: Bill was a wonderful man and is a wonderful man for many reasons. He has a sense of humor that is second to none. He loves children, he communicates with them and interacts with them. He has a sense of his own net worth and he communicates that to his peers and adults. He set the Henderson house record for eating chicken. (Laughter) And put all of his bones on my plate and told Barbara, "See? You need to feed your husband more." He had that kind of sense of humor. He shot hoops with the boys who came by to see George Junior. When he was leaving he said, "George, I know these are trying times for you and there will be individuals who will try to get you to engage in violence." Well, Bill was also committed to nonviolence and he really believed in it. He said, "You might win this thing being nonviolent, but don't you play the game in a violent way because you'll lose." You can't win violently, morally is what he was saying. He also said, "There will people who try to destroy your character and who will talk about you. Don't worry about what people say about you, you just be concerned about how you behave and what you say." Good advice. I needed those words at that time because I was receiving an awful lot of negative criticism, not only from my adversaries, but also from some of the black students who thought that I was too passive.

JE: But there were good signs that were happening on campus?

GH: Yes.

JE: Marthenia Miller was a black sophomore finalist for Miss OU.

GH: Yes. We had several things happening in terms of black students. For the very first time we had black students who were competing for Miss OU and for other achievements. To have a black student's picture on the front page of the student newspaper meant that we were breaking new ground for the university. That meant that blacks would be on the front page of the student newspaper not just for their athletic accomplishments but also for other kinds of university-related activities. I was very proud to see her there.

JE: Bill Moffit was another victory for you?

GH: The first African-American Student Government President—the first in a long line of them. Bill was my favorite. He later became a very prominent defense attorney in Washington, D.C. who died of a heart attack. But when he was here, Bill Moffit made a believer

out of me. I guess the way to put it in perspective—I said, of a black student becoming president of the student government, the same as what many of us blacks said about a black becoming a president of the United States—it had that kind of symbolism and that kind of reaction. I never thought I would see it in my lifetime at the University of Oklahoma. I wanted it to happen, but I didn't think it would happen. Let's face it. Less than five percent of the black students are not going to get a black president of student government. Hello? He did.

JE: And that was in what year?

GH: 1969.

JE: However, this didn't lessen the outbreak of fistfights and incidents of arson?

GH: No, but we also had back then the Vietnam protests going on. Bill was instrumental in keeping the students nonviolent during those protests.

JE: And while you didn't have a groundswell of public opinion favoring racial equality during this time—administrators would chastise students for trampling on flowers, but they ignored racism.

GH: Yes. It was a very difficult time for those of us who believed that our cause was just. If our cause was so just, why do we keep losing so many of these opportunities to improve?

JE: Then even those white people who would sign on with you, they would face a backlash?

GH: Yes, a backlash and they would then drop out. I understood and I didn't blame them because it meant that some of them, especially faculty members and staff members who wanted to advance in their careers, found out if they were identified with us, the probability of them achieving their ultimate goal of rising in their professions were minimized or even truncated where they wouldn't achieve those things. I didn't blame them. I didn't fault them for abandoning us during the time of need. I understood, but I was disappointed.

JE: So you had to recruit allies?

GH: One conversation at a time.

JE: And the allies would come from those who were standing on the sidelines?

GH: Yes. I convinced them. I guess the way that I did it was to point out, I hate to use the horrible analogy of what was happening in Nazi Germany for example, but if it can happen to us—black students on campus—and if you remain silent, it can happen to the American Indians, it could happen to the Asians, it could happen to the poor whites and eventually it could happen to you I would say.

JE: Eventually the white students, conservatives and moderates began to come out of the shadows. All along they may have been supporting you, but now they've decided to step forward and support you and the ASU.

GH: Yes. They even established their own organization, a student action committee—all white students—who then, independent of the African-American students challenged racism

and segregation and discrimination wherever they found it on campus. That independent voice was a welcome relief for us because it wasn't just black people complaining. It was white students also complaining about the same situations.

JE: The City of Norman too made huge strides toward equality?

GH: Yes.

Chapter 20 – 4:50

Race Relations – 2011

John Erling: But now we're here in 2011. Describe racial inequity today—it's still there.

George Henderson: It's still there. But in four short years, we, the collective we, accomplished more than I ever imagined could have been accomplished both on campus and off, at the University of Oklahoma and in the City of Norman. To describe my feelings about it, in my book *Race and the University* I repeated a saying that I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. speak many times when he was trying to describe what was happening in civil rights. It was appropriate for what was happening at The University of Oklahoma, and it goes like this: We ain't what we want to be, we ain't what we ought to be, we ain't what we gonna be, but thank God we ain't what we was. That was The University of Oklahoma. That was the City of Norman. That was the State of Oklahoma and in many ways the United States of America. Sure, much more needs to be done, but make no mistake about it, we've made many, mane gains.

JE: And the population of blacks on campus today—what is the number or percentage?

GH: Percentage—probably about 3 or 4 percent.

JE: Are you surprised at that number?

GH: It should be more.

JE: Why isn't it?

GH: Because most universities now are recruiting blacks. It's a highly competitive game now.

You see you can go to the University Of Mississippi now or South Carolina or some other places northeast or southeast or west. And there are relatively fewer blacks graduating proportionately from high school. We still have more black females on campus than black males because of graduation rates. So if you look at the pool, I know many people are critical and I'm unhappy with the numbers, but I understand what's happening. If we do not have more coming out of that elementary and secondary school pipeline proportionately, then we have fewer to compete for.

JE: Yes. David Boren has made an enormous impact as well?

GH: Oh my goodness. David Boren has done what I advocated that we needed to do. It's not just black and white it's about all peoples. David Boren has opened the campus up from not just thinking in terms of black students and white students, but thinking in terms of students. If you do it terms of minorities—all minorities—and you broaden that base, then when you combine the African-Americans and the other minority students, then we are talking about 10, 15 or 20 percent probably. Probably that 20 percent of the black students that we ought to have, we probably have about 20 percent of minorities now.

JE: Yes, it's a multicultural issue now, not just black.

GH: Absolutely.

JE: So then, as you look back, summarize then what you are most proud of.

GH: I am most proud of having had an opportunity to be part of a social movement in a state that I have grown to love. I am most proud of not necessarily what I have done, but what the students who have been here have done and what they have grown up to become and be. I'm proud to see that next generation, who indeed have told their children, "this is how it was when I was at the University of Oklahoma, (but) it doesn't have to be that way for you, and don't you go that way and make it that way for you." Mostly I am proud of the fact that I travel throughout the world and there is still no place better than this place. And I've had an opportunity to make this place a little better.

JE: This oral history website is really pointed toward education, and for the generations to come, the babies who are born today in our hospitals in Oklahoma will appreciate this even more...but I see this as yes, whites and other races need to hear it, but young blacks of future generations need to hear your story and know the way it was so they can appreciate even more what they have today and in the future.

GH: Somebody paid for them to be where they are and to have what they have. They need to understand that some of their ancestors paid a tremendous price educationally, emotionally and psychologically. If they do not make it better, by "it" I mean their communities and their universities or their schools or wherever they go—if they do not make it better—then a lot of people sacrificed an awful lot for very little.

JE: Thank you Dr. Henderson. I appreciate that. As we are shaking hands right here, right now, I want to connect with you—thank you for telling your story. It's very good.

GH: Thank you for listening.

JE: Absolutely.

Chapter 21 – 0:28**Conclusion**

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