

Wess & Cathryn Young

Survivor of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and dedicated activist is joined by his wife.

Chapter 01 - Introduction

Announcer: Wessley Hubert “Wess” Young Sr., was a Tulsa Race Massacre survivor, World War II veteran, and longtime Tulsa activist.

Wess was four years old in 1921, when he, his mother, and older sister were told to run for cover during the devastation. His family lost everything in the Tulsa Race Massacre and lived in a camp at the fairgrounds for months. Since Wess was so young in May and June of 1921, his memory is filled with the stories told him by his parents and relatives. Wess traveled around the country during his life speaking about the event.

Along with fellow survivors, Wess gave his personal account of the historic race massacre at a briefing before members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other leaders on Capitol Hill, May 10, 2005, in Washington DC.

He was founder and first president of Tulsa’s Brady Heights Neighborhood Association, and served on numerous municipal boards, including ones involving city planning and criminal justice.

Wess was 93 years old when he recorded this oral history interview on August 21, 2009, and was 97 years old when he died September 30, 2014. His wife Cathryn J. Young, who participates in this interview, was 88 when she died December 1, 2013. Listen to their 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre story on the oral history website VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 7:40 4 Years Old - 1921

John Erling: Today’s date is August 21, 2009. Wess, if you’ll state your name, your age, and your date of birth?

Wess Young: Wess H. Young. My age is ninety-three. I was born February 20, 1917.

JE: Where were you born?

WY: I was born in Madill, Oklahoma.

JE: Where are we recording this interview today?

WY: On Denver Avenue, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: This would be known as the Brady Heights District.

WY: Brady Heights District, yeah.

JE: Tell me about your parents, your parents' names.

WY: My father's name was Josh, I guess he was named Joshua but they called him Josh one time. My mother's name was Janie, because of the race riots. We lived in the 300 block on North Hartford, and that's in the downtown part of Tulsa. To be exact, Greenwood was the dividing line of the colored section, going north from, like, 1st and 2nd Street and you need to get to Archie, that was the dividing line where the colored people stayed.

JE: Your wife has just sat down here. Cathryn, hello, nice to have you with us.

So in 1921, Wess, you were four years old?

WY: Right.

JE: May 30, 1921, was the beginning of all of this.

WY: Right.

JE: So you've heard your relatives and all talk to you about the beginning.

WY: Right.

JE: And how Dick Rowland—

WY: That's right.

JE: And so why don't you tell me what you've heard, what you know about it.

WY: Well, the word was going around on the 31st that Dick Rowland was working uptown in one of the buildings uptown, I forgot the name.

JE: The Drexel and the Drexel Building.

WY: Drexel Building. He had to go upstairs to use the restroom, he couldn't use the restroom downstairs so he had to go upstairs to use the restroom.

JE: And he couldn't use the restroom downstairs because that was only—

WY: For whites. He got on the elevator and he went up. When she came back down, he was up using it, she claimed that he touched her improperly.

JE: She screamed, so that alerted—

WY: Well, the way I heard it—

WY: ...she didn't scream, see.

JE: Okay.

WY: She came back down to the first floor and they explained it to some other guy that Dick Rowland had touched her improperly on the elevator. So when he came down from using the latrine up there, the lobby was full of white mens and they grabbed him.

To my recollection, it wasn't said that they did anything to him at that particular time. They put him in jail. He was in jail. This happened, like, in the morning. Well, the news got out that the Ku Klux Klan was going to take him out of jail and lynch him that night. The early part of the evening, which was around five or six o'clock, a group of black mens when to the Cottage Hill to see that he would be safe enough to go to trial and not be hung, which, like, the rumor got out that they was going to take him out and lynch him.

The Cottage Hill was on 5th and Boulder. When they got up there, ten, fifteen minutes after they was there, well, a group of whites came up to get Dick Rowland, and they had a few words. One shot was fired. I guess the polices, whatever, dispersed the crowd.

Well, the blast came back down on Greenwood side and the whites stayed around there for a while. Some kind of way, the blacks got Dick Rowland out of the county jail because there wasn't but one jailer there. They got him out and they'd taken him to Sand Springs and hid him in Sand Springs.

In the meantime, this group of whites, they wanted to get him and said they was going to lynch him. They didn't get in to the jailhouse to get him. They confronted the mob out on the streets, and in that moment, they got him out and taken him to Sand Springs.

After they got him out, well, they come back down on the north side of town, the black part of town, and they were celebrating. Because that was the first time that a negro man had been rescued from the Ku Klux Klan. They were proud of what they did. See, back in them days, the blacks wasn't allowed to go downtown and buy them a gun and a box of ammunition. The only way the blacks had guns and ammunition was from some of their relatives or peoples that was in World War I had kept some ammunitions and some of the weapons. Maybe out of forty or fifty people it might be ten or twelve guns, a shotgun or a pistol. And a few rounds of ammunition.

