

INTERVIEW WITH: John Olbey, joined by Olive Olbey and Dorothy Wallace

BREAKING THE COLOUR BARRIER: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE CHATHAM COLOURED ALL-STARS
A collaboration between the University of Windsor and the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame

Interview Status: open to public confidential anonymous

Name of interviewee: John Olbey (J.O), Olive Olbey (O.O), Dorothy Wallace (D.W)

Name of interviewer: Deirdre McCorkindale (D.M)

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Transcription:

D.M: Okay, so today's date is July the 6th 2016. I'm Deirdre McCorkindale and I am doing the interview with Usher. Okay, so we will start.

O.O: His name if you wanted the real name.

D.M: Oh, maybe I should... John.

O.O: Yeah, they might not know you by Usher.

D.M: Yeah, I should remember that for the transcript.

O.O: John Olbey.

0:00:33.2

D.M: Okay, just make sure its recording -- it is recording. Good. Okay so the first question they would like me to ask you is, what is the name of the person you knew from the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

J.O: What time?

D.M: The person that you knew?

J.O: Oh, my brother.

D.M: Your brother? Oh, can you just state the name for them.

O.O: John.

D.W: What was his name?

O.O: Your brother's name.

J.O: Oh, Clifford Olbey.

0:01:02.2

D.M: Okay. And where was he born and where did he grow up?

J.O: He was born 44 Scane Street.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: And he grew up in Chatham.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: And then he moved to Windsor.

D.M: Oh, okay.

J.O: So, he made his home in Windsor.

0:01:21.2

D.M: Okay and do you remember how old he was when he made his home in Windsor? When did he leave Chatham?

J.O: He got married here.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: So he was beyond marriage age—I think he'd be 25.

0:01:37.3

D.M: Okay, so can you tell me anything about his family, who they were what they did for a living?

O.O: There is Penny. Penny lives in Windsor, she's retired. She worked at Canadian Tire and I don't know you—know people had different jobs so they don't stay at one place. Penny, and then there's Clifford Jr. He's in, Windsor. He's blind.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: Leonard was the oldest—he died.

O.O: No, he wasn't the oldest.

J.O: Jimmy...-Jimmy.

D.W: What did Clifford do?

O.O: Cliff Sr.? What did your brother, Cliff Sr., do?

J.O: Well he was a proprietor, part proprietor of a hotel in Windsor.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: Was a, what was the...—name of that place, the one that burned down I can't think of it.

O.O: I don't know. See I'm not—they were older than me. I did know them afterwards.

J.O: It's so far back for me.

D.M: If you don't remember that's okay. Proprietor of a hotel actually we might even be able to...—figure that out if it burned down too. What else did other people in your family do?

J.O: Well, George was the bell captain at the William Pitt Hotel downtown. And Wilfred started a business.

D.M: These are your brothers?

J.O: Yeah.

D.M: Okay.

JO: He started a business making cement blocks down the street.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: And he moved to Chicago.

D.M: Oh, he moved to Chicago? Okay.

J.O: And my sister, Dot, she moved to Detroit at a young age and she was in a cleaning industry down there in Detroit. And she lived there all her life. She had two marriages and she survived both of them.

O.O: She ended up working for the city for the city of Detroit as an employee.

D.M: Oh.

D.W: So, is that why you like me? Because my name's Dorothy?

Everyone: [laughs]

O.O: That's what she ended up doing. Then John, I don't want to interfere but you must let her know that your brother George, when he worked down there at the William Pitt whatever, how he saved people when the hotel burned.

J.O: Yes, I forgot about that.

D.M: Oh, I didn't know the hotel burned.

O.O: What did they call it, John?

