

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 interviewee: Pat Harding (P.H), Blake Harding (B.H)

Name of interviewer: Miriam Wright (M.W)

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Transcription:

M.W: I'm here in the home of Pat and Blake Harding, and I'm here with Pat and Blake Harding to interview you about Wilfred "Boomer" Harding and his experiences with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. I'm Miriam Wright, I forgot to mention that, you can put that in there in case years later we forget who was talking.[remove this section? Ok, and the way it's kind of organized is, I've got, sort of questions in sections, I've got kind of background questions about who he was and about him and his family, some questions specific to the, you know, his experience with playing for the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. I've got some questions about sports and life after the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, you know obviously, because we are going to be asking you other questions, no need to do a full description in that section, because we are going to do a whole other interview on that. But, you know, there are a few basic questions about how sports affected his life, that kind of thing. I have questions about sports in the community, sort of the value of sports in the wider community, certainly for the black community particularly in Chatham, and then a last set of questions about the impact and significance of the Chatham Coloured

All-Stars, why is it important to study them, and that kind of thing. So those are, kind of, the basic categories, to give you a sense of where we are heading with this. Okay, and again it's also okay if you don't know the answer to some of these questions, you may not, you know again, it's sort of me figuring out what people are going to know and what people aren't and it's okay if you don't know the answer. Just say that you don't know the answer, and we will move on to the next question. If there are any questions that you do not want to answer, that's fine. You could just say that I would rather not say and just move on to the next one, so that's fine as well. And then, as I said before, afterwards if there is other questions you think I should ask, we can talk about that afterwards, and we can make a note and then put it though later. Okay, any questions before we start?]

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M.W: Okay, so we'll begin with background questions, here is a fairly basic one: What is the name of the person you knew from the Chatham Coloured All-Stars? So, I think in this case, you actually knew several, but I think we will stick with Boomer, right?

B.H: Right.

M.W: Ok, so we are talking about Wilfred Boomer Harding, can you say where and when he was born, and grew up?

B.H: He was born in Chatham, Ontario, 1915, August 6, 1915. He was born at, his family lived on Wellington Street East. And the homestead, my grandfather and grandmother lived in was actually an old grant from the federal government for direct relatives of slaves, as was North Buxton. And that part of town, were land grabs. It's almost as east as you can go on Wellington Street, and he was one of eight children.

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M.W: Right, I guess the next question is sort of asking to expand on that. Can you tell me about, anything more about his family, who they were, what they did for a living, his friends?

B.H: My grandfather, his father, drove a horse and wagon to Erieau, and back daily and conducted coal from a load freighter to the local coal yard. Sometimes he would take the boys with him, winter, summer didn't matter. But my dad recalls stories of going out there in the wintertime and how cold it was. And Erieau's not that far by car, but it's a long way by horse and wagon. My grandmother was, as a sign of the time, was a stay at home woman. And the boys were all encouraged, the girls were all encouraged for

education and to get through at least high school, and other ones went on. My one aunt, his one sister, became a legal secretary. The other sister became a school teacher. The other ended up working in the hospital system and one passed away. Then the boys, one became a police officer, one worked a gas station in St. Thomas. One died very early, and that would be Len, and he was also on the Coloured All-Stars. And my dad ended up being a civil servant with the post office.

P.H: Don't forget about your grandparents, being interracial...

B.H: Yes, my grandmother was Caucasian... [crosstalk]

P.H: ... and the prejudice they went through.

B.H: ... and my grandfather was a person of colour. My grandmother's family had a doctor in the family, and Chatham's not that small. And they would actually cross the street if they saw my grandparents walking down the street. That's the way it was. They disowned her when she married my grandfather.

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M.W: Can you tell me a little about sports in the family growing up? How important were sports to them? Did other family members play sports, did they watch sports? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

B.H: They either played or supported. My Uncle Len was the oldest, and he was on the Coloured All-Stars. My dad was on the Coloured All-Stars. My Uncle Andy, two years later, 1944–45, he was on the Coloured All-Stars. He was very good at track and field as well, until he became a police officer. My Uncle Carl, he was an excellent ball player, and played around here, and eventually played up in the St. Thomas, London area. And his name is fairly well known around that area, even today. My Aunt Wanda, she was excellent at track and field. The other two were more or less braniacs, they were academic, but they supported all the other brothers and sisters in their athletic venues, you know. They were right there and they financed, physically, or whatever—the whole family was behind it. My grandparents, I don't think had an ounce of sports talent. [laughs] They were too busy working.

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M.W: Good, okay thanks. We'll move on to the next section about playing with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. Do you know approximately when Boomer Harding started playing with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, and how, how did he come to play with them?

B.H: Well, he was seventeen when the All-Stars began, but they played even before that. And it wasn't in, it was just barnstorming, or, you know pick-up games, exhibition games against anybody that would play them. So I imagine, he would be about, and this is only an estimate, fifteen, fourteen or fifteen, and he was playing with men. And, so, he was always into something with sports, even in grade school. Once he—at that time Chatham Vocational School, which was a trade school, same as McGregor, Tecumseh, and Chatham Kent are now—once he got into high school, was when actually he took off. So he was playing ball as soon as he got into high school.

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M.W: Right, okay, can you tell me a bit about how the team, kind of transitioned from barnstorming to becoming part of the Ontario Baseball Association?<sup>1</sup>

B.H: My knowledge is that Archie Stirling who became a former... in the future, became the mayor of Chatham.<sup>2</sup> His family had a little bit of financing behind him, and they owned a local variety store in the east end. And he was the OBA representative for Chatham and Kent County. He submitted the team for application in the OBA and they were recognized. That was the year, the 1934 Coloured All-Stars. The first year they were in it they won the OBA championship. As soon as they were in they were recognized by the OBA.

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M.W: What position did he play, and was he known for any particular skills or anything distinctive?

