INTERVIEW WITH: Pat and Blake Harding

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

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Name of interviewer: Miriam Wright (M.W)

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Transcription:

M.W: Okay, I'm here at the Chatham-Kent Armories—

B.H: The Ansell Armoury.

M.W: Yes, the Ansell Armoury in Chatham, Ontario. I'm Miriam Wright and I'm interviewing Pat and Blake Harding and today is June 22nd. Okay, I guess I'll begin with questions. These are questions related to, kind of, the sports career and life of Wilfred "Boomer" Harding, focusing mostly on the other sports besides baseball. But I'm going to begin with some questions about the scrapbook collection itself—three big scrapbooks that we digitized for this digital archive and website—and I'm wondering if you could just tell me about the origin of the scrapbook collection. Who started it? Who was involved with it over the years? What can you tell me about it?

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P.H: First of all, Blake's grandmother, Boomer's mom, started doing the clippings. She would clip everything that she could find about any of her sons. And then that was given to Blake's dad, Boomer. Boomer kept it in a shed, all of his stuff in his shed, where he used to do his little tinkering and taught our kids how to play darts and all that. It was just surrounded with all of his stuff. So when he died, Blake's mom took it all and put it in boxes. And then Blake wanted it because she didn't really know what to do with them. So it sat in our house for a while. And then we had this idea of putting Blake's dad's name up for induction to the Hall of Fame.[1] So then I asked Blake if I could have the materials and I would put something together. And he said "okay," and I could have everything I wanted in there. And I didn't know what the criteria was, but I wanted to make sure that Blake's dad got into the Hall of Fame. Because even without going through the clippings and all that, I had all these trophies and that, and I knew he was special. And so, there was no way I wanted any reason for him not to be—not that anyone said no—but I wanted to make sure. So, it took me a long time because I had to go through all the newspapers. Because sometimes they weren't cut, sometimes they were the whole newspaper and I would go through all that. And then I started reading these stories and didn't have the endings, so I had to go to the library and to the museum and different places to get other material that would close that story off. And it took about five years to put it together. And then we nominated, or had somebody nominate, Blake's dad. And I filled out the application and Blake brought the books to the Hall of Fame and he was accepted, inducted. And so was the Coloured All-Stars as a team. So, that's kind of the history of it.

M.W: And why did you think it was important to do that?

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P.H: I loved and respected my father-in-law very much and I wanted to do it for him. But then, when I started putting it together, my heart just fell in love with the Coloured All-Stars. I read about the struggles that they had and the prejudice that they had to overcome to simply play ball. And I just felt it was a terrific story. I thought that all the people that played on that team were heroes. And I wanted something beyond just the Hall of Fame for people to know it, to know that story, and I wanted it together. And after the induction I was hoping to be able to get it published or, you know, something to keep it. And so I just had to wait until the time was right. And then you guys took over and my dream came true.

M.W: I'm wondering if you could go back to Boomer's mother who was originally collecting this. Do you know anything about why she felt it was important to save all this?

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[1] The Chatham Sports Hall of Fame

M.W: She loved her children—all of her children—and their achievements. Like it was a very achievement-orientated family, Blake, don't you think? Do you have something to say?

B.H: Yes. Well, she didn't get to go, but she followed them through the paper or the media as such in that time. But they were all going in different directions, and especially my father because he was going from one practice field to another practice field, from hockey to baseball, even in the same season. And so, she encouraged them and she knew that, for a family of that size, sports was going to be their outlet or their way out as well as education. So, they really pushed education and they really pushed sports. And the minimal they would accept was the equivalent of a high school. And then the girls all went to either college or university, and they pushed, so it was very much the mother that was behind them. My grandfather, he was the one that gave them their work ethic, I believe, because he worked really hard twelve months a year. And he was driving a horse and a wagon to bring in coal from Lake Erie to the local coal yard. So, he taught them what work was about, and she pushed the education and the sports aspect.

M.W: Anything else about the scrapbooks before we…?

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B.H: Just that the Coloured All-Stars were already— Dad was already in the Hall of Fame before his individual application went through. Because they'd gotten in about four, five years before as a group, as a team, and then when Pat took over, she took over with Dad as an individual, as an all-around athlete. That's what he went in under, as an "All Time All-Around Athlete," and it started with the Coloured All-Stars basically. And then even at the same time, it paralleled high school and Chatham Vocational School[2] with the other sports.

M.W: Okay, thanks. Okay, we are going to go on to the hockey section. I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit about when and where did Boomer Harding start playing hockey?

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B.H: He played in a local league and it was played in Chatham's first indoor arena, which would be the Chatham Curling Club now, which is across the street from the old armouries on William Street. And it was way before helmets or mouth guards or worrying about concussions. He played high school hockey as well at CVS, so he would be sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and that age. It was just as much a passion for him to play hockey in the off-season as it was to play baseball because, as we know, he was in the Coloured All-Stars when he was seventeen. So he had already made his mark on hockey. Then he played as he got older, into his, I would say, when he was in his twenties. When he was in the army, he played hockey for the army as well. Locally,

[2] Hereafter referred to as CVS.

because they trained in Number 12 Basic Training Centre, which is now the Chatham Memorial Arena, in that section of town which was a common corps training for WWII, and it was designated Number 12 where they played hockey for them. And then they played in Kent, Elgin, Kent-London League. And then he went on to Kingston and played hockey for them. And then during the war, or after the war, he played in Europe. And then he came back and played local hockey again until '47 when he went to the Windsor Staffords for the IHL.[3] So it was always there, always there.

M.W: Can you tell me what he liked about the game?