When they came back down on Greenwood the early part of the evening, it wasn't quite dusk, well, they were celebrating. "We kept him from being lynched and they was shooting." And it dawned on them that they were using up their ammunition. So they stopped and then it got quieted, till around one or two o'clock on June 1st.

JE: June 1st, right.

WY: All at once, here come this fire from over on the south side of town, over on the north side of town in the negro part of town. And that's where the beginning of the fireworks. They kind of caught a negro off of guard and they got a foothold and they came in. People were hollering and crying and running, say, "Run for your life!" Said, "They're going to kill all the negroes." They said, "Go north." See, because the white part of town was in the south part of town so we'd go north. So we went back north on Greenwood on out to, at the time, it was Barry's Park, far north, it was almost to Apache, about three or four blocks this side of Apache. Most of the blacks and them had gotten that far from the

Greenwood area because they set the Greenwood area on fire and it was burned down. All the houses and everything there. They don't have a correct answer to how many was killed but they said it from three hundred to a thousand blacks was killed. They never could actually prove that but it has been stated there was that many killed.

Chapter 03 - 5:04

Mass Graves

Wess Young: There was a rumor that they buried them at the cemetery out there on 11th Street. I think it's Oaklawn, on 11th and Peoria. Later on in the years, they went out there and dug up a space where they were supposed to have a mass grave, but they didn't find any. The space they dug up was all virgin land, it hadn't been no digging in that area. But they just dug in one certain area.

I can't call the young white man, he said he was sixteen years old and he said he saw them dig the graves and dump the black peoples in there. He stood by it and swore. I think he's passed now.

Cathryn Young: I think that's a matter of record.

WY: Yeah, it's a matter of record, yeah.

CY: The person who'd been interviewed.

WY: They done interviewed.

CY: You know about that, or you read about it.

John Erling: We've read about the mass graves. Yes.

WY: About them mass graves, uh-huh (affirmative).

JE: But somehow nobody's been able to find those mass graves.

WY: Not able to find them, that's right. Nobody been able.

JE: That's the problem.

WY: See, back in them days, well, the blacks and whites was buried in the same cemetery.

CY: Separate.

WY: No, not separate, the same cemeteries. At that particular time—

CY: I don't think so.

WY: ...there was some blacks buried out there because it wasn't segregated. If you died and your undertaker had you bought a plot out there—you could buy a plot out there, and you'd be buried out there.

JE: They rounded up blacks—

WY: Right.

JE: ...and put them in jail.

WY: Well, I guess they did because they filled the jailhouse up and then they—

CY: They killed.

WY: Well, they killed some of them but the ones that was living—

CY: Was living—

JE: They put them in the Convention Hall.

WY: In the Convention Hall. Some whites came and got some of their servants, like the porters and the housekeepers and the butlers. I hadn't met anybody that said that they was protected like that that night.

JE: The whites came to get to them to take them out?

WY: No. It was during the riot, they wasn't arrested. It was during the riot that some whites came over and picked up their labor.

CY: The maids and whatnot.

WY: Save for the maids and the butlers, they came and taken them home with them. But they couldn't keep them, they had to turn them loose because they didn't take them in the house and keep them. But they take them in and protected them from that violence.

So when they turned them loose, they had to go out to this internment camp. At one time, we could come back to town to see where the town was all burned. They had to give you, they called it a "green card," that my mother and father could come back over and see if there was anything they could salvage. But the whole place was burned to the ground.

JE: Your mother and father, they were here?

WY: Yes.

JE: For the race riot?

WY: For the race riot.

JE: Much of what you're talking about was told to you by your mother and father?

WY: My father, right, my mother and father and other folks I know.

CY: And your older sister.

JE: And your older sister. What's her name?

WY: Mabel.

JE: And she's six years older than you?

CY: When they freed the blacks from the . . .

JE: Internment camps?

CY: Yes. They didn't have any houses to go back to because all of the houses had been burned, their property had been looted. Everything that they didn't snatch up at the last minute and take with them had been either burned or looted. This is what I have heard.

Since we have been discussing the '21 Race Riot, some of the people that were teenagers were old enough to remember what had happened. They were young children

that remember being under the bed where their mothers hid them while these people came through their house and took whatever they wanted.

JE: You were not born?

CY: I was not born.

JE: But were your parents here?

CY: No.

JE: Okay.

CY: No, my mother came here in '25.

JE: Okay.

CY: I was born in '25. I was five years old when we came here. My mother came earlier and established us a home here. We stayed in Arkansas with our grandparents until we came here to go to school. Stay with our mother and we've been here ever since.

JE: Let's go back to when they let the blacks out. They didn't have any homes to go to?

WY: No, when it kind of quieted down, maybe two or three weeks after the riot, they gave the blacks that was the group that I was with, my mother and sister was out at the fairground. At that time, it was around the fifteenth in year but now they spin it back to like twenty-first of the year where it is now. But they ended it on the fifteenth. That's where we were incarcerated.

Chapter 04 - 4:11

Internment Camps

John Erling: You and your family were put in the internment camp at the fairgrounds.