B.H: His key position, was, he caught, was catcher, but he could play any position. And this, this was a day before specialty, you know like, where a pitcher only pitches a hundred pitches or something. Well, if he needed to, he would pitch. He would play first, he would play any position but he was the normal catcher and especially for the '34-'35 and even into the Taylor ACs and the Panthers which were all subsequent teams of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. And that was his position. And he used to show me all of his knuckles that had been broken from getting foul tips, or hit with a bat, and show his hands, where you could tell he was a catcher, the old time catchers. He could call a game really well, as far as assisting a pitcher and helping a pitcher know the weaknesses

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, OBA.

<sup>2</sup> Stirling was mayor of Chatham in the 1950s. Stirling Park, where the Chatham Coloured All-Stars played, was named after Archie Stirling's father.

of a batter. He could get the calls for the batter, er for the pitcher, by setting up and ringing the umpire's cage or something like that so that anything that came close would be called a strike. 'Cause there was a lot of favouritism, because all of the umpires were caucasian at the time. And they quite often didn't get a call. So he had a talent for getting their attention. They used to wear, the umpires, the big air-filled chest protectors. But their head was still in that cage and Mr. Chase could almost throw a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball. So Dad would set up high, move his glove and let it ring his cage, or let one slip slow and catch him on the shins or something. After that he would get better calls. He had a good arm, as far as anybody trying to steal on him. And as for the other players on the team, they were all real men. They gave what they got and, their effort sometimes outshone their ability, their determination outshone their ability. That's what I remember about, not having seen the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, but having seen the team that was the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. They didn't get that overnight but that was the way they were. And knowing the gentlemen that played for them, I just knew they were tough, they were focused.

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M.W: Do you recall any memorable events or stories about his playing?

B.H: A lot! A lot of them were, again, was the OBA Championship, and how they were, that year they went undefeated. The first year in the league and they went undefeated which was a major feat for them, because of all the obstacles in their way. To get to the championships and lose, it just wasn't in their mindset. They were going to take it all. When they got to that game and got up to Penetang, which is north of Orangeville, up near Barrie actually and they couldn't stay there overnight. They had to stay in Meaford,<sup>3</sup> which is about a half hour, forty five minutes away, at the travel lodge, and be out next morning before daylight. And I would just listen to them and hear the anxiety in the retelling of the story about getting to play in this game, which would put them ahead in the OBA championship. And then see some of the disappointment, or hear some of the disappointment when they were saying they finally got a place to stay, they got some sleep, and they were anxious about playing. But they had to get up before daybreak, and get out of there so none of the citizens of Meaford would see them leaving the motor lodge. And then truck over to Penetang, get in the game, have it under control and have it called, you know, have it suspended.<sup>4</sup> And not just the idea that it was going to be suspended, but they would have to come all the way back there the next week and start over at nothing to nothing. That story really stuck out, as long as

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<sup>3</sup> They stayed in Midland, rather than Meaford.

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the third game in the championship series, when the game was stopped, officials claiming it was too dark to continue. The game was resumed in Guelph the next day.

he lived. But then knowing that the game was picked up again the next weekend in Guelph, which was about halfway, at the score, at the inning, that it was ended at.

That story ... just how they were treated, when you compare teams today that are provincial or national heroes, everybody loves them—but not everybody. [laughs] Very few people out of Chatham loved them. And how they were treated at home, the big celebrations. And the community coming together behind them, and not just the black community. It was a real turning of time, because before that there was very little acceptance, you know, blacks at the time. They went to church, or they did menial jobs. Now they were celebrities that had brought respect, through sport, to Chatham. And so, when they played ball on Sundays and Saturdays, the ball park was filled with everybody. And a lot of people were out to cheer the boys on. A lot of them were relatives, but it was something that gave them hope. The white people were out to cheer them on because it brought an OBA recognition to Chatham that they didn't have. So that was the stories he would tell, about how the park was filled. And we lived right next to the park, when I was born. And he had picked up the home from an aunt, he bought the home from an aunt. But how they would park all the way down the street. And how they would park all the way down the next street, and the next street over. And people would be walking in. He said you couldn't get a seat, people were standing all over the fences. And Imperial Oil was a big company that was out in right field, and over the right field fence—they would park in their parking lot, you know, neighbours' backyards, on the roof, just for them to see the Chatham Coloured All-Stars play. There was no empty seats, no empty places to stand.

Other stories, with the baseball was basically how they were run out of town, you know, if they won the game—get out of here, don't stand around and beat your chest because somebody is going to clock you, if you lost the game, which they didn't. But when they were barnstorming and that, and they lost, they would be ridiculed.

P.H: Don't forget the Indians Team....

B.H: That wasn't the Coloured All-Stars, that was about '35 or '36 when....

P.H: I'm sorry....

B.H: It goes in when the Toledo Mud Hens came to town to play, which was the, the AAA affiliate for the Detroit Tigers ball club, come down in a big highway cruiser. Park sold out as far as people being there, and they were going to play. I think it was just called the All-Stars then. And the manager that was travelling with the team, when they got off the bus, they started warm up, said, "We can't play here, because the MLB rules won't allow us to play a black team, and we can't play teams out of the Negro League. We can't play your team because it's a black team." And he brought, there was one First

Nations person on the team at that time. He was from Walpole and his name was in the write ups<sup>5</sup>, and “He looked like he’s coloured?” and he says “No, he’s an Indian.” And he says, “Yeah, we can play Indians.” So they played the game, and they beat the Toledo Mud Hens. And that’s just the mindset, and the stories that he remembers, and there were hundreds of them. And with the Coloured All-Stars, and then the All-Stars, that was some of the ones that stood out for him.

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M.W: Can you tell me anything about, I’m trying to get an understanding of the style of playing, like, the team as a whole? Can you tell me anything about that, what they were known for?