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B.H: He liked the speed. He liked the, again, he liked the personal contact he had with people, meaning on the ice, where he could give what he got. And I've said in other interviews—and I've said that in previous interviews and I'll say it in future interviews—that Dad believed in giving what he got. And if there was fair play he was one of the most fair-minded people on the ice. And if it got aggressive he could be just as aggressive. He had the will to just love the power of hockey. It was a different game than baseball, a different game than basketball or soccer. He skated well, and I think he enjoyed the speed more than anything.

M.W: Did he talk about how he was received by his teammates?

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B.H: As a team sport, he found it very, very much alone. Different from the Coloured All-Stars. With baseball, he was one of several and they were like brothers, a band of brothers, more or less, and their victories were all of theirs; their defeats were all of theirs. In hockey, all the way through, he was very much alone. He was an individual. He was marked and he always told me, he says—and this was again before helmets, or anything like that—he said: "It's hard to hide a black man on white ice." He knew that going into his own dressing room there was a hostility. Before he could earn the respect of teams he was playing against, he had to earn the respect of the guys he was playing with, and he had to narrow that down to the guys on the same line as him. He had to earn their respect. And he was just determined that was the way it was going to be happening, because he loved the game and he could use it as a tool—keep him out of trouble, take out his aggression. But he also found that he could gain respect through just going out every day and playing the hardest he could and soon. And very soon, that respect went through the dressing room. And then he gained it with other teams. But I

[3] International Hockey League, originally known as the International Amateur Hockey League, was a minor professional hockey league, a farm system for the National Hockey League. When Harding played, the IHL had four teams, all affiliated with the Detroit Red Wings.

think it was always important for him to be respected. He passed that on to me, and he just demanded respect.

M.W: What about reactions from the spectators or others? Did he talk about that?

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B.H: He always would tell me that he turned a deaf ear to what came out of the crowd. He said half the time you don't hear it. I didn't play much hockey, just a little bit. But my son, our son, played travel hockey, and I was pretty vocal as a hockey parent. My daughter was louder than I was—you could hear her across any rink in southern Ontario—and I said to him, "Did you hear your sister?" and he said, "Nope." He didn't even hear her and that was much the same attitude my dad had. He didn't hear the crowd or the noise cheering for him or against him. He was focused on what was happening on the ice. And I think hockey is such a fast game, if you start paying attention to what's out there, you're going to get your bell rung. You have to pay attention to what's going on around you. And I think he may have heard it going on and coming off, because he told me about slurs and things like that. He heard it definitely in the game when he would go into a corner and somebody would whisper sweet nothings in his ear. And he just filed that and said, "Next time I get a chance to meet up with you in a corner, I'll come out first and you won't." The crowd remarks, I don't think it got to him even as much as it did in baseball where you could see them and hear them better. I don't know why.

M.W: Can you tell me bit more about him playing in the Armed Forces?

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B.H: When he was in Europe, right after the war, they formed. Because it was in England, it wasn't an army of occupation. It was to supplement the army occupation in Holland and Germany, so there were still thousands of Canadians and allied troops in England. Tension was still iffy in Europe. So they were there for a while and they weren't in a hurry to get Canadians back. And so they formed a six-team—I believe it was a six-team, and the programs will verify that—league, to entertain the serving troops that were already there plus the citizens of England and Scotland. So, the teams were made up primarily of NHL hockey players. At that time there wasn't just a six-team NHL as we knew after the war. There was like: Montreal had two teams, the Montreal Wanderers, the Montreal Canadians; the Detroit, no, Toronto St. Pats, the Toronto Maple Leafs (which ended up being the Leafs alone); the New York Rangers; and I think there was a second team in New York as well, Detroit, Boston. So they formed a team out of guys who had enlisted in the army before the war. Syl Apps was one of them who went on to

be in the Hockey Hall of Fame.[4] Brown[5], he was a goal tender for Detroit Red Wings, he was over there at the time. So, when you look at the program you see all these NHL players, plus two or three or four sprinkled in from amateur hockey and Dad was one of them. Their duties relegated from Dad being a dispatch rider on a motorcycle to playing hockey. They got up at, they would answer the role at 6:30-7:00 o'clock in the morning, and they'd go back to their quarters until hockey practice. Then they would do their dry land training, and then they would be on a bus. There's letters to my Aunt Georgina that he sent, you know saying: "We're treated like royalty. We get the best meals because we had to stay healthy, and we would be wined and dined." I don't think he saw the prejudice in Great Britain like he saw at home. And so he would go in, they would play. They would stay overnight at a local Canadian Forces Base, and then they would move on to the next centre. It was a scheduled league. They would be playing against basically the same teams—they'd be Red Team 1 one night and Red Team 2 the next. They had a full season of exhibition hockey for the people in Great Britain and the troops. It would give them something to keep busy as opposed to getting in trouble.

P.H: He also played for the Kingston Ponies.

B.H: That was before he went to Europe, but this was the team in Europe.

M.W: So, is that before...?

B.H: When he was posted in Kingston, he was posted to Vimy Barracks, which is just down the road from Royal Military College, as I found out when I was at RMC. And they had a league of the Army Sigs against the Army Infantry, against the Air Force, against... and they had a league there and he played for what was called the Kingston Ponies.

M.W: Can you tell me about when he came back from the war. He began playing with the International Amateur Hockey League. Can you tell me how that happened?