Wess Young: Right.

JE: You were still too young to remember that. But what have you been told about being in that camp?

WY: Well, it was just a group of blacks. They only had the clothes that was on their back because when the riot started they had to run. They didn't have time to pick up anything. They had to run to just get up. And it started after twelve o'clock; the action started on the first of June.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WY: And they didn't have time to get no more than the stuff they could put on. Had to get up, say, "Get up and get out of the house and go north."

JE: Where did the blacks go to live when they didn't have any homes to go to?

WY: They stayed in these what you call internment camp until they could clean off the debris where the houses burned down. And the way they could tell who owned this piece of

property, the insurance companies when they sold a policy, they had a map of where all their policies was in this area. Back on Greenwood they had ten or fifteen policies there. Well, they had that whole block where those policies was. That's the way the peoples could claim their property. They had an insurance agent come in and the policies were like five cents a week or twenty-five cents a month or something like that. But that was the only way that they could claim that they had a legitimate claim, that was their property.

JE: Obviously their home wasn't there so—

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...did they live in the internment camps for a long, long time?

WY: It wasn't like it is now. When a tragedy happened, well, people from all over would come and help. They told us when—

Cathryn Young: They did publish it in the paper. They hid the fact that it had been because they were ashamed of what had happened.

WY: Well, the fact was too big to hide. Burning a whole neighborhood, how you going to hide that?

CY: They tried, they tried to hide it.

WY: Tell me how you're going to hide it. It was too big to hide. This is what happened: When it kind of quieted down the Red Cross and other charitable organizations came in with supplies like beddings and necessary supplies.

JE: Where would they have lived after the internment camp? Or did they—

WY: Well, they came back over here and build.

JE: While they were building, where did they live?

CY: In those tents.

WY: Tents.

JE: They lived in tents?

WY: Yeah.

CY: In those tents, so they were in those tents for a while.

JE: They set up the tents in the Greenwood area?

WY: In the Greenwood area, yeah.

CY: People that were old enough to remember what happened have said that they stayed in these tents over the winter.

WY: Yeah.

CY: Could have been building or whatever, establishing a home similar to what they had before this tragedy happened. But they stayed in those tents, that's where they had to live.

JE: Yeah.

CY: That's the only place they had to live.

WY: That's the only place.

JE: So then they started—

CY: All the ones that didn't leave town. Some people left town and have never lived here since. Since they have heard what's going on now that the '21 Race Riot movie and all of that, some people have come back that had not been back since they left here as children. And there's still some that have not come back.

I have gotten letters from classmates of mine, people that I knew back in the day, wanting to know what's going on. Because they had not been back here. They live in Chicago, New York, all around. They left here and went to California, they went wherever. And some of them are just hearing about it. So they get in touch with whoever they happen to know that's here.

Chapter 05 - 6:27

Afraid to Talk

John Erling: Where did you go to school?

Wess Young: I went to Catholic school at St. Monica's. I went there until the seventh grade, I think. And then I went to Carver. Then I went to Booker T. Washington.

JE: In any of your classes, in history or whatever, did they talk to you about the race riot?

WY: Um-um (negative).

Cathryn Young: They still don't, they just started talking about it.

JE: So your answer is no?

WY: No, no.

JE: But you knew, obviously, because—

WY: I knew.

JE: ...in high school, then you're sixteen, seventeen years old.

WY: Seventeen, eighteen, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Your family had talked about the race riot.

WY: They had.

JE: And you heard about it.

WY: Right.

JE: What you've just told me here today.

WY: Told you, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Do you ever recall sitting in a history class wondering why, *Well, why aren't you talking about this race riot?*

WY: No, it never did come to my mind.

CY: It was such a quiet thing. I finished school in '44. We didn't have anything, nobody said anything about the race.

JE: And where were you in '44?

CY: I was here, in Tulsa.

JE: Oh, you were here?

CY: I was here. I came here—

JE: And what school did you go to here?

CY: I went to St. Monica's from kindergarten through the ninth grade.

JE: But you knew, I guess, it was something that you shouldn't be talking about? Is that the way you felt?

WY: Well, during that time, the Ku Klux Klan was blooming. They could shut up anything they wanted to. They could shut it down and then rumors and things. If you would talk, just like you and me talking here, to a black group, well, it wouldn't go any further than this room. And then people in that room.

JE: So in your houses—

WY: Yeah.

JE: ...like we are now, that's the only place you dare talk about it.

WY: Only place you could talk about it.

CY: And people just didn't talk about it.

WY: See, you just didn't talk about it 'cause it was trouble.

CY: Because there was a danger.

WY: It was such a terrible thing, it was something that you want to forget about as quick as possible.

CY: And it was a danger.

WY: It wasn't something that you wanted naming along in with the older peoples. They didn't want that hanging over their head for them to have to tell their children and then they explain all of that. So it was a secret.

JE: So definitely, you didn't ask questions about it in school?

WY: No because the school teachers at that particular time, they didn't know anything about it.