B.H: Um, aggressiveness, flash, like baseball was—from my understanding, from what I have heard, and from what people have told me and other sons that were a little bit older than I was that actually saw them as the All-Stars, and some of the older people in the community—would be their flash. It wasn’t just baseball. They hot dogged it, you know. And they had a couple, and there was one, Don Tabron and he was from Detroit, and just a couple of hot dogs. And they put on a show as well as played ball. And when it got nasty, they were just as nasty and aggressive and tough as anybody else out there. And if you wanted to play to hurt one of them, again like I said earlier, they gave what they got. But it was entertainment, and I don’t know if you can go back in the ‘30s and say sports weren’t entertaining. They were competitive always. That’s why they invented score boards. My dad just said, “If it’s not ‘whether you win or lose,’ why would they invent scoreboards,” you know? And you have a lot more fun winning than you do losing. And that’s their attitude. They were there to win, and also put on a show. And if it got tough they could really dig deep and play on the same par and on the same level. And I can’t remember in the later days, from the remnants of that team, any of them suffering pain. I seen them get hurt but they didn’t suffer pain. And they would play with broken whatever, and then inflict pain. So you had to respect them and you had to kind of fear them. I don’t think there was any team that really came into the park and said, “This was going to be easy.” And especially after that first year, they weren’t a joke. They were an athletic, focused bunch of men.

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<sup>5</sup> Wellington (Willie) Shaugnosh who played with the team in 1935 and 1938, was from Walpole Island.

- M.W: You touched on this, but maybe you can sort of expand on it—what were people’s reactions to their playing, or to this team? Maybe talk about their fans, or the spectators, what was going on?
- B.H: Again, not being old enough to be there, but to hear my mother and them talk, a lot of times the women were in more fights than the men on the field. And, because it was brothers, husbands, boyfriends that were on the fields, and they were sitting there listening to the chirping going on in the stands. And if you said something about one of them, the fight would start and the play on the field would stop. And you'd have to go separate them. At home, totally different. It was like a big love-in and people would be excited about going. They would be talking about it through the week. And again, at that time, the major gathering halls were the AME Church<sup>6</sup>, the BME Church<sup>7</sup>, and the Baptist Church on King Street, or the Queen St. Baptist out in Dresden, and one in North Buxton. So the conversation would be, these are local heroes, and you know, there was a buzz in the community, there was a buzz in the press, the media, and....
- P.H: The idea too that really impressed me when I was reading stuff was, is that when, before the championship game, before the All-Stars, they were expected to be shine boys and bell hops, stuff like that. And nobody would know them, admit they knew you that they recognized you. Once they won the championship, they were stars. Colour didn't matter so much, they were stars. They knew who Boomer Harding was, they knew who Flat Chase was. So that was a total turn around for them, from being, I don't mean to be rude, from being...
- B.H: Obscure. [crosstalk]
- P.H: ...nothing in society, to being popular, to people saying hello and knowing you by your first name. Accepting you, as you know, they had never done before. It must have been really awesome for them.
- B.H: To take that into note for a little bit? As long as they were stars, they were members of the community. When they stopped playing, they were just coloured boys.
- P.H: Yeah, that’s true too.
- B.H: And, some got more prominent than others and some got breaks, and some didn't. And again that was if you didn’t have the equivalent of grade twelve you just reverted back to who you were. And there was a day you couldn't play ball anymore. Your community remembers who you were. And I say your community at that time, that was Colborne

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<sup>6</sup> African Methodist Episcopal

<sup>7</sup> British Methodist Episcopal



Street, Wellington Street, King St, Park Street, Scane Street, that were, quoted as the "East End." They remember who you were and they used to talk about how great you were. But the rest of Chatham basically forgot you if you weren't involved in it.

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M.W: Can you tell me a bit about, again you have kind of touched on this, but can you say anything about what he enjoyed about playing baseball? Do you ever talk about that, any other people or challenges or difficulties that you haven't already mentioned?

B.H: Well, I just think with my dad it was, like I had so much respect for him and I always knew he was focused. But I also, I knew he was a realist. He knew he had to do something or he'd ended up drinking wine out of a paper bag. He knew he had a gift that I think was more the passion that was behind it. I think he would, if there hadn't have been baseball, soccer, basketball, hockey, I think he would have played tiddlywinks to win. There was a passion about sport. He would watch lawn bowling if there was nothing on TV. Just the idea of putting yourself out there and trying to, to be the best... He was very very quiet, and I've mentioned that in other interviews and that. He was very quiet, but when he spoke, you listened to him. But on the field, there was a total different person. And that was, I think, I don't know if you call it an alter ego, or what. But when he went on the field he didn't have to be subservient to anybody, and he wouldn't be. And I think that, that shaped all of their lives, as much as it could. So I think it was a passion, more than anything. It was a chance to be equal or better. He never said that, but I watched him, right 'til, he competed until... well, he just loved sports. And that passion drove him to do it. And, I think, I don't know if being a professional would have taken some of that passion away. We see how professionals are burnt out by the time they are thirty. But he had a chance at, you know, the NHL when he was thirty. So, yeah, it was a drive, a focus, and a passion.

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M.W: Just a question here about traveling, you kind of talked about, about that. Can you tell me a little about where they were travelling, like with the team, like what....

B.H: Anyplace there was a ball game, OBA definitely had a schedule. And most of it was southwestern Ontario—Thamesville, Dresden, London, Wallaceburg, Sarnia, Cottam, that way. And I don't think they went too much further than southwestern Ontario. And I know they didn't play in the States. And again, travel at that time, was, for them, either a flatbed truck, or a bunch of cars they could borrow....