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B.H: I don't know it transpired, how he got introduced other than the fact that the goal tender for the Red Wings at the time who played over there invited him to come down. And, I messed up in the history of how. I, I know he played for the Staffords, but I thought he was traded to the Detroit Auto Club for part of that season.[6] That was just by discussion plus some of the write-ups, especially the initial games when he went to the Olympia.[7] But there was a gentlemen who came by a couple weeks ago and had all the

[4] He played with the Toronto Maple leafs in the 1930s and 1940s.
[5] Adam Brown
[6] According to newspaper reports, Harding was first signed with the Detroit Auto Club, of the International Amateur Hockey League, and then was traded to Windsor Staffords before he played his first game.
[7] Former arena of the Detroit Red Wings – the Detroit teams in the International Amateur Hockey League also played their games at the Olympia.

stats. He belongs to this group, and that's out of Nova Scotia, and kept all the hockey stats that happened since hockey began. And he had, on that league, my dad's stats. Detroit Auto Club which showed in '47, it showed their stats, but for '48 it didn't because they didn't make the playoffs.[8] And I was sure that Dad said he got traded to the Detroit Auto Club, but I can't verify that in anything I see. But he was told to go out, come down, and Detroit would possibly have a look at him. So that's why he went to the International Amateur Hockey League. I think it was four teams in that or five.

M.W: In the scrapbooks, he did play for Detroit Auto team.

B.H: Yeah, but I didn't see it in his stats.

P.H: Oh, okay.

B.H: And it looked like the one year the Staffords, one year it shows him as only playing one season in '47, but I know he played in '48, and it shows him as playing, the one year it showed him—how many games he played, how many goals he had, how many assists, and his total points in regular season. Playoffs had zero, zero, zero, zero. But that was the same year that he left that league and came down and played for Petrolia in the playoffs, and they won it. And he was kind of, they were allowed to pick up a couple of players from southwestern Ontario. And he and another guy from Chatham went down and played for Petrolia in the playoffs. They picked him up basically. So yeah, I'm fuzzy about how the transition, about the transition between Windsor, but I know that was a club he played for and he was traded.

M.W: Now they certainly made a big deal of him being, you know, the first black player in the IHL. I'm wondering if you could tell me a bit about that.

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B.H: There is a couple stats and I just found out exactly talking to this fellow who collected all these stat books, and he actually let us keep them for a while. And he was, I know he was the first player that played for them, because he was the first player of colour to play in the Olympia and that was Detroit Auto Club's home rink. And I believe it was probably Windsor or Detroit Metal. There was a couple of teams out of Detroit, and I'm sure that they both played out of the same rink. Yeah, there was a lot of publicity on that. Also, the fact that they hadn't had any blacks play in the NHL as of that time, because Willie O'Ree came years after—about 10 years, I think, in the fifties.[9] There was a black player that they said played for the New York, not for the Rangers, but played where the New York Rangers played.[10] But that was after, and it was publicized in

[8] Harding played with the Staffords in the 1946-7 season and the 1947-8 season.
[9] He played joined the Boston Bruins in 1958.
[10] Likely referring to Art Dorrington, who played in the Eastern Hockey League in the early 1950s.

history as the first black player to play in an NHL rink. And when this gentlemen brought us the books he said, "No, that's your dad right there." The history we knew then was either by telegraph or pencil. And as far as they knew on the east coast, this guy coming down from Nova Scotia was the first guy to play in. And publicity hadn't reached New York, that dad had played in '47-'48. They really publicized it. They thought that this might be the guy to make it to the NHL. But as we talked in other interviews and other discussions, that's the year I was born and Dad had got hired at the post office as the first letter carrier in Chatham. And to him this was like winning the lottery. And he said, "I can't afford to be driving to Windsor and Detroit." And in '48 it wasn't just a 45-minute drive 'cause you took number 2 Highway, or 42 or whatever it is today. You had to drive down there in the middle of winter. And getting back and making sure he was to work the next day to carry that bag. And plus the idea that if he got injured, but he still played hockey. Again, that really didn't fly as far as his explanation to me why he didn't go. But he said, "I was 30 years old, I was at the end of really my highlight in hockey, I'd played the best hockey I was going to play." And which, he said, "It wasn't worth the gamble to continue on down there." So he left them, from what I understand—they didn't leave him—and that he did play when he got back here for the next few seasons. Just told me that he still loved the game and that he was still out every night playing during winter or during the summer.

M.W: Was there any sense of regret or about the challenges for non-white players, you know, not being able to get into the NHL at that point?

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B.H: From Dad, that he regretted not getting? I think not something that festered. Again, in our first interview I said that that my dad was a realist. He knew what he could do and what he couldn't do as far as society. I know he would look and we would watch Hockey Night in Canada when I was four, five, six—it was the only hockey game on all week. And you sat there on Saturday night and they had Imperial Oil sign and: “Welcome Canada and Newfoundland and the United States.” And we would watch, and he said, "Oh I played with that guy" and "I played with that guy." And you could tell that there's a little bit of envy and I think it was legitimate and it was honest, but there wasn't the bitterness. And you know, he said, "I took that guy out one day" and "I beat him through scoring." And he knew a lot of the players early on when I was just four or five. So that would make it in '53, '54 we'd be watching it and he was still playing locally. But I don't think it would be considered resentment. I think he knew he got the most of what he could get out of it. And he played it because he loved it and he had a passion for it. And I think getting in the NHL would have been a hallmark for him and again his place in history. And he knew that he could have had that place in history but he was, again, 30 years old, and a war and a Depression and all that other stuff kind of got in the way. And the other thing is, playing in the NHL wasn't all that much money, and the benefits and that that. Because all of those guys had to go to work in the summertime to keep their families and that. You know if they signed a couple of thousand bucks a year in 1948-49

they were making good money for them but it wasn't enough to raise a family on. They listen to Don Cherry today, and even guys like Alexander, Claire Alexander that played for the Leafs in the late 70s, he was doing milking in the summer time. And a lot of these guys were into farming, construction. Brett and Bobby Hall, they had to farm, they had to do something in the summer to pay the bills. So he took something that he could work at all year and make a paycheque. So I think part of the resentment was kind of lessened by, it was his choice to not pursue it further, so.