J.O: The William Pitt Hotel. And it was a Garner House at one time. Garner House Hotel and he was working there as a bell hop and it caught on fire.¹

¹ The Garner House Hotel, at the corner of King and Sixth Streets in downtown Chatham burned down in 1929. The William Pitt Hotel was built on the same spot two years later.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: And he was chasing everybody out of the hotel. Everybody had to hit the streets so he went up in the elevator and on each floor he ran down the length of the building and back again, screaming and rapping on all the doors to get all the clients out. And he went up to the next floor and up to the next floor and he did that and when he finally finished he was overcome with smoke.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: And I remember him coming home. I was just a young fellow and he was just burnt smoke all through his clothes, everything, and he was a kind of hero but it was quite a thing.

0:05:55.4

D.M: Okay, so the next question they want me to ask is, how important were sports to Cliff growing up? And what sports did he play?

J.O: Who?

D.M: Cliff.

J.O: Cliff, he was a runner.

D.M: Oh, he was a runner?

J.O: Very fast at track in school and I think that's about all he was interested in, and baseball.

D.M: So just running and the baseball?

J.O: Baseball.

0:06:22.2

D.M: Okay, that's good. Did any of your other family members play sports or did they watch sports?

J.O: No, they didn't. Well Wilfred did. Wilfred was a boxer.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: And he was in Toronto working as a Pullman porter. Anyway, he became the Canadian

champion.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: In his weight in the army -- that's after he joined the army. Then they sent him to the west coast and he was a light heavyweight fighter.

0:07:09.6

D.M: Wow, I am learning a lot today. Okay, so for Cliff do you know when and, you don't have to give me an approximate date on this, when he started playing with the Coloured All-Stars?

J.O: I was gone.

0:07:24.8

D.M: Oh, you were gone. Okay well that's fine. Do you know how he came to play with them?

J.O: Pardon?

D.M: Do you know how he came to play with them, like how did he get involved with them, do you know?

J.O: Baseball?

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: Oh, well guys used to knock around in the ball park. I lived on Scane Street. And there was Stirling Park—that was just beyond the next row of houses, and a swimming pool there, a supervised swimming pool and that's where all the kids hang out.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: So there was a diamond there and you'd choose up sides and play ball.

0:08:08.1

D.M: Okay, that makes sense. Did he ever talk about how the team was formed or how they joined the Ontario Baseball Association?

J.O: I have no idea.

0:08:20.5

D.M: Okay, what positions did he play?

J.O: Clifford?

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: He was right field, that's where he played.

0:08:29.5

D.M: Was he known for any particular skills or anything distinctive about his playing?

J.O: No, pretty good fielder, that's all.

0:08:40.8

D.M: Okay. Do you remember any memorable events about him playing? Was there something particular when he was playing that was really memorable that people talk about or...?

J.O: I was twelve years old and I was a ball boy and I chased balls on the fence. I can't think of anything memorable about his activities.

D.M: That's okay.

J.O: They were in a different age group than me.

0:09:16.7

D.M: Yeah. Can you tell me, do you remember anything about the team itself their style of playing, what they were known for?

J.O: Yes, I knew the team and they're very well etched in my memory. I knew them all and they got Don Washington from Detroit. He was the solid heart of the team. He was catcher and he was like the field manager and had brought a short stop from Detroit too. I know the third baseman, King Terrell. I knew the second baseman, Flat Chase and the first baseman was Ross Talbot—he was in the chicken business after that, and my brother was in right field and Gouy Ladd was in center field.

O.O: [inaudible]

J.O: I remember the ball team because it was quite a thing for me there. I spent all my time in the park you know?

0:10:40.9

D.M: Yeah. So what were people's reaction to their playing like did they have a lot of fans? Did they have a lot of spectators?

J.O: Yes, they had a lot of fans. They didn't have much to start with, just the local groups and the families and the people around the park. But as they got better they started playing these teams out of town.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: And there was a man that owned the pool hall. He sponsored them for...uniforms.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: Now they're dressed up you know and they travelled as a team and they played as a team on and off the field and they were quite a rowdy bunch.

0:11:28.0

D.M: Did he talk about what he enjoyed about playing baseball, why he liked playing baseball?

J.O: Nah.

D.M: No.

J.O: He didn't talk to me. [laughs] I was just a kid.