M.W: So no 401, or.... [laughs]

B.H: No no, everything was a four hour drive from here, so the travelling was...And I keep remembering him telling us about a flatbed truck. And a lot of times he said, "We used to borrow it out of the driveway." They had push button starts in them, and they would put it back when they got home. And I said, "When did you get your license?" And he said, "We didn't have a license." [laughs] So it was however you could get there, and sometimes it was an illegal drive. Sometimes, actually it would be a legal drive but, it wasn't far, they had there. And we look back at the line sets and the box scores and it would tell you who they were playing. And they usually were day trips within southwestern Ontario.

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M.W: And, anything about, I guess, reception in other towns, you kind of already touched on it, but, you know, what it was like to play in these...?

B.H: I'm sorry? [asks for clarification]

M.W: ... sorry, about how the team was received in these other towns?

B.H: Well, they weren't. First, in '34, it was a novelty, kind of like a freak show. And that was the attitude when they went in to play. When they left, it was, "Those guys can play ball," whether they wanted to admit it or not. It was, just chipping away at mindsets that were formed throughout the States and throughout Canada. And it was an awakening for a lot of people that, okay... if they run them out of town it was because they feared their ability. And that we've just been made to look bad. That changed over the years, to not being a freak show, to being "let's go out and see a ball game because it is going to be a good one."

P.H: But that never changed the idea of not being, of some places not serving them...

B.H: Oh, no that didn't change... [crosstalk]

P.H: ... bathrooms.

B.H: ... and I heard a story the other day that related to the Coloured All-Stars of baseball, with my dad. The daughter of the guy my dad was teamed with who was second in Canada in darts, they, she was talking to me about a tournament before my mom and dad, and her mom and dad went up to Wawa, Ontario. And it was a provincial dart tournament, championship. Mr. Scott, Clifford, went in to register the rooms. And when

my dad and mother came in, they said, “Well, we don't have any rooms available”—and this was in 1970 something. And Mr. Scott went to make a deal with them and my dad was like, “It ain't worth it, this place is a lower standard anyway.” And so they went to another. That attitude was always there. We could... there was a lot of changes but there was still a lot of people who had it in their mind that you just don't do this.

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M.W: Okay, I'm going to move on to the section sports and life after the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. And again we won't go into a whole lot of detail about this—we'll do it later. So when did he stop playing for the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

B.H: Do you remember what year or?

M.W: Yes....

B.H: When the Coloured All-Stars transferred or moved on or evolved into the Taylor ACs and then the Chatham Panthers. So he never really quit playing for them as long as they existed. When he made the break from that team, is when he went—and I was a bat boy, so it would be in the late 50s or early 60s—when he went to Blenheim as a player-manager, to the Blenheim Braves. And there was one or two of the guys that went with him, and that team had pretty well dissipated then. And that would be '30s, '40s to '50s. And again not under the All-Stars or Coloured All-Stars, but different names, and he ended up being a player-manager. Then his brother-in-law, Ken Milburn, ended up being a player manager when he moved on. And after that it was Allan Wright and I remember the last three player managers for that team because I ended up coaching against them in hockey and stuff, with their kids. But no, he played as long as they played and he was still catching. And he was still playing for his turn, and on the odd occasion pitching....

P.H: I think he was one of the youngest members, too, of the All-Stars....

B.H: When he started yeah [P.H agrees] so that's why he was able to play with them after a lot of them had dropped out and the faces had changed, and... But, it integrated and it became the All-Stars and it picked up other sponsors.

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M.W: Can you tell me a bit about his life after, you know how he made a living, his family life?

B.H: Well, he had his job with the post office, when, if it was in the summertime, he got

home from doing delivering mail he would put his feet up for a while. Then he would go out and umpire a ball game, 'cause he became the umpire-in-chief in Kent County. He became the senior referee in Kent County in hockey. So I used to go from rink to rink with him, or instead of the baby sitter I'd go with him and he started doing the Kent rural league. And, he was still... when I was younger... he was still doing a little bit of soccer. And then the cartilage in his knees went and that, and he started doing the darts and horseshoes and that type of thing. He retired at 60. And the retirement age was 65 for civil servants, but at that time you could accumulate your sick time. And he had five years of sick time accumulated because he hadn't used it, because he thought going to work was a privilege. It was a different era when you were a letter carrier. You shined your shoes, you wore your hat, you had your hair cut and you were a civil servant. And I can remember in the middle of winter time, he would just come home for a half hour. He would lay down and then he would get back and finish his route. At that time you sorted your own mail. He, by then there was other people of colour working at the post office as well as inside stock and outside stock. So he retired at 60 and was on sick leave for five years. But he stayed active, when I was growing up, with me. I think I told the story when I went out and was playing ball. And, I was out in Sprucetown which is North Chatham, and we lived in the east end. I got my bike, my spikes, my glove, and my hat, and I got on my bike and rode four miles out to the ballpark. And he pulled in the parking lot behind me in the car. And I asked him what he was doing and he said, "Well, I'm umpiring your game." And I said, "You couldn't have given me a ride?" And he said, "No, I'm not showing you any favouritism." And he says "You better be out there swinging too." And that's just how he was. I rode my bike out there....

P.H: There is something that isn't in the books either that's really neat that he did. When Blake and I, after we were married, we would go out to different things together. And one of them was the Mistletoe Ball. And his mom and dad danced like a dream. They were—I think it must have been all that coordination on the sports arenas... areas. He was a really good dancer.