CY: The teachers didn't teach you anything, they didn't know about it, it wasn't in the books. Now the first classes that are being taught, I think it was last year, the last school year—

JE: In 2008, you're saying?

WY: No.

CY: Yes. It started coming out a little in '07. Because some of the young teachers' families had been here for years. And the families started talking about it. And these people got excited about it and knew that it was something that black youngsters should know about.

JE: Okay.

CY: So they started talking about it. Wess has had teachers come here and interview him. So now they do have something, supposedly, I haven't been to the school so I don't know, but supposedly it's in the history books now.

- JE:** You have children? How many children did you have?
- CY:** Five. Four boys and one girl.
- JE:** And they all went to school here in Tulsa?
- CY:** Yes, yes, yes.
- JE:** You, of course, told them—
- CY:** Born and raised.
- JE:** ...about the race riot?
- CY:** We didn't talk about it because—
- WY:** We didn't talk about it, um-um (negative).
- CY:** ...it was just a subject that you didn't talk about.
- JE:** So even—
- CY:** Why talk about something that you really knew little about?
- WY:** No.
- CY:** Very little. Wess was four years old, what did he know about it? It was squashed, it was quieted down. Do you know anything about it? Have you ever heard anything about it?
- JE:** No, and I've lived here now thirty-three years.
- CY:** Okay, and you just started hearing—
- JE:** And it's only in the last, I would say, five or six years that you begin to hear about it.
- WY:** Five, six years, um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** Right. What year did you graduate from high school?
- WY:** 'Thirty-five.
- JE:** Cathryn?
- CY:** 'Forty-four.
- JE:** That's the era we're talking about where nobody—
- CY:** Nothing was said.
- JE:** ...nobody talked about this.
- CY:** Nobody, the teachers didn't know anything about it because they had not been raised to talk about it.
- JE:** You had five children.
- WY:** Right.
- CY:** They knew nothing about it.
- JE:** They must—was there some time though, in their growing up and as they went to school and mixed with other children, that they would come home and say, "What is—"
- WY:** No.
- CY:** No, the question you're about to ask us is no. Our kids never asked anything about it because they never knew anything about it. Their daddy didn't know enough to say anything about it. This stuff is just coming up and he's been asked questions about when he was a four-year-old and still a baby. You know, they don't have a long memory.

JE: And again, you're ninety-three, Wess.

WY: Right, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So all the survivors that can remember are no longer with us. Is that true?

CY: Well, no, there's some that remember.

WY: If you feel this close it's about eighteen others still living.

JE: But were they older at the time? So that some of them would—

WY: Some of them were older. Most of them, I would think, I'm one of the youngest ones.

CY: Some of them were older, some of them were—some of them Papa's age, around Papa's age and older.

WY: Yeah.

JE: Do you know the names of some of them?

WY: Otis Clark—

CY: Oh, we—

WY: And the oldest living survivor we know of.

CY: Otis Clark, he's a hundred and six.

WY: Yeah, he's a hundred and six.

JE: He does talk about it?

CY: He remembers because he was like eighteen at the time.

WY: Yeah, um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: And he remembers. A cousin of his got shot and they ran. Otis left here and didn't come back here to live for years and years.

JE: Your children now are what, forty, fifty years old?

CY: Ha, older than that.

JE: As a family, have you talked about it?

CY: Since it has become—

WY: Um-um (negative).

CY: We have been traveling with this. We go to different places to be interviewed after the movie is shown. And it's about the 1921 race riot.

WY: They got a group of us together, Professor Ogletree, when he heard about it—

CY: He came here for another thing altogether.

WY: For another thing altogether.

CY: But he was encouraged to come in because it was a group of these survivors.

WY: And then people about—

CY: At the cultural center. So he went in and talked to them. When he saw them he was just astounded.

Chapter 06 - 4:26**Reparations**

John Erling: All of this comes to light because the talk of reparations became an issue.

Wess Young: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Cathryn Young: Because they don't want to do anything.

JE: And they don't want to have—

CY: The city, everything has turned it down, they don't want to give any sort of reparation for the '21 race riot, and it was a race riot. Every other race riot in history, reparations have been given, except this one. This one has gone all the way to the Supreme Court.

WY: They turned it down.

CY: And it's been turned down. So why? So what do you do?

JE: This younger generation, does this make them angry or hostile or what do you think it does to them?

CY: No—nothing, really, because it's nothing for them to be angry about. They have enough to be angry about that going on in their lives right now, instead of going way back to 1921.

JE: You're saying in 2009 here, because they're black, they have enough—

CY: It's because they're people.

WY: Oh, yeah, plenty.

CY: Because we are people, just like you or anybody else, times are tough.

JE: Yeah.

CY: Money is not available. People are trying to pay their bills, make their money, keep their jobs, it's not easy.

JE: Okay, so—

CY: So they don't go back to this. Now our granddaughter, which is very close to us, and she knows that her granddaddy knows a little about this, and she knows that he's been interviewed by whoever can get in touch with him. And they write books about this. She's concerned because everybody is writing a book about it and they're making money on it but we're not getting anything from it.

