

INTERVIEW WITH: Horace Chase

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: Horace Chase (H.C)

Name of interviewer: Genevieve Chevalier (G.C)

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Transcription:

G.C: I'm here in the home of Horace Chase and I'm here with Horace Chase to interview you about Wilfred "Boomer" Harding, your father, and their experiences with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. I'm Genevieve Chevalier, we put that in there in case years later we forget who was talking. Ok, so the way it's organized is, I have questions in sections. So, I have background questions about who your father, Earl Chase, was and about him and his family. Some specific questions to his experiences playing with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. I've got some questions about sports and life after the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. Because we're going to be asking you other questions, no need to do a full description in that section because we're going to do a whole other interview on that. There are a few basic questions about how sports affected his life. Questions about sports in the community, the value of sports in the wider community, for the black community particularly in Chatham. And then last set of questions about the impact and significance of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars, why it's important to study them and that kind of thing. So, those are the basic categories to give you a sense of where we're

heading with this. It's completely okay if you don't know the answer to some questions, you may not. So, we'll start with that. If you don't know an answer, we'll just move onto the next question. Just let me know, and if you'd rather not say and just move on that's fine as well. At the end if you have any other questions you would like me to ask, we can discuss them at the end, but we do make a note of it and have them approved by the Research Ethics Board. Ok, do you have any questions before we start?

H.C: Nope, let's see what you want to know.

2:00

G.C: For the record, what is the name of the person you knew from the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

H.C: Well, I knew most of them, but my dad of course, Earl "Flat" Chase. But I knew most of the players, and some of them were relatives, and most were friends or my dad's friends. I was a newspaper boy when I was young so I delivered a lot of newspapers to the east end where we all grew up. So, that would be most of the players I would know personally.

G.C: Ok, so if we focus more on your dad. When and where was he born?

H.C: He was born in North Buxton, and that was on, let me get it right now, August 16th, 1913. On Backtown, a little street in North Buxton. He grew his later years after he grew up and moved to Windsor. And then they only lived in Windsor until he was about 18 or 19. He went to Patterson High down there and then he moved to Chatham and got a job with the city. Then he married my mother who was also from Buxton, Julia Black.

3:17

G.C: Can you tell me anything about your family? Who they were and what they all did for a living?

H.C: Well, let me see how far back I can go. Well my dad was like a supervisor for the city, he had about three or four guys who worked for him. And my mother was a stay-at-home mom, 'cause we had four children in five years, so kept her busy looking after them. She worked a little bit at the little bean factory, a little part-time, helping out on weekends when they needed it. Then, most of the time my dad actually played ball, tell you the truth, his love of the game was phenomenal because that was his sport. In fact, when all three of us children was born he wasn't there for the birth, he was playing ball. That's how much he played.

G.C: Certainly your mom was thrilled about that one.

H.C: Oh, I guess she would have been.

4:23

G.C: Now, do you know if sports were important to him growing up, and did he do any other sports besides baseball?

H.C: I don't know much about that because with me being born in '36, two years after they won the Coloured All-Stars, only thing I remember is my mom mentioned that he played ball with the Cleats, I think it was the Patterson Cleats down in Windsor. And that's about all I heard about that he played ball with them. But I don't know if he played soccer, basketball, or we never got into that. We weren't what you'd call a much outside baseball family. We liked our baseball.

5:02

G.C: Did his other family members play sports, or did they watch sports?

H.C: He had four sisters and two brothers, and to my knowledge I don't know if they did. Because if they did they never talked about it. I'll be honest with you. So, I can't say for sure if my aunts or uncles played any other sports that I'd know of. They could've, but nobody talked around the table 'cause when you were small in my time, kids were outside playin', parents got together, adults, kids got no say in it. When you got called in or something, you didn't sit around and ad lib to what they talked about, you done what you were told. You go outside and play or you do this. That's the kind of lifestyle I had.

5:49

G.C: Do you know how and when approximately he started playing for the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

H.C: I believe they started their team in 1932. I think that was the year it got organized, and they would be I'd say 80% or 90% of them, were the same ones that made the '34 one. Because of the '34, the '35 come in and that was Fergie Jenkins' father was playing for them, and a couple other ones that come in that we call the imports. Well, imports from all around here. But I think it was 1932 they got established.