0:11:42.7

D.M: Okay. Did he talk about any challenges or difficulties with the team like were there any difficulties like maybe getting places or people's reactions?

J.O: No, they would be mad maybe, come back angry sometimes and then say some incident had happened but most of the time they were good.

0:12:02.9

D.M: Did they say why they were angry when they came back a few times?

J.O: There was anger within the players.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: For some of the treatment they received.

D.M: Oh, I understand.

J.O: But they kept it to themselves. They didn't, they didn't, bellyache because that's the way things were.

0:12:26.4

D.M: Yeah, I can understand that. Did he talk about travelling with the team like what their exhibition games were like? Stories about travelling to other towns, anything like that?

J.O: There was a couple of times I got a ride with them but as I say the adults were separate from us and after the games they had their fun. But it was hard getting a ride sometimes. And they rode by cars, traveled by cars and then one time they rode in a truck to Strathroy and that was being, oh I don't know what it was Jakey and Solburn, your friend Jakey.

O.O: Oh, Eves?

J.O: Yeah, Eves. He had a truck and he liked baseball and he carried them one day.

0:13:41.7

D.M: Okay, so when they won what I am trying to figure out, this question is worded weird. When they won what was the reaction in Chatham? Did they have a lot of support if they'd win elsewhere?

J.O: Oh, yes.

D.M: Yeah?

J.O: When they won the series the last series and they came into town they were riding on the sides of the cars and everything and the whole town was jammed at King and Fifth Street to meet them. And they just hollered and cheered them because nothing like that had ever happened in Chatham before and they had all kinds of white fans, coloured fans.

D.M: So, people from all over not just this area].²

J.O: They were all Ontario winners and everybody jumped on the bandwagon. [laughs]

D.W: Some excitement in Chatham.

0:14:44.1

D.M: Okay. When did he stop playing for the All-Stars?

J.O: I don't know.

D.M: Oh, that's ok—you don't know you don't know.

J.O: I don't know when the team broke up.

0:15:02.9

D.M: We already kind of covered this at the beginning but maybe we can go over it again in case I forgot anything. Would you like to share anything about his life after he played with the All-Stars? Making a living, his family life? We went over this a little bit but do you have anything else to add to it?

J.O: Well, he went to Windsor.

D.M: Yeah.

0:15:32.1

J.O: And he worked at the Prince Edward Hotel, and then he was walking down the street one day and there used to be a fellow that travelled all over the United States and Canada and he threw money away.³ He'd get a hotel, nobody knew who he was and he'd throw money out the window and Cliff happened to be going down the street and seen the bills floating and anyway he got a thousand dollars. He ran right to the bank. [laughing] Just as fast as he can go. You know what, guys are laughing at him, yeah, "that's just junk" and he just run and presented it at

² Referring to the east end of Chatham, where the many of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars lived and usually played.

³ Harry Falconer McLean, also known as "Mr. X" was a Canadian-American railway contractor and philanthropist who gave money to various causes and individuals. Sometimes he randomly gave money away, handing it out to people on the street. He visited Windsor in 1944, and reportedly threw bills out the window of the Prince Edward Hotel.

the bank and got half of the money but he won a thousand dollars... didn't win it. [laughs] That fellow travelled for years giving money away.

O.O: It was in the paper.

D.M: It was in the paper?

O.O: Yes, it was I heard about it. I was quite young and I think we were married when he got--but I remember hearing about this guy. But he had all kinds of money and I guess anybody who was around was able to get it or was lucky enough to be around.

0:17:02.2

D.M: He's not still alive is he because I'd like to... [laughs] So did he continue to play sports after the All-Stars or did he kind of stop after that?

J.O: He didn't play anymore.

0:17:11.6

D.M: Okay, did he encourage others in his family to get involved in sports -- you guys, his children anybody?

J.O: We had a junior team.

D.M: You had a junior team?