B.H: Um yeah, he kept busy, and the thing about him not doing any favours or anything. I can't remember how old he was, but if I said, "Let's go play catch," no matter how tired he was, he would pick up a ball and go out there. And he would try to squat and catch. He was in his 50s now, and going into his 60s. Or go shoot hoops. We would go out and shoot hoops, or kick a soccer ball around. Didn't matter, if I wanted to do it he would do it. He would encourage it. He would never coach, he would never---if he got involved in my games, it was always "You're not going to get a break," that attitude. And again, everything was still centered around sports. I remember him getting... well even his viewing of sports on television, he used to get really put out about how they ended up commercializing sports. He was a Montreal fan from the get-go. He had so much respect

for Beliveau<sup>8</sup> and people like that, when they came up. And again, the Quebec Aces which was a Senior A hockey team which had Willie O'Ree and the Carnegie brothers on it, which that line they called the Black Aces.<sup>9</sup> Montreal ended up buying that club so they could get Beliveau and he had so much respect for it. And then when they started to expand the league into the States, and have all the flash and the flair and the loud introductions. He said, "That's not hockey, that's not, you just sing the national anthem and get on with the game. This thing about shaking hands after the game," he said, "that's bologna. You are trying to rip the guy's head off, and then you shake hands with him?" He says, "No, no, you shake hands before the game." And, he used to turn the volume down, and say "I don't need that clown, that only made it two or three years in whatever sport, or he didn't even make it, sitting there telling me what I see," you know. "He's paid by the club and he's prejudiced toward the club," or whatever. He would say "Turn the volume down and watch the hockey game, or watch the baseball game." And he was really old fashioned that way. And I don't know what he would do if he had a big screen TV now, because he's been dead that long, and was sitting there watching this thing like that. And hearing Don Cherry... and it's funny, because Don Cherry was his type. Cherry never made it to the NHL, except as a coach, and he always played AHL in hockey and that, but he was that kind of guy. Greg Zahn, that does the analysis between innings with the Blue Jays, that type of catcher, like you know, "That's good baseball, he tried to hurt you, so you plunk him in the head next inning." That's how he filled up his days. I don't think he ever sat around and watched Lawrence Welk, I know...

P.H: He never missed an event with his grandchildren....

B.H: ... for the kids when they were in sports, after he had his heart attacks, after he had his strokes. You know, the day he died, I was coaching soccer for our daughter, and I went up that night, talked to him, and said, "I won't be up that night, I won't be up in the morning. I'll be there around noon because I got a soccer practice." He said, "Don't worry, come up after you practice." And he had gone just before I got there. It didn't matter where we went, he would jump in the car. If Drew was playing hockey this weekend, "Yeah where is he playing?" "Petrolia" well...

P.H: And school stuff... [crosstalk]

B.H: ... "I'll pick you up," and school you know...

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Beliveau, former player with the Montreal Canadiens.

<sup>9</sup> Herb and Ossie Carnegie, and Manny McIntyre, known as the "Black Aces" were the first all-black line in professional hockey, playing for several teams in the Quebec Senior League in the 1940s. Willie O'Ree was the first black player in the NHL, joining the Boston Bruins in 1958.

P.H: ... any money for ribbons or sports or academic...

B.H: ... or a treat, you know, just as they were younger.

P.H: ... and Carrie, always called him, our daughter, "Root Beer Bear" because he would walk down. And, I don't know if you know that commercial, but that was popular when she was little, but she would be behind him and that was so cute... He would always take them to the duck pond, didn't matter what they wore. And he made a pond out in the country. And it didn't matter if it was Easter Sunday and they were dressed to the nines, or what, he would take them out there and let them get all muddy and everything. And Blake's mom would say, "Oh Boomer." But the thing was, he was totally involved with his grandkids. And his grandkids were very important and he wanted them to achieve. And so, therefore, he was always there for them.

B.H: I remember him, again, being quiet. My son, our son is very very quiet, and was really a beautiful skater, Drew was, Andrew. And he was playing travel hockey and everything else. But he wasn't, didn't have a dirty play in his body. I remember him standing in front of the net, waiting for a tip in or something, and my dad would be watching him. And the guy would break a stick across the calves of his legs, and Drew wouldn't even wince. He would just stay there and take it. And my dad would say, "You got to get some respect out there," he said. "Run your hand about six inches up the shaft of your stick and let him run into you, catch him right under here..." [B.H. motions under his rib] He was always giving Drew advice, and he'd say "Well I just put the puck in the net" you know. And Drew, he would pick up on useful tips. But the ones which, and again it was a different era, and in a lot of ways. But what my dad was seeing out there was sport and "give what you get" again. And it was always in his life and I brag about him, and I'm proud of him, and he was probably the best dad you could have, the best grandfather you could have, probably the best father in-law you could have. He tried, and he was, he was who he was. If he changed, he changed on his terms, not because you demanded it....

P.H: The sad thing, too, was when your dad was watching Drew and Carrie, especially Drew, he also saw that there was still prejudice. And that was kind of like, after all these years, there is still prejudice in sports.

B.H: But he was a realist....

P.H: Heck yeah, but he didn't miss it, he caught it.

0:44:32.9

M.W: You mentioned his involvement with you and the grandchildren in sport. What about your mother, was she involved, with the team? What...?

B.H: She just pretty well let Dad have his run after she had done it all with him when they were younger. And you know, when he was in the army, she packed up and moved to Kingston for three years, you know, moved away from her family. And lived down there and got a room with some people that were involved with the military. And one ended up being a prison guard. She went to a lot of his things, but I think she just wore out of it all.

P.H: She played darts with him though...

B.H: Yeah, there was darts. [crosstalk]

P.H: ... the tournaments that they won, they were a pair. She was a very good dart player.

B.H: You, know, she just, she didn't have his passion for it, if you can put it that way. And when she was in school, they were in the township. And they severed a piece of land that they built the school on way back when. So her job was to go fill the stove with wood every morning and that was one of her tasks. And their job was to work on the farm. And, she was skating on Bear Crick and got a break away and ended up in Chatham and didn't come back. They had, they were told what they were going to do, and it was to contribute to the farm. So she didn't have a lot of athletic drive or passion for it. But she did it, and it was a social thing with the darts, and she bowled. Dad bowled too, when they were younger and first got married and things like that. But the drive to compete wasn't there. She was a scrapper though—she might have been five foot nothing, but she was vicious when she got into it, and so she was a good cheerleader.