6:27

G.C: Do you know what position he played, and was he known for any particular skills or

moves?

H.C: Well, my dad played second base, pitched, he played first base, and there was a gentleman down in Windsor my dad told me he even caught Satchel Paige down at Wigle Park down in Windsor, when Satchel Paige's catcher got stuck in the traffic in the tunnel coming over for the game. The coach went to the other team goes, "Do you have anybody that can catch Satchel Paige," he says, "'Cause our catcher's stuck and we wanna get the game going." And they looked at Flat and, "You want to catch him?" He goes, "Yeah, I'll catch him." So, he caught him for six innings, I was told by this gentleman. And there's a write up in the Windsor paper, and I think that was back in about 1928 or '30, around that. But I couldn't find the article. I went to the Windsor Star but I'm not that good with their machines and checkin' archives to find this kind of stuff. But those positions there and I don't remember him ever talking about playing outfield. I would say he mostly played infield and pitching, that was his forte.

7:36

G.C: Do you remember any memorable events or stories about his playing?

H.C: Unless you pick out a certain one, I heard a whole bunch of stories, talk about him hitting the longest home runs in about five different towns. And they also talk about his hitting average, that he finished one season with I think about 0.768 batting average playing for I believe it was the 1935 team. And just the different things that went on at the park. Because you see when he was playing, I was playing. When I come along and start playing ball at six or seven. So, I'm six or seven playing ball at Stirling Park, he's on the road playing his, and I can't go on the road but I'm playing and we had no car. We didn't have a whole lot of money. So there's the stories he tells me about where this one fellow, Willy, he was an Indian fellow, while was a great pitcher and he backed him, they both pitched. And they'd talk about playing once, and I believe, I think it was down near Bothwell or could have been someplace a little further where they introduced the team as all Indians, they weren't coloured, they just said, "No, they're all Indians." So, whether it had to do because Willy was their pitcher and they hadn't never seen a coloured team come in and play in a white area, but they all went in as. Then they'd run into problems he told me like when they'd go to eat, and where they go to sleep, and how they had to travel, how they'd run into the colour line, coloured bar. But he didn't get into too much of that because I think he loved the game too much, that he just had to put up with it. It was a way of life, so we had to put up with it. So, different little stories like that, you know, I remember from my dad.

9:27

G.C: Can you tell me anything about the team itself, what they were like, their style of

playing, or what they were known for?

H.C: I can't tell you that much about them, because I didn't see them play. See when they won it, I wasn't born yet. And in 1935, I was just two years old, so I just knew when I seen my dad and some of the guys play, which would be in the early '40s, and that would be a mixed team then, there was white, coloured, everybody was playing then. And they were a good defensive and good hitting teams. You know, they could hold their own with any team in the area. I remember riding with my dad, going to Sarnia, we'd been to Toronto, and also hit—I didn't go to London with him, 'cause he played with the London Majors. And there was the Sherman's here, and the Hadleys, and all those teams. I think they were all competitive ball players on those teams, they were really good.

10:22

G.C: What were people's reactions to their playing? Did he ever talk about the fans and spectators?

H.C: Well, I remember they used to crowd Stirling Park, sometimes get as many as 400 people coming out to watch the game. And sometimes, mostly on the Sunday, that they would crowd it. So, they had a good following here when they played ball, I'll say that much. They liked them and, like I say, you knew the guys, you grew up with them, worked with them, ate with them, you know you socialize with them. So, to me it's also like one great big family. And I was the same way when I come along, with all the guys I played with.

11:02

G.C: Did he talk about what he enjoyed about playing baseball with the team or why he did it?

H.C: No, Dad never talked too much about why he played with them. He always advised me when I started playing about how to be a good sport, and taught me how to pitch, and how to throw, and taught me the game. But he didn't get into a thing like that, I think because at my age and me playing with the kids I played with, and him working and playing ball, there just wasn't time. And I really, I grew from watching them. If I went and watched their game, I learned from them. I might ask my dad, I said, "Why is so-and-so doing this, why is so-and-so doing that?" He says, "Because of this, you do that because of that, you cover this man, whenever the ball's hit everyone moves. In the infield, whether it's hit to you or not, you go for cover, to a base, everything." And when I managed, I taught my team the same thing. When the ball's hit, everybody's got a position to move to. You gotta cover. That was the main issue he always used to tell me.