0:17:21.2=

J.O: Yes, it was the Pythagoreans, they called it and there was a club, a Masonic lodge in town and some of the sons of the players and the young people in there decided to play ball and put this team together and that was the name they got, the Pythagoreans.

D.M: The Pythagoreans.

J.O: Yes, the Pythagoreans. It was something to do with some mythical figure that they knew something about. It was in their lodge and that's why we took that name.

0:18:08.4

D.M: Okay. How do you think sports affected his life?

J.O: Cliff?

D.M: Yeah.

0:18:48.4

J.O: Well, I don't know. He was a happy go lucky guy and he met a lot of people. He was at home no matter where he went and he, when he went to Windsor and once he got that money he started working in this hotel that burnt down and he got a share in the hotel and the hotel burned down anyway. And when I came home from overseas he was a numbers man. You know what a numbers man is?

D.M: I know a little bit about it but I have never understood how it worked.

J.O: Well, you buy numbers.

D.M: Right.

J.O: He had customers all over the place and it's based on the races.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: The official race track news is published in the paper everyday and you had a number and whatever your number placed you got so much on your money, and some people played heavy and some people played. He'd go around with a book. It was illegal of course.

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: [laughs] He said he knew every alley in Chatham and Windsor.

O.O: It's almost like the lottery, now isn't it?

Everyone: Yeah.

J.O: When they started gambling legally around here they just about went out of business.

D.M: Thank you for explaining it to me, because I've always heard about it but I never understood how it worked, so.

D.W: But can you imagine a thousand dollars back in that day, how much that's worth?

J.O: What?

D.W: What a thousand dollars would be?

J.O: Oh, lots of people win that much.

0:20:58.7

O.O: There was Sagasta Harding playing ball with the All-Stars. Maybe John after you've finished with him he might be able to tell you about him.

D.M: Okay.

O.O: I don't know if you wanted to know about him though.

D.M: They probably do, they probably would.

O.O: He was one of the oldest ones—Sagasta Harding was one of them.

J.O: Oh yes.

O.O: Then they went to Romulus⁴ and brought him to Toronto to the first Blue Jays, and he threw out the ball.⁵

D.M: Oh, I think I saw the newspaper article.

D.W: But then it's nice to hear it from John.

D.M: This is, I prefer -- I like talking to people a lot better than just reading the newspaper.

O.O: He was a relative of mine, as well you know, and he would play the piano at [inaudible] and he would play the organ at the church in Romulus.

J.O: They had a special holiday game in Toronto. They got all the vets they could find of the team and they honoured them there. At the Toronto Maple Leaf where they play—

O.O: At the Rogers Center.

D.W: Did you go?

⁴ Romulus, Michigan.

⁵ Referring to the 2002 Toronto Blue Jays game where they honoured the Chatham Coloured All-Stars and wore replicas of the All-Stars' jerseys.

J.O: No, I didn't.

0:22:37.7

D.M: Okay, I am going to word this a little differently because of the way they worded this question but were sports really important in the black community here.

J.O: What?

D.M: Were sports really important in the black community here?

J.O: Yes, it was.

0:22:46.7

D.M: Yes. Why was it important to the community?

J.O: Well, I think it was a sport you didn't have to have a lot of money.

D.M: Oh.

J.O: And you could get out with a raggedy glove and one glove and when you come in from the field the glove went down on the ground and the fielder from the other team used the same glove. And our teams out there you see, so there was not enough money there for everybody to have a nice shiny glove. It was good because there wasn't much money floating around and it got the guys together.

0:23:44.6

D.M: Did Cliff ever talk about any difficulties within...—the sports community over time? I think they mean racism. They are not saying it here but I think that they mean racism. Did he have a hard time at all, that you know of?

J.O: I don't think they had a hard time as a team—they might have been rejected in some instances.

D.M: Okay.

J.O: But when you're with a bunch of guys and you're...—solidified, you know, nothing fazes you. You know, insult them back or doing anything they wanted to, nobody could hurt them.

