

**Oral History Interview of
Eddie Randle**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
November 10, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

Part of the:
African American Oral History Project

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Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

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Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Samantha Rubin and Ian Fehl

Editor(s): Kayci Rush

Interview Series Background:

The African-American Oral History Collection documents the diverse perspectives of the African-American people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, segregation, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Eddie Randle who describes his life growing up in Detroit and attending Cranbrook Preparatory School. Randle recounts his childhood in Detroit. He also discusses the Detroit Riot and the Vietnam War.

Length of Interview: 02:00:37

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Background information about the oral history program	05	00:00:00
Eddie's information, family, and childhood	12	00:15:30
Knowing Stevie Wonder, his education; polio	19	00:32:07
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How his friends managed during the riots; journey to becoming a pilot	50	01:46:02

Keywords

Education, Racial tensions, Detroit riot, Vietnam War

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

That means that now I can watch—in fact, that's a better recorder to me than this one. It's older but that screen is much easier to read.

Eddie Randle (ER):

Much easier.

AW:

This is—I have to tilt this a little bit and I really don't like having to fool [with] the recorder during the interview because—that's just—yes.

Margaret Randle (MR):

That's distracting.

ER:

I can only see red from here from this angle.

MR:

I can only see red, too.

AW:

Yeah and this is—and so I'm not as happy with this one as I am this one. But there you go. You can't buy this. This is the old model. You can't buy that anymore even though I think it's the best. Like a lot of things—I guess that's a sign of getting old.

ER:

It is. That's called progress.

AW:

So anyway, that's sort off the basics of it. As we go along, please, if you want to stop and ask questions, we'll do that. It doesn't hurt our interview one bit. What will happen after we do these interviews, besides the deed of gift and all that, we load this on our server, and our server has backups. So, we're—at Texas Tech we have, I think, three main servers that back up all the time there in different locations for all the reasons that you would imagine. So, once we get it on our system, it is preserved. Even though that's the case, I keep an outward hard drive on my desk that also copies everything just so I know for my own safety. But at some point then, we have students that will listen to the recording and they'll transcribe it. We do that for a number of reasons. One is that it makes it easier for researchers to—they can use a word scan and go through a transcript but we're not quite up to speed in being able to search for words audibly in recordings like we think we might be one day.

ER:

Do they use software and then edit the software or is it all manual?

AW:

No. We would love us to use software but that is a long way off. We found that it actually takes more time to edit the software product than it does to train someone and do it directly. So, even at that, by the time we get through with the transcription process, we have about ten-to-one in it. Ten hours to one hour of—

ER:

And people get quite good at that, if you think of court reporters. I mean, they're incredible how they can pick that up, so yeah.

AW:

And especially since we deal with people with different ways of speaking, with different vocabularies and for instance, I do a lot of interviews in the arts. I also do a lot of interviews in agriculture and in every part of the country, agriculture has a different lexicon. What does a person mean by this over here versus over there? And so, that would be difficult for software to keep track of. And the other thing is we found that software, the software that's out there, is pretty good when it's trained, i.e. if it's the same—like, dictation software works pretty well because it becomes used to the voice of the single person. But the moment you throw in another voice—and goodness help you if you've got three people talking, it's a complete train wreck. So, we'd love for that to happen but it's not there yet. We also, as a university, have a requirement for accessibility so a person who can't hear or is hearing impaired should have the access to this just as anybody else would, and a transcription provides that. So, we will do that and that will be what we do. Then, other thing is, we marry this up to physical materials. So, if there's an archive, a physical archive, that is connected with this—for instance, maybe you've written books on a subject in your field of computers and we're interested in acquiring your notes and the way you develop that and so forth, then the oral history interview would become one part of a larger archive that would help round that out. In the interviewing with educators, your oral history's going to be a huge part of that but there's certainly going to be things, especially to—I know we'll be talking about schools on the east side that aren't there anymore or they've changed from one thing to another. Sad thing for me, and I never went there but I had a lot of interaction with it, was when Dunbar quit being Dunbar High School. As a grown up, I went over there and do things and it was just such a wonderful place. Well, what's the ephemera that is disappearing? Newsletters, school papers, posters, photographs. Those kinds of things are important in an archive and they work hand in hand with what will happen in the oral history interview to round out everything. So, we try to put all of that together in one what we call a finding aid. So, somebody would come either online or come physically to the archive and they can look up and say, "We interviewed Eddie Randle and he talked about his education, and his background in

computers and we also have photographs or manuscript materials. Then a researcher is tapped into all that without having to say, "Well, let me look at this," and with that we try to connect it all. So, want to get started and we'll see how things go?

ER:

Well, I do have a couple of questions, Andy.

AW:

Sure. Do it.

ER:

What is the purpose of the interview? Is it to inform anyone interested about the Southwest or is it—I mean, what were—where would I be going in terms of talking about myself? What—because life for me obviously began before I moved to the south. And I know it's the Southwest Collection but—so, where are we going with the conversation?

AW:

We're going wherever your life has been. We—one of the interesting things about our business is we're collecting things for people who will use it and we don't know who they are. And we're collecting things for those people that we don't know who they are and we don't know what they're going to want so we try to be catholic, in the small c, and get as much as we can. We're called the Southwest Collection because our history. We began right after the university was founded when our first librarian, Elizabeth West—we have West Hall named after her. And the president of the Board of Governors, which we call Regents now, learned that the records of the Espuela Land and Cattle Company were about to be thrown in the trash. So, they loaded up in whatever their Model A, T or B automobile and they drove out to off the Caprock and collected those records and brought them back and that became the seed of the Southwest Collection. At the beginning, we collected things that were pertinent to this part of the world. But, one of the interesting things about this part of the world is that this has been for twelve-thousand years a crossroads. And that means that a lot of folks have come through here, a lot of cultures have come through here, and so a lot of what we—what happens in this part of the world is connected to something that happened elsewhere. We certainly see that in the arts. We have any number of important artists, writers, musicians who have come from this place. But lots of leadership that's come from this place in all kinds of fields. So we're much larger than

MR:

Than just the South.