0:46:47.0

M.W: Let's move on to some questions, some general questions about sports in the community. So I'm just wondering if you would give me a sense of the place of sports in the black community when he was growing up. Was it important, what?

B.H: I think, the same as with baseball. But that's, and I shouldn't speak for the whole black community but, that was their claim to fame. That was the heyday, that's what made the world go around for them. But then, when that stopped, in the middle of winter, Dad was playing basketball. And, in any of the pictures that you look at, he was the only

person of colour on the basketball team. They had CCI, um, CCI and CVS<sup>10</sup> and Catholic Central I believe, were the only high schools. There was a private sponsored team called Flowers and I believe he was a mayor later on and Dad played for him. And so, when baseball finished he was still going and he was still. And the public really didn't follow it and hockey that much, the black community, really didn't. It wasn't somebody they were looking up to in the off season—very few of them really knew he was playing hockey. He played on a couple of teams when the only indoor arena was the curling club, across from the old armories downtown. And then he ended up playing out in the county. And then he went off to war and played with the army during and after the war, the last part of the war. And then he came back and did the same. So it was just off the radar so he didn't get a lot of support that way. And it was pretty, I get the sense when I used to listen to him, that it was pretty lonely. It was that feeling of maybe, Jackie Robinson, that I'm out here all by myself, there's nothing I can do to hide it. I'd take my helmet off -- well, they didn't wear helmets -- so a black man on white ice, sticks out. And back then it really stuck out. Right now I think there are eighteen or nineteen in the NHL, but at that time it was very obvious. So the community was waiting for spring to start again, and you can't blame them. And the press, the press wasn't there until he really made that debut<sup>11</sup>, and they wouldn't even pick up the paper to look at the line sets for hockey. Dad played and later on, Eddie Wright, who became athletic director at U of Buffalo, and a scout, and he played junior A hockey. Then there was Paul Brown's son who played for Michigan I believe. And he played, he was on the Sports Hall of Fame committee, Paul is... and it was still really thin there. Mike Marson, but he was from Toronto area—he played Junior B hockey. And the black community really didn't get behind it. They thought it was beyond. Also the expense of hockey. And Dad, I think, was a real pioneer in hockey, and didn't have the community behind him. And I think it was a really... he was on his own in that. But baseball, as soon as it started they were out watching him practice and get the team ready and they were right behind it—spring had arrived.

0:51:04.3

M.W: Do you notice change over time, in terms of ease, or getting over barriers for, for....

B.H: Oh, definitely, definitely. and the first time we talked, and, we brought the books down. And we were sitting there with Lauren and we were talking about the stories<sup>12</sup>, just how

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<sup>10</sup> Chatham Collegiate Institute and Chatham Vocational School.

<sup>11</sup> Referring to when Wilfred Harding joined the International Amateur Hockey League team, the Windsor Staffords, and the press reported on him being the first black player in the league.

<sup>12</sup> Referring to the time he and Pat Harding came to the University of Windsor to bring the family scrapbooks on their father's sports career. "Lauren" is one of the students who worked on the project.



the media -- and the last two that were written, one in Chatham by Mark Malone and the one in Windsor<sup>13</sup>-- just the difference in the respect from the time the first ones [articles from the 1930s] were written. And you go back to that and you say, well, like "This guy has just crawled out from under a rock." But at least they wrote it. They didn't care if they got the names right, they didn't care what views... what was politically correct or not. You were lucky that we reported on you, that type of thing. And just every year, Ernie Miller, I thought was the best.<sup>14</sup> And I remember him because I met him. And he was in Chatham and the promotion was to the London Free Press. But he was one of the most open and respectful sports writers. And for me, as a kid, to be saying, okay, a sports writer has got my respect, was something of the day. Those books and that last thing, it's just a time thing and it just shows that, in the community, I think the ones that did make it through to the community proved that, ok, I can do a job. I'm not lazy, I'm not shiftless, or whatever acronym you wanted to throw at people of colour. No, I can do a job, I can do it. I can do a full day's job for, you know, a full day's pay. And they proved it, and they proved it... and I know they did the same type of selection. I know that Jackie Robinson was picked not because his total ability, because there was a lot better players in the Negro League, there were a lot better players. But they didn't have the mental toughness and the mental discretion to go out there and fight back. They went out there, and Dad, Uncle Ken and Uncle Andy were picked because it wasn't so much a gamble by putting them into public positions. They knew they would do the work, they knew they would not get in trouble, and they opened the doors. And if you talked to any of the real community leaders from the black community, they would admit that the Harding boys had a lot to do with opening things up in this community. Again, there are still things. A friend of mine, a good ball player, he's about two years older than I am, applied for Union Gas. He got a standard form letter back saying "You are totally qualified for the position, but we gave it to somebody else." He jumped right on it and said, "Why didn't I get the job? How many people of colour do you have in the head office at Union Gas?" He ended up getting a job, but there is a recourse now. And there is a recourse because my dad and my uncles, once they got their foot in there, and they were doing their job, and they were earning their respect on the ice or on the basketball court or on the ball diamond, they demanded that you treat them with respect. They wouldn't accept anything else. They wouldn't expect it. My dad used to deliver mail on King St, Main St, going to different places. "Here is your mail," "Well, how are you doing today, sunshine?" "Well, you can pack that up, my name is... you can call me Boomer, you can call me Wilfred, you can call me Mr. Harding, but you will not call me sunshine." He just wouldn't accept it. And I never seen too many people want to take it to the next step, and say "What are you going to do if I don't?" I'm really pleased about that. Our kids ran into it. My son used to tell us

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to local news coverage of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars public history project.

<sup>14</sup> Miller was a *London Free Press* sports writer who wrote an article about Wilfred Harding in 1978.

when he was going to the Pines<sup>15</sup> in grade nine, and he was on a Catholic, a separate school basketball championship in grade eight. And when he went to grade nine they all went up to play basketball together in high school. And you know, going to a store—four or five of them went all the way through grade school together and then high school—going to a store and as soon as they walked into a store the manager or the clerk would follow him around the store.