D.W: No, what also you gotta remember, these were...—no little people like Olive and I. You're

talking about Earl Chase, a good-sized man, talking about Gouy Ladd, who was a good sized man, and Flat Chase and who else, and I mean these were....

J.O: Big Boys.

D.W: They were, and so to somebody that was going to come at them, they better be pretty sure of what they were doing right?

D.M: Okay, that makes sense.

D.W: So that's what he's trying to say.

0:25:16.3

D.M: Okay, so overall what do you think was the significance of the Coloured All-Stars? Like what do you think I guess they are kind of asking, what's their legacy? What's so important about them, I guess?

J.O: I think there's an importance because they there was an important factor because they could do something together.

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: They could get together and do something because they were unwanted on the other teams in Chatham. There's lots of ball teams that flourished around here but there was no coloured team and when it was formed, it became a unit that was well known. And I know they all had pride in their accomplishments. I think it left a legacy that lasted for quite a while anyway, until the boys were gone.

0:26:27.0

D.M: Has the Coloured All-Stars, are they a part of your family history and memories?

J.O: Pardon?

D.M: Are they a part of your family history and memories?

J.O: Nah.

D.M: Not really. That's okay.

J.O: Not a prominent one.

O.O: Don't you want to remember them?

J.O: Well yeah, but I mean I don't...

D.M: They're not a significant...?

J.O: It's not a subject of conversation... do you remember that play he made? [laughs]

0:27:02.5

D.M: Have any members of your family been involved in any of the public commemoration? So, for example the 50th anniversary celebrations or the recognition game in 2002? So, was anybody in your family involved in any of those?

J.O: No?

0:27:21.1

D.M: No. Okay. Is this a story that you think that more people should know about and why? Do you think more people should know about this?

J.O: Oh yes

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: Yes I think it's nice that you're doing this. I don't know how far it will go.

D.M: Hopefully pretty far 'cause they are being pretty extensive with this so.

O.O: It's good so that the great-grandchildren, coming up, playing ball, can know.

J.O: 'Cause a lot of people don't know about it.

D.M: I didn't know about it until I got involved with the project and I grew up here and I didn't know anything about it.

O.O: Yes.

D.W: I didn't know nothing about it.

O.O: A lot of times they didn't, well I just heard some things what John would tell me you know, I

didn't either.

0:28:14.0

D.W: I just knew the men and I know that you played with the Panthers [to John] Didn't you? Alan's team.⁶

J.O: Yeah.

D.W: I don't know, I just remember 'cause I'm 1943.

O.O: See I didn't come to Chatham 'till 1949. Well I might have known some things that was going on but I, you know.

D.W: But I remember now. I don't know what position you played but I remember you [referring to John Olbey], Mel Cross, Earl Chase, Horace Chase, Charles Hurst, Rodney Williams.

J.O: Yeah, well some of those guys come along behind me, you know. You know those guys were young. I'm over the hill, you know.

D.W: Well I knew you come out there and you threw some balls with them.

J.O: We started the Pythagoreans, then it became the Panthers because the Masons didn't want anything more to do with us.

D.M: Why did they name it the Panthers? I'm just curious, just asking. Why was it called the Panthers -- do any of you know why?

J.O: I don't know why. Somebody come up with an idea—just the Panthers. It started with a "P."

D.W: You didn't know that they were over there playing?

D.M: I didn't know till Dennis⁷ told me when we were at the event with the paper. He told me about the Panthers, so I didn't know about that either.

D.W: But Alan⁸ did try you know. Who was before Alan? There was other coaches...

J.O: Yeah, I remember him catching... trying to catch. He played with some teams around here. Of

⁶ Alan Wright, Dorothy Wright Wallace's older brother.

⁷ A relative

⁸ Dorothy's brother

course by the time he come along the teams were intermingled all over.

D.W: Yeah.

0:30:43.4

D.M: Okay, so the last thing they want me to ask is if you have anything else that you would like to add about Cliff?

J.O: Cliff?

D.M: Anything else you'd like to add? Story you think we should know?