12:09

G.C: Did he talk about any challenges or difficulties?

H.C: Not really. My dad, he didn't do a whole lot of talking about things like that. No, if he did he might have talked with my mom about it, but like I say, when you're a little kid you don't get into adult conversations. So, no, I don't remember him talking about something like that.

12:33

G.C: Did he talk at all about travelling with the team, either for exhibition games or in league play? Or travelling to other towns, what it was like or the reception that they had?

H.C: No, he wouldn't say that. He'd just tell you whether they'd won or lost, and how the guys performed, and how many guys got hits. You know, if a certain play maybe was made. But you know, he never got into picking on a town and saying, "Hey, they didn't want us there, they were throwing this, they were putting names up," or bad things like that. I think my dad was kind of laid back that way to me. He might have talked to the guys he worked with, or the guys he's associate with, but maybe he just felt I didn't need to know it, I don't know. As far as I'm concerned, I didn't need to know it. I was that person that what Dad says, you do, and he don't have to tell you twice.

13:25

G.C: So of course, he was part of the '34 team. So, did he talk at all about winning the championship or any stories about the final games, reactions from family, friends, or the general public in Chatham?

H.C: Not about the '34 team. Because for him to talk to me about it, I'd have to be about 8-10, so '44-'46. So, we didn't talk much about the '34 team, to tell you the truth. And I really didn't get into it because I didn't know what it meant, because I was too young, and I was busy playing the sport myself. So, we didn't get into socializing. We weren't close where you come along and talk about what we did playing ball or what I did playing ball. He just, when I played ball he'd come to the game and he'd tell me what I'd done wrong. How to pitch, where to throw, and things like that. Teaching me the game, but not so much about his history of his life.

14:25

G.C: Do you have any information to share about his life professionally after playing with the

All-Stars?

H.C: I wouldn't say my dad had anything professional. Go play ball, go to work, look after us. If we had a game he'd come out to the game there and he'd cheer for us. I remember once that I was pitching against my brother, and he was behind the back stop and I was trying to figure out who's he gonna cheer for? My team, or my brother's team? He was cheering for both teams every inning. So, I guess it really didn't matter. Just told us both, "Do the best while you're out there. When you get between them lines give 100%, when you come off that field then you're done playing ball. But you give 100% between the lines." I try to live to that.

15:15

G.C: Did he continue to play sports of any kind throughout his life with other teams?

H.C: The only sport he ever played was just baseball. He didn't get into soccer or hockey, golf or any of those things. I think because my dad was used to working, and times were tough. And like I say, having four young kids with mouths to feed. I think that was his only thing, was to play ball. Live to play ball, eat, sleep, and enjoy life.

15:50

G.C: Obviously, we've covered this already, but did he encourage others in his family to get involved in sports?

H.C: Oh, he was always talking to my brother, Earl, and myself about sports. And I had two sisters, but they were much younger. But he always told us when we got out on that field, he says, "Do this, do that, play this, watch this, watch that." He could coach us from the sidelines or at home, and tell us how to play the game. Especially when we had a question and seen something, and said, "Well now why did they do that, why did they do this?" Then he would explain to us. So, it was kind of understanding the things he taught us.

16:33

G.C: How do you think that sports affected his life?

H.C: How did sports affect his life? Hmm, I'd have to say outside the family that was his life. I'd have to say that was about it actually. But he's always just played that. He played it in Windsor, and he played here in Chatham. He played in Bristol, anytime there was a game they'd call and say, "Flat, we need so-and-so," he was gone and he played. So, that was his love of the game.

G.C: Do you know if sports were important in the black community when he was alive, or can you say anything about that?

H.C: No, he never got into the black community and sports, how it affected people. He just went out and played the game, and enjoyed the game. We never sit and talked, and he never said, "Well you can't do this because you're black, or you can't do that because it's just for the white." He'd just go on out there and do the best you can, whatever sports you're in. Because I played a little soccer. I played a few other sports, some basketball, but he'd just encourage you to go do it and that's all it was.