M.W: Now he continued to play for various local teams throughout the '40s and the '50s, can you tell me a little bit about that experience, were there any differences in, you know, acceptance and stuff of black players by that point or?

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B.H: I think, again, it was very lonely because there was very few black players in the league. We found out after meeting a cousin that I hadn't seen in 35 years that her father actually was my dad's brother, older brother[11], had left Chatham so he could play hockey because he wasn't accepted. And he was four years or five years older. He was born in 1911, and Dad was born, so he was 5 years older. So he went up to St. Thomas and he played there and nobody knew who he was....

P.H: 'Cause he had red hair and freckles.

B.H: And that came from my grandmother. And then he went up to Kirkland Lake and played there and worked in the mines and was accepted, and then back to St. Thomas. So there were a spattering of black players playing. Some people didn't realize they were black but around here he was still. I think there was a few in the '50s that might have been playing but they didn't play with Dad. And the other thing was that his respect had been earned since he was a kid, and in Chatham and Kent County, people knew who he was. You know, I think it was lessened, and everybody was playing because they knew they weren't going to be NHL players. And they were playing because they liked to play hockey and it was recreational, basically. It was competitive, it was really competitive, but they were guys that just wanted to play hockey.

P.H: Can I just ask a question? Is that all right? How do you think your dad felt watching the Maroons and knowing he was never good enough to play for the Maroons?

B.H: That was a bitter, that was. Pat's question was how did he feel about not making the Chatham Maroons which was kind of the 'be all end all,' because Senior Hockey was very important. And they went on to win the Allan Cup, which was, the winner of the Allan Cup went on to play in the World Championships against the Russians and that. The year Chatham Maroons won it, they passed on the Trail Smoke Eaters who they

[11] Referring to Wilfred Harding's older brother, Carl.

beat out from Trail, BC. And Trail went out and played against the Russians and for the World Championship. He was bitter because he never got a shot with the Maroons. And a lot of guys he played against --he was a better hockey player than they were, And Chatham's not prepared to have in Senior A Hockey a black hockey player. I know he was bitter against the organization. Not against the people that played in it, because a lot that were younger that played after him became really good friends and respected friends: George Aitkin and Ted Power, Cesare Maniago (he ended up playing for the St. Louis Blues at that club a few years, again, later). He enjoyed the hockey. He enjoyed watching them play. He knew they were good hockey players but he always said, "I wasn't good enough to make the Maroons, but I could, you know, have a shot at the NHL."

M.W: He also became an official in hockey. Can you tell me about that?

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B.H: Yeah, 'cause I did see some of that because he had retired from playing, so…. My mother had always worked two jobs. She either worked at the local theatres, and then she worked at night and she delivered rural mail. And Dad worked at the post office five days a week delivering mail. And at nights he either refereed hockey, refereed soccer, or refereed, he umpired baseball, and one of those sports all year long. So, as opposed to getting a babysitter, I would jump in the car and go with him. And I recall a lot of times I would just run around the rink, you know. I was a rink rat in the purest form. And—but I got to watching and it was all business. He was all business and he, again, he demanded respect. He was the guy with the whistle, the guy. The linesmen, they had a whistle too, but he was the one that ran the game. And he was the senior disciplinarian on the ice, and he would run the penalty box, he would run the clock keeper, he would run the…any nonsense that was taking place off the ice because they didn't have the Plexiglas all the way around. I mean, people could get right up all close and personal to players right over the boards. And he demanded, and he said you know, he would stop the game. Or if line shifts weren't taking place fast enough, changing lines, he would: "Okay, let's get it moving. Two minutes for delay of game." I would travel with him. A lot of places treated him really good. A lot of places he had to change in the car. But I remember him refereeing for the "Ag School,"[12] which is now a branch of the University of Guelph but in Ridgetown. They would always have us out for dinner first. And again, the meals were terrific because it was all grown in Ridgetown at the Ag School and the beef was raised there. He would always take me to those. And they would give him a room in the dorms to get ready between game time and that. And I really enjoyed going to those. And then, just watching his professional mannerisms. And he did the same thing in baseball—if the players between innings didn't run out and run in, he'd tell them to hustle: "People aren't here to watch you guys drag your butt." So he set the tone for a hockey game, and he couldn't see any reason for a hockey game taking, you

[12] Local term for the agricultural college.

know, an hour for a twenty-minute period. He just kept it going. If there was a fight, he'd send a linesmen in to break it up and he'd stand there and he'd award the penalty, where deserved. No, he was respected in hockey too, and then eventually before he quit he was the senior official for like…he would schedule the games and who got the games and where. So he could schedule himself a little closer to Chatham instead of going all the way to Tilbury, Bothwell, or whatever rink they were playing in.

M.W: It sounds like he enjoyed that kind of role.

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B.H: Oh he did, and it was money. It was not big money, but it was pocket money, and it paid for his gas getting there and it was extra money. It was a second job he always had. He did make money out of sports finally in officiating.

M.W: I'm going to shift over to some of these other sports. Track and field, tell me a little bit how he started doing that.