P.H: When he was in grade school, the principal had took one look at Drew and at first, you know... and picked him out for a basketball player....

B.H: And you know, he was in grade two, grade three, and he says you are going to play basketball. And this principal, it was a small school, it went up to grade six and then—kind of a feeder school—and this principal was a basketball coach in a high school program in the public school system. So he was leaving the separate school to go coach high school basketball all over the province. And he was, you know, you could be dumber than a fence post, I think, and you would pass if you played basketball. But Drew always felt that and, Drew was so honest. Like, if I was coming home from work and he was in front of the school I would say, "Get in," he would say "No, I have to cross at the light." I said, "Why" and he said, "Because my teacher said so..." He is that way today. If he was speeding, he would turn himself in. But they would follow him around the store, and he knew that. But what can you say? You can't fight, you can't legislate or tell people how to think. You can legislate their words to you, and how they demonstrate it, I guess. And you don't have to take it. And our kids, Drew, would get in a corner and that word would come out... Now he is 38, and his child, we were at a little event the other day, and his child was in grade one. And the kid said to him, you know, "Black attracts the sun, and white repels it and that's why you are hotter than I am." [laughs] And this is 2016, and we are not talking about uneducated people. We are talking about... and it is still there and you just shake your head. And I say, they walk among us. Some drag their knuckles on the ground, but that's what you have to deal with. But it's so much better, so much better.

I know my dad had wished for me to do more in sports, but it's like competing with a legend. And every time you go out to play something, it was "Oh, you're Boomer's boy." And there was an expectation right there. I went in the military, the reserves, and I saw obstacles in front of me, to get to where I wanted to go. And I took everything that he had done in sports, and applied it to the military. And I got to where I wanted to go, and I did it over all kinds of boards and questioning. And every time that I got promoted, I wondered how. I can honestly say I excelled at what I did and still have a really big input into my own regiment. And since then, not only was I the first Chief Warrant Officer of colour in a hundred year history, I was the first one from Chatham since the

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<sup>15</sup> A Chatham-area Catholic school

amalgamation had taken place in 1954. Since then, we have had an oriental Chief Warrant Officer, and another from Chatham, that opened some doors I think. But it was Dad's focus that said, "You know what, you don't have to take that crap." You put it out there and you dare them to say you can't do it.

P.H: And Blake's dad paralleled Blake's career with his. Both his parents—but we are talking about his dad—were so proud of his achievements because his dad experienced the things. He knew what Blake was trying to do, all the prejudice, things that he would have to overcome. And there was only respect and admiration for his son.

B.H: There was this kid from McGregor that asked me "How do you eliminate racism?" And I says "Intermarry." Just have everybody intermarry and then you know. And that's seen as a real simplistic idea, but which part do you hate? But it's still there. He asked me if it... he was doing a little bit on Fergie<sup>16</sup> and how Fergie came to. And I said, "Well Fergie's father played for a couple years later on." He came down here from Windsor, and he was a cocky little... he had little man syndrome, and you would see that in sports. The smaller they are the tipper they are. And Fergie Sr. was a good ball player, but he was a better cook and he got his notoriety through that. But Fergie Jr., he worked at his craft. Fergie played hockey as well as basketball, but baseball was the love you know [note: will probably cut this section, starting here, and the story about Fergie and prejudice, you know, Fergie was out....

P.H: Are you talking about Sr. or Jr.? [interrupts]

B.H: Fergie Jr.'s wife, Cathy... he played for Boston, the Red Sox, and he was on his way to the Hall of Fame... they lived in a prominent neighborhood in Boston and Cathy got stopped by the police and taken downtown because she was riding in a white neighborhood. She said, "My husband is Fergie Jenkins, he pitches for the Red Sox" and they said, "Well, you are going to have to get somebody from the club to call and verify that." Just because she was out riding her bike. And that's even closer to where we are now, but yeah, it's better, but it just doesn't mean we are finished. [and ending here]

1:02:14.8

M.W: Okay, these questions are about the larger impacts, significance of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, maybe in the years since. So the first question is overall, what do you think was the impact or significance of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars team?

B.H: I think I might have mentioned, maybe two or three times, I think that was a turning

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<sup>16</sup> Ferguson Jenkins, Jr.

point in Chatham. I think it was a turning point in recognition that the east end wasn't just a rundown area of town. I think it was a turning point saying that people of colour had pride, and they had ambition and they had drive. I don't think you could ever turn the clock back to before that in this community now, you know. It's probably paralleling other things that happened in the country at the same time. But that was our community's opening to the, to what can be done and what can be achieved. I think it was, like the NATO troops that go into change hearts and minds. Well I think that ball club changed a lot of hearts and minds in the community and it's never been the same since. I think a lot of hard, fast bigots were changed. And it wasn't all done at the first game or in the first year. But it started things in motion, I really do, or there would still be a fence around the east end. And you can see there is not...people have moved on, I think. I'm sorry to see the Hall of Fame open in the arena, but if it's a sports Hall of Fame I guess that it's a good location, and it's a good building. Because it is a memorial arena and that in itself says something, toward one way.<sup>17</sup> Being the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, it was so appropriate to be in the WISH Centre<sup>18</sup> and to little kids who are in the summer programs and see the pictures on the walls. And say "You know what, wow that was awesome, we could do that." Maybe not as a team, but as an individual, and say, "We could do that." I always think that is so important, the effect of athletes and what they do on and off the field or on and off the ice, or on and off the court, on younger people and our... I don't know if I'm right or wrong or should say it or shouldn't say it, but Chatham is anal. They just cannot take their... well something to be proud of and push it. They just leave it there, on the side, you know. They need to give their head a shake and grab on to the stuff they have. Uncle Tom's Cabin has been out there for, I don't know, and people come from all over the world to see it. And you ask the guy down the street, "You ever been?" "No, where is it at?" you know, and things of that nature. There is a lot of history in this community, the War of 1812 you know, Proctor and Tecumseh, all that stuff, and yet you almost have to force feed it to our population. And, if our kids can pick up on something positive, and say let's go with this, or even if it changes their thoughts and they just work a little harder doing something to get where they are going, then it is all worthwhile. But, um, I don't know, I think this is a great thing to supplement a good story, by just putting it forward. And I'd love to see the library in Chatham... I just know they won't, our grandkids will just have to go to Windsor, well because they can go online they can do it from here....