JE: Yeah.

CY: People come here and interview, but they don't say, "Well, Mr. Young, I appreciate you for speaking with me. And when I publish my book or whenever I do whatever I'm doing, I'm going to make money on this, I'll see to it that you get some money from this." It's like Mr. Young don't need no money.

JE: But you've never received money from any book that was published.

CY: No, of course not.

JE: Yeah.

- CY:** But that's not saying that we should not receive money.
- JE:** No, you believe you should.
- CY:** I believe that if you interview Mr. Young and he's in your book, shouldn't he get some of your proceeds?
- JE:** Let's talk a little about what you did as a young man. Did you work at the Mayo Hotel?
- WY:** Yes.
- JE:** What did you do there and how old were you?
- WY:** I was a bellhop. Oh, I was in my thirties.
- JE:** In your thirties?
- WY:** Yeah.
- JE:** In the '50s—
- WY:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** ...you worked as a bellhop?
- WY:** 'Fifties and '60s, yeah.
- JE:** And it was such a marvelous beautiful place.
- WY:** The Mayo Hotel?
- JE:** Yes.
- WY:** Yes it was.
- JE:** Do you remember people that were famous, did you see there?
- WY:** Yeah, Gloria Swanson, Joan Crawford.
- CY:** Well, most any celebrity that came through town at that time would have stayed at the Mayo Hotel because it was the biggest hotel here and that's where they frequented.
- WY:** And, uh, uh, the reason we got to see Joan Crawford, it was through some picture she had made and some of her advertising she came through it that day.
- JE:** That was a busy hotel then, wasn't it?
- WY:** Oh, yeah, it was a busy hotel. It was *the* hotel.
- JE:** What kind of money did you make? Do you remember?
- WY:** Good money, the best money I ever made.
- JE:** Is that right?
- WY:** Best money.
- JE:** Lots of tips?
- WY:** Lots of tips. That was when we lived on, see, our salary was like twenty-four dollars every two weeks.
- CY:** Yeah.
- WY:** But our tips, we was running ten, fifteen, twenty dollars' worth of tips every day. That is if you stay up on the floor and work.
- CY:** On the floor.

JE: Did you work days or nights or both?

WY: Why, we worked both. We had like what you call a split-shift.

CY: Split-shift.

WY: One day you'd work ten hours, but it would be five hours in the morning and five hours at night. The next day, you'd work six hours.

JE: How many years did you work for the Mayo Hotel?

WY: Ten, fifteen years.

JE: Brian Jackson, is that a name that, Byron?

WY: Byron Jackson.

JE: Byron Jackson?

WY: Yeah.

JE: What was that?

WY: They manufactured underground pumps to pump the oil out of the ground up to the scene.

JE: And you worked there for a while?

WY: Yeah, I worked there for ten or twelve years.

CY: Twelve.

Chapter 07 - 6:27

Downtown Tulsa

John Erling: While Greenwood was flourishing in the '40s and '50s, and downtown Tulsa was with Clarke's Good Clothes and—

Wess Young: Right.

JE: Do you remember Renberg's?

WY: Renberg's.

JE: Vandervers?

WY: Street's.

JE: As blacks, you could shop in that area?

Cathryn Young: Yeah.

WY: Some stores, you couldn't just go in there and say, "I want to try on this suit," and so on. But if you worked for a rich white man, he would call down there and say, "I'm going to send my porter," or my maid, or my yard keeper, whatever, gardener, "I want you to give him what he wants and put it on my bill." You couldn't go in there and buy with your money, but you could go in there and get—

JE: Okay, so this would be in the '50s, and '60s?

WY: Right.

JE: So you could not go into these stores like Renberg's and Clarke's, unannounced and buy anything? They wouldn't wait on you?

WY: No, they wouldn't wait on you.

JE: And this was back in the days when you had to use separate restrooms?

WY: Right.

CY: Yeah, that just got over with.

JE: And dining, you couldn't eat?

WY: Oh, no, no.

JE: Okay, so—

WY: You can't go in there and spend your own money. Like Cress's had a big dining room where you'd go in and sit down and all.

JE: Which store?

WY: Cress's.

JE: Cress's.

WY: Yeah, it was a national merchandise store. Like they sold everything from a button to glasses and stuff like that.

CY: Um-hmm (affirmative), penny candy, and Coke.

JE: Okay, so you could, you could have lunch there or dinner there? Or—

WY: Later on, but when it started out, after they wrote that law that you couldn't sit down—

CY: Segregation.

WY: That segregation law, but then they opened it up. But before then, you couldn't go. It was just like you name them all high-priced stores, you couldn't go in there and spend your money. But your boss could call down there and say, "I'm sending Mr. Young down there, I want you to give him a suit, give him whatever he want, and charge it to my account."

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: Charge it to my account.

JE: Did that happen to you? Did you have somebody call down there?

WY: No, I never was that lucky.