B.H: Okay, track and field. Basically, when he was a teenager and a young adult at CVS, he entered every track event there was, every field event there was: pole vaulting, they call it triple-jump now but it was called 'hop-skip-and-jump' back in the day, standing broad jump. Every field event and every running event he entered, and every one he did well. That carried him on through high school, and then when he got in the army. Especially at Number 12 Basic Training Centre, he competed against some of the best and one of them was Keith Crummer. Keith Crummer went on to the British Games. He competed against him, that's Bill's uncle. Crummer was a major in the army. He ended up being a Commissioned Officer in the army. Another one was McCurdy[13], out of Windsor, who ended up being in the Federal Government. He competed against him. But he just, once he swore in the army, again, he grabbed onto sports and track lasted him until the war. But after that he was finished in track and field. He would encourage me, he would encourage our grandkids— or our kids rather, his grandkids. No, he spent just as much time, just as much energy in track and field as he did in baseball, hockey, and soccer, and he wanted to be the best. And that was because a lot of what was in the army, like I would say equal amount of his track time was spent with the army almost as much as high school, I would say about four years. But there was other people of colour or blacks or First Nations people in that. And track and field, again, basically is an individual sport other than the relays and things like that. But he just took it on and did his best in army pole vaulting. He won gold in that one year, or first place. I don't think they called it gold. We have pictures of him on the podium receiving it. And that was one district against the other, like, Number 12 Basic Training Centre competing against 13 Basic Training Centre which was the Kitchener area. And they had these training centres set up across Ontario and then they would compete. And internally they would compete in

[13] George McCurdy. McCurdy's brother Howard was a Member of Parliament for Windsor from 1984-1993.

the centre first and then go, almost like high school where you competed against your own. And then, I don't know—it wasn't OFSA, it was WOSSA then, it was Western Ontario Secondary Schools. So yeah, he competed in every sport in track and field and was there and he excelled in some. Running and pole vaulting was one of the ones he excelled in. My Uncle Andy came a couple years later, and he was at Number 12, and Andy could run like a deer—no one could catch him. He ended up being on the police department. But Dad had to move over to that for track when it came to running events, and they enjoyed it because they were competing against each other and he was younger. I know he talked fondly about that. In fact, my Uncle Andy used to, they used to, rookies would get on the police department after he'd been there for a few years, and they'd go out behind the police station (which is the downtown mall now, but it used to be Marcus Street and the police station was at one end) and they would have races. They would leave their guns laying on the ground and they would run [laughs] but someone would be watching them, and he was pretty fast.

M.W: Were there other members of the family who did track?

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B.H: Yeah, there's my uncle and he died early, and I can't remember exactly when, but he was involved with track. Uncle Len, I don't think—

P.H: Aunt Wanda.

B.H: Pardon?

P.W: Aunt Wanda.

B.H: Aunt Wanda his sister, younger sister, she was a female track star in Chatham-Kent, and she went to CCI[14]. And Uncle Andy, Aunt Beulah, Georgina were older and they were the brainiacs. They went off and did good things with the educational side of things. They didn't get involved in sport, just supporting sport.

M.W: What about other members of the black community? Was it more common?

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B.H: At track and field?

M.W: At track and field, yeah.

[14] Chatham Collegiate Institute.

B.H: Yes. And there was other members that I didn't actually pick up on in the press releases and that, mostly because it was a school. Again, and I didn't really take note of who they were. I just know that after him there was a lot. And they were sprinkled in and out. And I think the schools actually promoted it, and it was mostly through CVS which was a trade school, the equivalent of high school.

M.W: Just to move on quickly to baseball after the All-Stars. You talked a bit about it before, but I just wanted to talk about, you know, the continuity of black baseball teams after the All-Stars and became more integrated over time, that kind of thing.

0:41:36.7

B.H: It, again, after the, during the '40s and that, they went from, I believe (and I could be wrong, I know I'm right on this first part of it), it went from the Coloured All-Stars to the Chatham All-Stars, and that was because there was a couple of First Nations people ingrained in it. Then from there it went to the Taylor ACs, which was named after their sponsor, who was Taylor Mills. And that was right across, again, from the old armoury, just across from the big crick. There was a big mill there in the 18-whatever when Chatham was first incorporated as a city. They sponsored them, and Taylor had that school which was called Taylor Institute, or Taylor School, and it was a very basic trade school for sewing and for the black community. And this was right across from the WISH Centre (where the WISH Centre is now), where the pool is in the park, and they used to have dances and stuff like that. Well, they did a team and it was called the Taylor ACs and it was predominantly the Coloured All-Stars with a mix of some more players coming in—the Gibsons, Chuck Gibson and his brother Virgil Gibson, and some of the younger guys that were just coming in later. But my Uncle Ken played on that team and the Wrights, Allan and Art Wright, played on those teams. My dad was the manager, player-manager. And then they went from, I believe the next connection was from Taylor ACs to the Panthers. And the Panthers were predominantly from the Coloured All-Stars to the All-Stars to Taylor ACs with a sprinkling of white players in it: Dave Baldwin, who had a tryout with the Detroit Tigers. He lived in, he worked for the Department of Highways. He was a good ball player. Bobby Forsyth, who ended up having Forsyth Travel in Blenheim. Who else? I can't remember the names off the top of my head. That was in the '50s. I was actually a batboy for my dad, and Flat Chase was still pitching. Scott came down from Windsor. He played—he was a pretty flashy shortstop. A lot of the players again were based, the nucleus, the older players were from the All-Stars. But Murray Crouch—there was four or five white boys that played on that team. From there they went to Blenheim and Dad moved on. And then, after my dad was a player-manager for the Panthers, my Uncle Ken took it. And then it was Allan Wright that took it as player-manager, and these guys would play for him. He went to Blenheim as a player-manager. They won an OBA Intermediate, I think it was, out there, and Dave Baldwin. Again a different, he was, I think the only black player that played on that team. He was a manager so he was in the lineup all the time, because he made out the lineup. And I think maybe that was the last, because I remember going to Blenheim

with him and he played for that community for three or four years. And the manager was Sammy Ryan and they owned a local restaurant out there. And their family was very athletic in the community. So Dad played out there for two or three years and managed that team.