17:45

G.C: Did he talk about any barriers or difficulties in participating in sports within the wider community, or if that changed over time?

H.C: Oh, I'm trying to remember, I think he mentioned one time they had a problem with accommodation, getting food, and I think Happy Parker had to go into the restaurant at the back, and the people at the back, I think the cooks, they were black, and sent them sandwiches out to the guys on the bus to eat, for their lunch, to get something to eat because they couldn't go into the restaurant. And I think he just talked about that once, and I can't remember where it was, but I know that it happened like that.

18:29

G.C: Overall, what do you think was the impact or legacy of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

H.C: I think it was good for the community, to tell you the truth. With the support that they got from the fans, businesses, and their friends. I think it was one of the best things that happened because they all talked about it, even when I was coming up eight, nine years later. They'd say how the Coloured All-Stars were good at this, they all could have been in the Major Leagues, they all could have played in the National League if they would let blacks go into the League then. And we were so happy in '47 when Jackie Robinson broke the colour barrier. But like I say, that was about seven years before my dad died. That all happened, and it was quite a thing. But Dad admired him and I told him, "I want to be like Jackie Robinson when I grow up, I want to play second base." He says, "You watch how he plays it, swing and everything else." So, we all kind of started to model ourselves after different guys on the team that we'd seen play.

19:45

G.C: Have any members of your family been involved in public commemorations of the All-

Stars? So, the 50th anniversary celebration in '84 or the Blue Jays recognition of them at a game in 2002?

H.C: In '84, I was involved with it, and so was my brother Earl. We were both involved with the celebration, and there was my sister. I don't think she came out though, she was living in Toronto. So, we were involved in it. And then I got instrumental in getting him and the Coloured All-Stars into the Blue Jays celebration they had down in Toronto. A guy I talked to, I can't remember his name right off hand, he presented me and Don Tabron and Sagasta Harding with uniforms out on the field. And I've got my uniform here and a picture and a plaque. And they feted us down there, they drove us down there, put us up in the room, fed us, and we had a great celebration down there. And then at exit number six they put the Coloured All-Star up there, and they used their third baseman as my dad, the figure they were gonna use to represent the Coloured All-Stars was my dad, and they put him up there because he was the one that was chosen. I think he was about the hottest hitter that year, so they put him up there. So, they done a real nice job, and I've got all the stuff they done for us. And I'm quite proud of that fact, and they treat us real nice. My brother and I, we both went down for the celebration with our families.

21:40

G.C: Is this a story that you think more people should know about, and why?

H.C: I think the people that should know about it, are the ones who think times were easy for us. If you go back fifty years ago to when they were having, well it would be seventy, eighty years ago now for them, and the troubles they was having. You'd have to almost really talk with their families, and the ones that they lost for the trouble they had. Now a good fellow that you probably will interview is John, Usher Olbey. His brother played with my dad on the team, and I believe your doctors were going to interview him, 'cause he was at the baseball thing there at Stirling Park. But, Usher would be another, hmm I think he's 92, and I'm only 80 so he's got another twelve years on me. So you see, he would actually be around about 10 years old when they won it. Now he'd be able to tell you more about the answer to that question than I could to tell you the truth.

22:49

G.C: Do you have anything else you'd like to say about your father?

H.C: Well, I'll be honest with you, I didn't have much time with him. I lost him when I was going on 17 and I was still playing ball. I wasn't working, I was going to school. I didn't have a lot of, like I couldn't go play golf with him, and I couldn't go to a ball game with him. Like I went to his ball game, but I couldn't go see Detroit Tigers play in Detroit, and

there was nothing in Toronto. I didn't get there because there wasn't enough money around to do things like that. You had to count your pennies, look after your family, feed them and look after the household things. Which we accepted. We didn't expect it because we weren't used to it. I just sometimes wish I had more time to get to know him better, but when you lose them at, I'm 17 and he's 41, you haven't got much time. So I just wish I had more time, but I didn't. It's not God's thing, so I live with it. And that's why I try to spend more time with my family here, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. So I say, "Grandpa's always around."

G.C: All right, well that's it for our questions.