1:06:32.3

M.W: How has the story of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars been a part of your own family

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<sup>17</sup> Referring to the plaques and photos the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame has on the Chatham Coloured All-Stars.

<sup>18</sup> A community centre in the east end of Chatham. It houses the Chatham-Kent Historical Society which has a museum that has photos and memorabilia of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars.

history? Has it been part of your own kind of story? How important have the stories been?

B.H: Yeah, it does, it gets told. And my Aunt Beulah who—we didn't get any hard copy documents—but she was a story teller and our kids used to just sit on the edge of their chairs. And we would go down to Windsor and she would tell stories and they listened to everything she said. Our son was home on the weekend and --he's kind of a nut bar sometimes --but, he was telling his daughter about, you know, her great grandpa. And this was, there is a trophy down there when he was male athlete of the year in grade eight. And he says, "Yeah, Daddy won this when he was that age, you know, and this is a picture of Daddy when I was playing soccer at your age." So, the Coloured All-Stars has been told and we just hope they will pass it on, you know. We can't make them, but they are on Facebook, they are on the computer, they are on all the tools that are out there. And my daughter in-law is a teacher and my cousin Tracey, she is very interested in it, because she is the youngest of our bunch. And, again, her dad gets involved in it, and she is proud of her dad, and it's interesting. I've told you about Jennifer. She was almost in tears the other day when she called, saying that "I know my dad would be proud that you and I are talking about getting together, and me providing some stories, and talk..." [note: remove this phrase --and says I won't say anything about my mother] But I know our fathers would be proud of it and, it kind of choked her up because of all the years we missed. And this project may have brought us together. My Uncle Len has a son in Toronto and he was raised by his grandmother. And, back in the day, and his name, his last name would be Brown. And I'm going to get a hold of him, and let him know. He doesn't know the stories, but he has a right to know the story being told, because his dad was instrumental. He was my dad's older brother, and so I am going to get a hold of him and send him some of the stuff on Facebook or... But it has done a lot for our family already. And the Coloured All-Stars, again, it was dramatic. I don't think people realized how much of an effect it had. And you know, they don't stop to think about it, they just knew things changed. But I think that was the point.

1:09:40.7

M.W: Have you been involved with any of the public commemorations of the All-Stars over the years? I'm thinking of like the fiftieth anniversary celebrations, and the Blue Jays game....

B.H: No, my dad was there to get a certificate from the mayor with the ones that were still alive. We went to the two inductions, but other than that no.

M.W: What about the Blue Jays game in 2002?

B.H: Yes, we went to that, and most of our family there were walking. Got on the bus and went to that and had a great day, and I think Isaac, was it Bella or Isaac?

P.H: Isaac.

B.H: He was in his mother's arms when we went down for that. So the whole family that was still alive went to that game. And, that was a great day, just the recognition of who they were as a team, and what they did, and what they accomplished. The Blue Jays did it up great.

1:10:43.7

M.W: Is this a story you think more people should know about, and why?

B.H: Definitely, because it is educational. It's not just trivia, it goes way beyond that, I think. The staff and the students at the university have just put so much professionalism into it and credibility into it, and it needs to be exposed. It needs to be there for anybody to click on, and it is being told. And the newspaper articles really, really... we've got so many calls, people called in tears and just said, "That's about time," and "We are so respectful of Dad and the team." And they were saying "This is great—it is too bad it so late but it is much better late than never." It has really made an impact, it really has.

P.H: The thing too, is that, if you have not had the extremes of reading material and you haven't lived in that time, it's hard for you to realize what those people did. And my first purpose to put that stuff together was to make sure that Blake's dad got into the Hall of Fame, and also that the 1934 Coloured All-Stars would get some kind of acknowledgement. And I just never thought it was going to happen. But now that we have this information, I really do believe that a lot of people will find out, will learn, just how special, not just Boomer Harding. I mean, that's where I was starting from, but I have a lot of admiration for the Coloured All-Stars and though this work people are going to know about this, you know. They won't forget. If you forget your history, you know, you don't have a whole lot, you just go back and make mistakes, over and over again. And when you see this, it becomes real. A lot of people in Chatham, and a number of other communities, do not believe there was ever any prejudice in this community. They absolutely do not believe it and this is all documented so that it is hard to refute.

B.H: The hurt and the pain was there, but they got through it and that's another lesson. And you know, nobody wants anything, like, they are not sitting back there saying we are going to start a class action suit against it. No that's not it. They are just saying they went through it, and this is where they are at today. And we need to know about it

because it is part of our history.

1:14:20.2

M.W: The very last question, do you have anything else that you would like to say?

B.H: No, just thank you...

P.H: Thank you very much.

B.H: ... and thank Heidi, and thank the students because, just, your work is really respected.

P.H: And Miriam. [crosstalk]

B.H: I said, thanks to Heidi, thanks to you, thanks to students, and that their work is really respected. And it adds credibility to it and, we couldn't have asked anyone else better to do it.

P.H: I really do believe that, though, all things in their own time. Because I was kind of disappointed when it just sat there. And for a long time I was concerned what was going to happen with the information. But I guess it just must have been the right time, you know. It just must have been the right time for it to come. All things happen in their time.