M.W: Was there any differences in how spectators were responding to the black players in that later period?

0:46:01.7

M.W: Oh, it changed graphically, noticeably all the time. And I think that was at the time that if any comments were made, you were going to have a scrap with the whole team. Not just because they stuck up for each other. It was sport again. It was baseball, and he was accepted then. But then he was accepted, there was slurs and everything like that, same as there would be today. It was much mellower. You know, it was....

P.H: You can really see the progress when he wasn't allowed to play ball, then they were allowed to play with the....

B.H: The OBA?

P.H: Coloured All-Stars, and then they are, actually are playing black and white on the same team. The progression there is awesome.

B.H: And then him being the only black player from a whole black team, to him being the only black player on the team. And you know, he was getting older, he was, he'd be in his mid-30s. I was born in '48, and I was a batboy at five or six or seven so it'd be in '55, '56 around there. And he was still playing and he was playing strong. And, you know, maybe not back-to-back games like he did when he was younger, but he was still catching. And that's what I remember and that's what I -- the write-ups are there from every team you could think of to the point where he was playing fastball, softball. Tecumseh Park, and that's where the big park was for Chatham and it was right out in front of the armories. And he was playing against, there was a league in that where he played against younger guys that I ended up serving with in the military. "Oh, I played with your dad." And that was nice because I almost got the respect from them that my dad had earned and that's what I try to tell the kids. That respect was with the name. Actually, we used to tell the kids when they went out, I said, “Don't forget the name you're carrying in Chatham because everybody knows it.”

M.W: So that was softball right?

0:48:31.1

B.H: That was softball, yeah. I almost, softball wasn't, it was a draw in Chatham and again it was entertainment. And, but he played in a league and after he played, I played, and Horace Chase and—we played on teams together and industrial ball. That league was primarily the only ball park in Chatham was in Tecumseh park. And Dad played in that and he umpired in that as well, so.

M.W: I want to ask you about soccer. He played soccer for a bit, tell me about how....

0:49:10.0

B.H: Again, soccer was in high school, then in the military. And then his real, his championship days were after the war. And he played with what they called it, the Legion Shield which is a provincial championship. That's how the area leagues culminated their play. Most of the teams and most of the soccer then was sponsored by the Legions. And after the war the Legions were, there was a lot of Italian Canadians, there was a lot of Polish Canadians, English from Great Britain, Scotland. Soccer was a very European game in Canada and Dad had to play that. And he excelled in it. He did well around here—his reputation was known around here, was after the war. He was a veteran. The crunch was when they won, I think it was the first Legion Shield. A guy that I really respected, and buried, was one of my first company majors when I joined the regiment, had played with Dad in this Legion Shield—Vic Jewiss, and he was a little scrapper. He said, "You know we went down to Toronto," and Vic told me this, and he said, "All the wives went down and we were playing for the Legion Shield. We beat a Toronto Legion team from a local branch down there, and the host team, or the host centre, was a Legion Branch. And we all went for the awards ceremony after and the meal and that and the drinking of beer. And they wouldn't serve your father." And so this was in, this would have been in '46, '47, after the war. After he returned as a veteran and helped win the Legion Shield, he wasn't going to be served in a Legion. And so he said, "We all got on the bus and went to a restaurant on Highway 2 and we had our own little celebration on the way home. Brought our hardware with us, our medals," he said. "No, we weren't going to take part in it. He was going to have to sit and wait for us and Joy" (my mother). And he was, the fellow that was telling me this, Victor, he was very bitter about it, and "We just said 'No,'" and he said, "Take your soccer ball where the sun don't shine." And they were really close together. There was a couple of people of colour playing in the league and I knew some of their names, I think. Chuck Gibson, who became a chef at the Lighthouse Cove at the William Pitt Hotel. He was playing in one of the teams in the league in that. They weren't in that team with Dad, maybe the next year they were—I'm really not sure. We've got some pictures of the teams. But they won two provincial championships in soccer. Again, soccer he didn't play as long as after the war, for the reason of your knees and things giving out. And he saved it for baseball and hockey still.

M.W: Okay, he played a number of other sports when he became older—horseshoes, darts, bowling—can you tell me anything about that?

0:52:56.3

B.H: Darts first....

P.H: We played together.

B.H: Dad started with the Legion again and it was very organized darts. And a friend of his which is still alive -- and actually after he saw the write up in the Chatham paper—his wife, he's blind now and they're still living together, Chip and Dorothy Scott. And they ran with my mother and dad for dart tournaments because they played pairs darts together, him and Mr. Scott. And when they saw the paper she was in tears she was so happy about him getting recognition. And he played singles darts which is himself against the world, and then pairs darts and then team darts. And he ended up switching Legions because one Legion would give them more support financially to go to tournaments than the other branch did. And then they went to open darts which would be open to anybody in the world to play, and then Legion darts (Dominion darts, they called it) and that was open, the Legion branches and the Legion post, I believe. And they were second, and him and Mr. Scott were second in that in Montreal. And then in the open darts he was beat out. He was in third for that, and a world champion from Scotland beat him out. He ended up with a third in that. He went to tournaments in Philadelphia, Chicago, all over. And there was an annual tournament up in Wawa, and this is, I would be a teenager probably and my dad, or maybe we weren't married yet....

P.H: Yeah, I think we were because I have a charm from Wawa.