J.O: Nah. [laughs] He was in the numbers.

D.M: See, I like that story. I like that story better than the baseball thing.

0:31:02.5

J.O: When I came home⁹ and I got off the boat there was nothing around here, so I decided to go to Windsor. And I went to Windsor and walked into the place where the bar was and there was Cliff -- he's running a poker game. Stopped: "Olbey, yeah that's Olbey! Hang around for a minute." [laughs] I hadn't seen him for five years you know. But I mean, I waited 'till they were all done and the game broke up and we got together and he said, "I'll go get some money". So he went to the hotel where he was staying in—Drake Hotel.¹⁰ It was a small hotel in Windsor and he went to his room and there was an old cedar chest—not cedar, just an old chest, you know the old kind that were bound with metal.

D.M: Yeah.

J.O: Raised the lid on it—and it was full of money—full of money. And he took some money.

J.O: He's still in the numbers game you know and he was running a poker game on the side. And he said, "I gotta take some money." I said, "You crazy leaving that there in that scumbag of a hotel." "Ain't nobody gonna bother me," you know just like that. And nobody bothered him either. He was well known. So we went out and had a good time. I asked him if he knew anything where I could get a job. He said, "You go on back to Chatham, boy. There ain't nothing here for you." Nothing here for you—he didn't want me in that type of activity.

⁹ Referring to coming back from service in World War II.

¹⁰ Drake Hotel was at the corner of Glengarry Ave and Chatham Street in Windsor.

D.M: Environment yeah.

J.O: You know? And he sent me on my way.

0:33:35.1

DM: Did he make good money running the numbers?

J.O: Huh?

D.M: Did he make good money running the numbers?

J.O: Yes. Them guys used to strut around. I remember the guys come, big fellow that come down here and he went with the Binge girl for a while.

O.O: Reid.

J.O: Reid, he was a big numbers guys and he was a friend of Cliff and all these guys had big, big, money, pockets full of money, all them guys. Strutting around everybody knew them.

O.O: But yeah, he had a business on the side as well, like a Laundromat, you know how they would be in that, a front.

J.O: Yeah, always had a front.

D.M: I like this story better than the baseball story.

0:34:34.0

O.O: Cliff was such a likeable person, he was so funny. Like I remember him playing the lottery, you know how you could buy those tickets and he'd hit the jackpot.

J.O: \$40 000

O.O: \$200 000 plus he had that other thing on the side. He went to Las Vegas. He lost \$40 000 but he didn't mind, you know. He said well he won the \$200 000.

D.M: So he was kind of lucky then, eh?

J.O & O.O: Yeah

J.O: What to see his picture?

D.M: Yes

D.W: That's enough to make you sick.

O.O: Said, "oh my 40 000." [laughs]

D.W: And here you are trying.

O.O: I guess that's the way his life, you know, if that's the way you were, and that's the way you played and everything, that's nothing you know. But he was such an enjoyable person, likeable person. See I came along later since John, Usher, was youngest I, you know. [inaudible]

0:35:52.6

J.O: [shows picture] Sharpest guys in town.

Everyone: [laughs]

O.O: That's the family.

J.O: Him with his shirt out. That's Cliff.

D.M: When was this taken?

J.O: This was taken, we all used to go to Windsor and the Emancipation Day parade and all that stuff in Jackson Park.¹¹ It was a big day. And we'd get together, and we'd get together over to Smiley's house -- his house. [points] And this is my sister and this is George, older than him, and who's this? This is my brother Wilfred and this is my brother Smiley and this is me. This my sister—she lived in Detroit. Look at them pants. [laughs]

¹¹ Held in the first weekend of August, to commemorate the end of slavery in the British empire, August 1, 1834. Emancipation Day parades had been held in the Windsor-Sandwich-Amherstberg area since the nineteenth century. Starting in the 1930s and continuing through the 1960s, Walter Perry of Windsor organized Emancipation Day celebrations in Windsor which attracted thousands from both sides of the Canada-US border.