CY: My mother worked for a fellow that I could go to—

WY: I never was that lucky. But I worked at King's Jewelry and I worked at Brown and Duncan's.

JE: Brown and Duncan was a department store. What did you do at Brown and Duncan.

WY: Yeah, that was a department store. Well, they had a cafeteria in there and I worked in the cafeteria.

CY: He could work there.

JE: You could work there but couldn't sit down and eat at the counter?

WY: Couldn't sit out there.

JE: It was segregated.

WY: Yeah, it was segregated.

JE: How did this make you feel?

WY: At that particular time, that was what was going on and it didn't make me feel out of place because I couldn't go there.

CY: We had our own places to go to. We'd come back over to Greenwood and you could go anywhere—

WY: You could go anywhere.

CY: ...on Greenwood, get what you wanted, order what you want, sit down at a table with a nice white tablecloth with silverware.

WY: Silverware. See—

CY: The table was decorated. You would be waited on, in your own section of town, where you felt comfortable.

WY: That's where Greenwood got its nickname of the Black Wall Street. Because you could spend your money in atmosphere that was for you. See, because if you go uptown and spend your money you would be like an oddity or something.

JE: And they didn't want your money.

WY: They didn't want your money and they wouldn't take it. They wouldn't take it. They'd tell you right now, "We don't want your money."

JE: To be rejected like that had to be a—

WY: Well, I mean, well—

CY: You knew better than to go up there. You just knew where to spend your money. You knew where your money was going to be spent. You knew where you made your money. You put your money in your pocket and you come down to your own—

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: ...place where you are welcomed at any place and from door to door to door to door to door was something that you could entertain yourself. Back and forth across the street, all over the black part of town, you were treated with respect. You didn't want to sit down there, you didn't want to.

WY: See—

CY: That was something you did not want to do because you were not welcome there.

WY: Back in them days, it was a national law, segregation. The blacks had a part and the whites had a part. And there was very few you could break that line. It was just a segregation line.

CY: You didn't even want to.

WY: And we lived with it, we lived with it.

CY: You didn't even want to.

JE: Yeah.

WY: Well, you might have wanted to but you know if you was in your part of the town, you was getting the best there was to get. If you go to this other part where it was segregated, you was a second-class, third-class citizen or whatever.

CY: Whatever somebody that worked there wanted you to be. They probably didn't make more money than you did but they could turn up their nose at you.

WY: Raise their nose at you. You could go in the store and you could go in there and won't nobody come and wait on you. And you'd just be walking around and walking and wasn't nobody come and wait on you.

JE: I think, as you said earlier, you knew that was going to happen to you, so you would just stay away from it.

WY: Right. Well, we did until we got together.

CY: Didn't need to go there.

WY: We didn't have to go, see?

JE: You saw signs in windows: Blacks not served.

WY: Not served, right, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Drinking fountains, was it separate drinking?

WY: Separate, yeah, separate drinking fountains.

CY: We knew where to go.

WY: Go.

CY: When I was a little girl, my brother would take me shopping. We lived on Latimer Court so he would take me from Latimer Court down to the train station. That's where I could use the restroom. He would wait in the lobby for me. When I would come out, he would take me on to Cress's, that's where I shopped. And they had whatever my nickels would buy. I could buy crayons, beads, whatever I wanted. I could buy it with the little money that I had. Even the clothing that they had I could buy. I couldn't try it on there but I could buy it there.

JE: That was downtown?

CY: That was downtown Tulsa.

JE: So Cress's had a different attitude than the other stores? Are you saying that?

CY: Yes, yeah.

JE: Blacks were more welcome at Cress's?

CY: That's what I'm saying.

Chapter 08 - 7:30**N-word**

John Erling: So they tried to make you feel like you're a second-class citizen.

Wess Young: Class citizen.

Cathryn Young: They tried to make you feel something that you knew you wasn't.

WY: In your place, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That was important for your parents probably also to tell you, "They're treating you like second class." But to instill in you—

WY: Yeah, raise you.

CY: Yeah, still raise you to be a first-class citizen, to respect yourself and others. Not to go and turn your nose up and act ugly. We were taught that a nigger was a bad actor. That's what my mother taught me and that's what's in the dictionary.

WY: The dictionary, yeah.

JE: A bad actor?

CY: Nigger, a nigger was a bad actor. Look at the dictionary.

WY: My wife's a dictionary.

JE: So amongst blacks, you would call somebody a nigger if they were—

WY: Yeah, yeah.

CY: White, black, Indian, Mexican, whoever, if he was acting bad, you could say, "Oh, that nigger is really acting bad."

JE: Oh, so you could call a white a nigger?

CY: Well, you can say it, you wouldn't say it to them.

WY: Yeah.

JE: Say they were—no.

WY: Unless they were saying—

CY: Unless they were saying something to you that you didn't like.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative), didn't like.

CY: You would call them a nigger. They might call you a nigger but you could call them, "Hey, you're the one that's a nigger because you're the one that's acting bad. I'm acting with respect, you're acting bad."