0:54:50.6

B.H: Oh yeah, we were. So it would be after '73, and he was up in Wawa and Mr. Scott and Mrs. Scott and Mom and Dad were going up in a pairs tournament. And he was still in the car and he was getting their stuff, and Mr. Scott went in and booked a room. When my dad come in they said, "No, we're all full up." So this was Wawa, Ontario, and after 1973, so prejudice was still there. Mr. Scott, he was fiery, and my dad said, "No, forget it. This place is below our standards anyway." And I really couldn't believe that was said because he mellowed, and I hadn't heard this story except just a couple years ago from the Scotts.

P.H: I've got to tell my story about the darts, because Blake's mom and dad used to invite us over for Wednesday night supper before we had the kids and we would play darts. And this went on for a long time. And so then, out of the blue, Blake's dad invited me to go to a tournament with him and play pairs, and we won! And I doubled out, and there was, like Blake said, there's always prize money, but he had paid my registration and so I didn't figure I was going to get any money or anything like that. It was just odd to play with him. And like he wasn't supposed to be coaching me or anything. Everybody played

on their own, but he did it with his eyes. I would look to him, and he would know what I wanted to do, and he would coach me and say, "Don't tell anybody what you're going to go for, but you know, just go." And he knew I had to double-out on double-one, which is freaky—I hate it, but he just nodded to me that everything was going to be okay. And "bang," first dart and I got it! So then afterwards, because he thought I had given so much of myself in that, he split the prize. And that, that was so totally unexpected and I knew he was proud of me. And if Boomer was proud of you, you knew something good because… And I will never forget that day, ever, you know. It was just awesome.

B.H: But he was tight was his money so if he split his money.... [laughs]

P.H: Oh yeah, real tight. I mean yeah, I forgot to mention that. [laughs]

0:57:14.1

B.H: Money was, you know, he'd always valued money. So for him to give her half… The atmosphere, too -- back then it was like, you got in a dart tournament, you might have fifteen boards going all at once to the process of elimination. It's almost like a dog show except it's people. And at that time there was smoking in the building, and there was drinking and everything. He wouldn't touch a drink while he was playing. And he liked his bottle, not to excess, but he liked his pop. And darts was, again, all business. When he went, he went to win. We lived out on the 10th Concession in Chatham Township for a few years in a ranch and he had his dart boards set up down in the laundry room. And he would throw two to three hundred darts a day. All's you would hear was "thump," "thump," "thump," you know. And some of my clown friends from the army would go, "Oh come on, Boomer, I'll play you a game!" And if you happened to get lucky and beat him, the next game, like, you could go out in three darts when you're playing pairs—it's usually 5-0-1 down. If you're playing in individuals 3-0-1 down, you double-in, you double-out. But you could throw 360s and 180 and you could win the game on that. He would take you in the next game and would take you in three darts.

P.H: All those little things....

B.H: 180.

P.H: 180s, those are all perfect games, not, almost perfect.

B.H: Three darts and a....

P.H: And, you know, he was just awesome. Like that's the whole thing about Boomer Harding though, is that, you know, he played all these sports and people would like to say that they know him or didn't really know him that much, that he was good at all of them and didn't excel at any of them. That's not true—he excelled at any sport he took. And the other thing about darts is, when they moved from the country to the St. Clair Estates,

my kids would disappear and they were just little and he was, they would be out there with Papa learning how to play darts. It was like, really cute, really sweet.

0:59:39.9

B.H: And you worried about darts popping out, blinding your kid or, you know, dart in the middle of the forehead coming in saying, "Look what Papa did." And I think doing these interviews, that, and I've said it two or three times a day, he had a passion. He loved the sport he was in, but he took them all serious. There was no joke about it. There wasn't, I don't remember seeing him laugh when he was playing. And again, being a realist I think he knew that if you were going to play, he used to tell me, "They say it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." He says, "You have a hell of a lot more fun playing the game if you win than if you do when you lose. And why would they invent scoreboards if it was for fun?"

P.H: Yeah, that's one of his favourite sayings.

B.H: But, you know he, it was serious. He'd do it, he'd do everything to the best of his abilities. He never did anything half, haphazard.

P.H: And he was always there for our kids when they came home with their ribbons from....

B.H: Track and Field Day?

P.H: Track and Field Day. And always slipped them some money, because when they would come home with 1st and stuff like that. Really proud of them, you know, really proud of them.

B.H: The horseshoes, it was there so he played it and it was not as far up as darts was, because this was, again, later in life. He had actually quit refereeing—well, he was still doing a little refereeing and umpiring—but he had really slowed down. And I think this was actually after he had his heart attack when he was 60, that he was still playing strong darts and strong horseshoes. And horseshoes was, there didn't seem to be the venue for it. There wasn't the, they would play at the Branch, and it would be kind of like, almost like intramurals at school. Just that branch would be playing. And they weren't going to other towns or other places. But again, he put in the country, he put a horseshoe pin in next to the house. And "clang," "clang," "clang." He got his horseshoes, he'd throw so many a day. If you wanted to play with him fine. If not he would just go out and throw and throw and throw. And he knew the work ethic it took to be a good horseshoe player. But it didn't just draw a lot of, you know, from 4000 people at Stirling Park to watch a ball game. You might have ten or fifteen watching the horseshoes. But he wanted to win when he played it. I can remember when there was, on TV, when a baseball strike was on or something, he'd watch lawn bowling on TV because it was competitive or carpet bowling, or whatever they called it. He never played it but—

P.H: But it made him really interesting to me. The only thing that I felt I neglected in those books was the Kingston Ponies, when he played, when he was in the army, when he played hockey for them. Because I got the sense from the articles that I did have and what I heard about the Kingston Ponies is that it would have been another story kind of. Like there weren't a lot of black players. But his experience on the Kingston Ponies was kind of like the All-Stars, because that was a very colourful team and. But I couldn't find a lot of information, just kind of rumor-type things. But I think he really enjoyed playing with them. And don't forget baseball—or basketball, with the Flowers!

M.W: You're right actually. I missed that question. Yes, I was going to ask you about basketball.

1:03:32.1

B.H: Basketball, as much as I can figure out, 'cause there's a city championship and it was a high school league. But he didn't play for the high school. He played for a publicly sponsored team—the Flowers. And this, the name of the team was 'Flowers,' and I think it was, I think this guy may have been a mayor in Chatham at one time, I can't find too much on it but I do see it in history. I've got a battle sporran coming from a guy over in northern Michigan, for a First World War battle and his name was Flowers. And he originally was, his family was from this area and I was trying to find that out. But he played, and it was CVS, CCI, and those were the only two high schools at the time so the third team in the league was sponsored by Flowers. And he played for them, and we've got press clippings of that. We know he played, we know he did well in it. And you know, I don't know, there was, I think, one picture or two pictures of him—

P.H: Yeah.

B.H: Not too many more. But he was active in basketball during his high school time.

P.H: And him and Blake's mom really enjoyed bowling, too. And we bowled on their team for a long time which was kind of awesome.

B.H: Recreational. Recreational bowling.

P.H: Recreational for everybody else. The sport for his dad.

M.W: Right. Question about that Olympic Gold Achievement Medal that we see. Can you tell me a bit about that?

1:05:27.2

B.H: That was—

P.H: We're going to clear up that little mistake.

B.H: He didn't actually go to Calgary that year. It was presented across Canada to recipients who exemplified the Olympic Spirit, and each area had a—someone they felt designated that should receive it. And so he was one of the award winners of it for all the sports into that. The other thing I don't think we have mentioned and, he is in the Dresden Sports Hall of Fame as well. He went in with Kenny Houston, the year Kenny Houston went in, and Kenny Houston played for the Atlanta Flames and then he went on to play for the Calgary Flames. And there was a young track star at this, a female track star went in that year, and I went out. It was at the Lambton Kent Arena in Dresden. He qualified for that because he lived in Chatham township. So when he went in under the old—and not near as much, verification and documentation to get him in. They just knew of his darts. They just knew of his past and his umpiring and that, and he was entered in that. I've never been into it. I just went out the day he was acknowledged. I think that was the same year that, well it was the year of the Calgary Olympics.

M.W: I guess, we can kind of bring this to an end, but I'm wondering what you think is the value in telling the story of Wilfred "Boomer" Harding. Why is it important for people to know about it?

1:07:22.4

B.H: I think we all see value of it, especially those who have been working on it. And I've just kind of strengthened my value of this story and getting it out there. Because it hasn't been told, and the remarks I get from people that have lived in this community all this time saying, "I didn't know that," "I didn't know that," and "I didn't know it was that way." And I think—I don't know if you hear a bitterness in other people you interview, because their perspective is different than mine. And they were, how they come up through it. Some of them, like some of the older people, lived it and whether it be through a brother or an uncle or their grandfather, whatever, and the stories they heard, wasn't necessarily my dad's story. But there's a general theme there that we can see and it's portrayed mainly by the press. And the press I think, whether they're accurate or not, is a real indicator of our society. And from 1920s to when Dad finished, we can see a tremendous change and acceptance. And I hate the word tolerance, because tolerant says "I'll put up with you." Acceptance is what I look for, and I think there's a greater acceptance. There's still problems and there always will be. You can't get into a person's head and just make it go right (I'd start with the federal government and work down). But it's what your examples are. They're changing. And it goes back to Afghanistan and Vietnam, when the military went and said, "We're trying to win the war of hearts and minds." If you can change how people see you, and they can see that you're dedicated, all the old myths of what come out of the South are just those. They're stories that aren't true, or maybe the stories had some truth but it's a matter of survival, to what can happen if you're given the opportunity or you grab the

opportunity. That all those men and, again, I say men not being sexist, I'm saying at that time, that's who broke the colour barrier. And then their sisters and their mothers and all that supported it, and the sisters had their turn in their own way. And they made those old things go away to a great extent. And it's documented in every newspaper you read and every kind of film you see, and the tributes. It blew me away since the last time we got together and we were out in Amherstburg, and Lauren gave her talk.[15] The respect that she showed for my father, that, to me, a young lady that is well-educated and with her proud parents sitting there very proud of her, as she addressed "Mr. Harding." You know, Dad would have been blown away.

P.H: I could see when I put the scrapbooks together a very important story. Blake's dad once asked me if I believed everything I read, and then he gave me some books to read on black history. And I read those and his thing was like, "You can't believe everything you read." And so when I was doing this, I was making sure that I got as much information that was true. I never put anything in that I could not find three sources for at some point somewhere, whether I could photocopy them or not. Because in his name I wanted it to be the truth. And I just, like Blake said too, I could just see the struggles of the men that started off with the All-Stars and the struggles that Blake's dad and his family came. That is our family history. It's not just black history or baseball history, it's our family. Our family needs to know, our children and our grandchildren need to know. They find it difficult to think of prejudice today, but when they're a little bit older and they go online, see this, they will realize where they came from and what they have.

M.W: Anything else?

B.H: Nope.

M.W: Great. Thank-you very much.

1:12:40.9

[15] Referring to Windsor student Lauren Miceli, winner of the David P. Botsford Scholarship in local history for a paper on Wilfred Harding.