JE: So then, when whites would call you or anybody racially—

CY: I never got called a nigger because I never acted bad.

JE: But whites would use that word for anybody who was black.

WY: Right.

JE: They weren't using it because this black was bad.

CY: Because they didn't know any better.

- JE:** They didn't know?
- CY:** That's what they were showing their ignorance.
- JE:** Right.
- CY:** A negro is a black person.
- JE:** Yeah. I didn't even know this myself that that's the way—
- CY:** It's in the dictionary.
- JE:** That's why blacks can call another black a nigger is because they know they're calling somebody who's been bad in the—
- CY:** Not necessarily. Now the word is just used, but it's more of a slang. It's more of a slang.
- WY:** It's more of a slang.
- JE:** Now today?
- CY:** That's right.
- JE:** But back in the day in the '40s, and '50s, and '60s, that's the way it meant.
- CY:** Back then.
- WY:** Meant, um-hmm (affirmative).
- JE:** So it still had to be difficult for your parents to tell you, "No matter what they call you or how they treat you, you still should be proud."
- WY:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- CY:** "You are a proud person. You act nice, you will be treated nice. If you're not treated nice, leave, that's what you do." Any place that you are not being treated like you want to be treated, you walk away. Just like you walk in their door, you walk out of their door.
- JE:** Yeah.
- CY:** That's anywhere. That's in your own neighborhood even.
- JE:** Did you think as children or whatever, *I'm a good person. I want to do the right thing, but simply because the color of my skin is different than yours—*
- CY:** I'm proud of the color of my skin, there's nothing wrong with the color of my skin. It's in your mind that something is wrong with my skin.
- JE:** Yeah.
- CY:** God created me this color.
- JE:** Right.
- CY:** You may not be proud of your color but I'm proud of my color.
- JE:** Right.
- CY:** That's the way we raised our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, and now we have great, great grandchildren. And they are to act with dignity wherever they are.
- JE:** But here we are in 2009 and we still have racial problems, don't we?
- WY:** Oh, well, yeah.

- JE:** Don't you think we will never ever solve the problem of race until the end of time?
- CY:** Oh, I think it's getting better and better and better.
- JE:** It is getting better but—
- CY:** It's getting better and better and everything takes time.
- WY:** Only—
- CY:** It has taken time. We have come all the way to see a black president. So there is no way that we can say that it won't happen.
- WY:** It's a—
- CY:** There's no way that we can say, any of us can say what will happen and what won't happen.
- WY:** This—
- CY:** It's up to the good Lord in heaven is what's going to happen here. Because this is his.
- WY:** Um-hmm (affirmative).
- CY:** This is his. We all belong to him, no matter.
- WY:** And so when it rain, it don't just rain in the black community.
- JE:** Right.
- WY:** And it don't just rain on the good people.
- JE:** On the white community, right.
- CY:** On the ones that call themselves the good folks, you know.
- WY:** On the white and good people.
- CY:** And there's good and bad in all nationalities. It's according to how you want to act.
- WY:** It's what's in your heart.
- CY:** It's not necessarily what your parents taught you.
- WY:** It's what's in *your* heart. See, you can't lay what you do on nobody but yourself. You do what you do, not what your parents did, but what you do is you.
- JE:** You know, you have had to be really strong mentally and stronger than many, many whites. They didn't have to go through what you've talked about here today.
- CY:** Do you know—
- WY:** Well, I—
- CY:** ...I feel like they've gone through more.
- JE:** Really?
- WY:** Oh, yeah.
- CY:** I feel like they've gone through more because the ones of them that want to pretend that they are better than anybody else. You're not better than I am, I'm not better than you are. We are all God's children.
- WY:** We're all God's children and we have all been oppressed. We've been somewhere where we was looked on as something different. God make us all different, we're all different from each other.

CY: He intended for us to be different.

WY: His intention, yeah.

CY: And he made us different.

WY: But he put us here as his creation and what he wants is when we can live in peace and harmony. And it will happen someday. It might not be in your time and my time. But it will be here.

JE: I don't think blacks and whites will ever live in peace and harmony.

WY: They will.

CY: Well, nobody lives in—look, twins don't get along.

JE: Right, right.

CY: So how can you expect two completely different people to get along?

JE: And I believe here in 2009, there's a lot of racial discrimination in the minds of people who live in Tulsa today.

WY: People in Tulsa.

JE: There are those—

CY: And everywhere else.

JE: There are those who are eighty-five and ninety today.

WY: Ninety today, right.

JE: And they were raised back in the same time you were, as whites.

WY: That's right, as whites.

JE: And they still—

WY: They still have that animosity.

JE: Still have that view about blacks—

WY: Blacks, um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...and all that they did back in the '30s, '40s, and '50s.

WY: That's right.

JE: And they can't get rid of it. Now their children and grandchildren don't view it that way.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But some whites of your age still have in their hearts—

WY: Right.

JE: ...some of this racial hatred.

WY: Hatred, um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: And I think it's all about jealousy. What you have, I don't think you ought to have that. I don't think that you're as capable as I am.

JE: That's true.

WY: All right. What the devil is working—

CY: Oh, he's always working.

WY: ...in the world. Well, he's always in there, that's, that's the reason we have this—

CY: He's a booger. But the devil's a nigger. He's a bad actor. [laughing]

WY: One of these days—

CY: That's the biggest nigger in the whole fort, because he's getting really mad because a whole lot of folks act that.

WY: Well, that's, that's where you got it, that's where it's at.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

WY: That's it. That's the reason we having wars and strife all over the world, not just in Tulsa and Oklahoma, but it's all over the world.

Chapter 09 - 4:29

A Good Life

John Erling: Here you are, ninety-three.

Wess Young: Yeah.

JE: You've got your much younger wife here.

Cathryn Young: [laughing] Yeah.

JE: Cathryn. And as you look back on your life, both of you, it's been a good life?

CY: Yes.

WY: I think it's been a good life.

CY: Never been hungry a day in my life. Never been barefooted a day in my life. Never been without clothes, never been without a roof over my head, in my whole life.

JE: And that's better than a lot can say. Believe me.

CY: Right.

WY: Oh, yeah, I—

CY: I may not have but two or three pennies but I got some of it. If I don't have but three pennies then I know not to spend all three of them.

WY: Yeah.

JE: I believe that today, young blacks are obviously accepted far more in community than when you were young.

WY: Yeah, yeah.

JE: Does it make you wish that you were a youngster today and you wouldn't have to go—

CY: No, no, no, no.

WY: No, no.

CY: Wouldn't want to be in it. I don't want to be in that mix. I was in mine, I don't want to be in theirs. They have their life, I've had mine.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative). We have.

CY: I'm coming down to the end, and that's the way I want it. We teach our children, "Don't cry when I'm gone. Give me my flowers while I'm here." Meaning, treat me nice while I'm here. You won't have anything to cry about when I'm dead. Don't come to a funeral of mine bawling and crying because I died, because I was born to die.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: You can count on death. You were born to die. That's one thing that you are certainly do is die.

JE: Right.

CY: So get ready for it. That's the way we teach our kids, our grandkids, "Hey, be ready, be ready for it."

JE: You know, you live in a nice home here. Did you buy this home many years ago or did you—

CY: Yes.

WY: Yeah.

JE: From saving money?

CY: We came here as homeowners. I found this house. When I walked into the door of this house it was being used like a speakeasy.

WY: The lady—

CY: The lady that owned the house at that time had owned a hotel on Greenwood and Archer.

WY: Café, wasn't a hotel.

CY: It was a hotel, she owned the hotel and the restaurant there.

WY: She didn't own it, she didn't own it.

CY: That's the way I got it.

WY: The way you heard it, but—

CY: That's the way she told me.

WY: I know them, I was there.

CY: Anyway, that's what, anyway, she owned this house.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: And that's the way she was using this house, just like she used that house.

JE: When you say speakeasy, tell students who will listen, what is a speakeasy?

CY: Well, a funhouse, where you could go. You hear the music, you eat, you drink, you celebrate.

WY: You need a place where you could go and get a drink and sit down and enjoy yourself. And they called it a speakeasy because you wasn't rowdy or anything in there. And you just sit down and—

JE: Okay.

WY: ...order you a drink and then whatnot.

CY: When I walked in here it was a bar in this room. And a great big real nice refrigeration thing where they kept drinks—

WY: Nice thing.

CY: ...and the food and stuff. Back in there, was the kitchen.

WY: Was the kitchen.

CY: That's where they cooked. They had closed in the back porch to make it big enough for a café. They had a pool table in the front. That was a private room where a party could come and rent that room. The door would be closed. You could party in there until your time was up and then you left and somebody else's party was in there.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Well, I want to thank both of you for this time. Because this will be for students for many, many years to come.

WY: We hope so.

JE: On a website so that students can listen to the way it was. And I appreciate your visiting with us today. Both of you were very good.

WY: Um-hmm (affirmative).

CY: Well, thank you for coming.

JE: Any comment, any kind of a comment that you'd like to make?

CY: Just thanks for coming.

WY: Yeah.

CY: And I have to go and finish what I was doing. [all three laughing] Because we are getting ready to go for another fun jaunt. We are going to hear Earth, Wind, & Fire. Philip Bailey that sings Earth, Wind, & Fire is my cousin.

JE: Oh, really?

CY: And we are going to see him perform in Oklahoma City.

JE: This weekend?

CY: Yes.

JE: Oh, great! Well, have a safe trip and enjoy.

WY: Well, thank you.

CY: We will.

JE: And I got to say, for ninety-three years old, you don't look ninety-three, well, neither one of you look old and I haven't even asked you, Cathryn, what your age is.

CY: I'm eighty-four.

JE: You both look young. Can I take your picture?

CY: If you have to.

Chapter 10 - 0:33**Conclusion**

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