AW:

Yes, in fact, right now, because there's some things that we're doing in the field that I'm interested in, which is creative process, I spend probably more time in Santa Fe doing interviews and collecting materials than I do in Texas because there are a lot of the people from our part of the world who lived in Santa Fe and they're reaching the end of their active careers so we're up there doing—making collections, runs and doing interviews. So, we're—we really don't care. Wherever it goes, it goes. And the other thing that I am also a firm believer in is a statement from Ernest Hemmingway who said, in talking about writing, that he said any man, but I say any person, "Any person's life truly told is a novel." And that means anything about our lives is important and the grand and glorious thing about an oral history interview is that this is your history without any intermediaries. It's you and your words and your voice. So, a hundred years from now, no one is saying, "Eddie said this," or, "Here's what happened." We can hear Eddie talk about it. So that's our object. So, the field is open to what you want to talk about. I'll be interested in some things. For one instance, where did you come from? How'd you wind up here? What did you do? In your career, what was your educational background? All those kinds of things are important. So, does that help?

ER:

Yeah, sure. It does.

MR:

Do we need to keep this one going?

AW:

Yeah. Wouldn't you like to?

MR:

I guess, I'm learning from you so—

AW:

I think it's good for you to keep it going so that you can attend—

MR:

See what's going on.

AW:

Um-hm. You can see what's going on. When I pause this one you can pause that one and so forth.

MR:

And I pause by pressing right—

AW:

You can press—there's a little button at the top that says, "Pause." Give that a try.

MR:

Okay.

AW:

Okay, now to start it press the button in the center again.

MR:

That says record, okay.

AW:

And then button at the bottom, that little black square, that's to stop it. If you shut it off without stopping it most of the time it saves it, but occasionally it won't, so it's best to stop it before you turn the recorder off.

MR:

Okay. And how do you turn it off?

AW:

Well, you'll turn it off on this side button that says, "Power," and you just—

MR:

Okay. I see it.

AW:

You have to press that—

MR:

But don't—

AW:

We'll want to stop it first.

MR:

Okay, All righty. This is really interesting. You know, I have always been interested in history, so this really is exciting to me. What I would like to see is—after all of these interviews have been done, I'd like to see the final—what happens. Like, after the transcripts and all of that stuff.

AW:

Right.

MR:

I'd like to see.

AW:

One of the things that we don't do is we don't write the book. We provide the materials for our researchers and its one of things that I find lacking because I would like for us to be doing more with that. [Margaret coughs] But, we just—we can't do that. So, our idea is if we collect it, people will come—

MR:

To see it.

AW:

To do it.

ER:

Y'all want more coffee?

MR:

Yeah, I'm going to heat this one.

AW:

I'm doing quite well, thank you.

MR:

Put some water in mine and just heat it up.

AW:

So what will happen to it is that it will be collected and available. Now, there's lots of things that can be done. Obviously there's the issue of the fact that the two of you are African American and we've gone through how many hundreds of years of difficulty in that regard and are still going through it. How does that fit into it? But you're also—you're an educator, Eddie's in a field

that's certainly dynamic. Your people have come from different places and wound up here. That's an interesting way to look at things. Community. One of the interesting things about anybody that has an ethnic identity, that means they're always a part of more than one community. And, you know, that's an interesting topic. So, I can—I mean, there's just so many ways that you can look at this. And then, again, the fact that you're in education, goodness knows there's as much—that's just—the world is fraught with issues on education today.

MR:

Yeah.

AW:

Particularly those of us like me. I also teach. I teach creative process in the Honor's college and song writing in the School of Music. I watched this state of decline over the twelve or so years that I've been doing that and how capable my students, who are also very bright and very eager but they don't write like they did.

MR:

You're welcome. [Laughs]

AW:

I know it's not your fault. I have my own opinions about that. So, there are lots of things that can be done with these interviews afterwards but we're the place that collects them and holds them and makes them available. Preservation and accessibility, those are our two main things. So, we've been talking a lot and it's all in here. The poor transcriptionist doing this is going to be really tired of listening to me talk, and so we need to get to you talking. So, I'm going to say this is the tenth of November 2017, Veteran's Day observed. Veteran's Day being tomorrow. It's Friday, and I'm in the home of Margaret and Eddie Randle, with no s, correct?

ER:

That is correct.

AW:

Okay. I just remarked I think before the machines were on that it's sort of a foggy morning and it feels more like spring to me than fall. But nevertheless, we have a beautiful view looking out at the golf course. I suspect there are a lot of people like you that live out here that don't play golf but just like to have something to look at besides fences and anywhere else.

ER:

Yes.

AW:

Good. Let me—and this is Andy Wilkinson. I should have said that. It's in the morning also. We got started a little after eight, around eight-thirty. So, I need to fill out this paperwork though. We're going to be talking with Eddie first. So, how would we style this?

ER:

Eddie J. Randle.

AW:

Okay. E-d-d-i-e.

ER:

And the J is for James, but rarely do I use my middle name. [Margaret coughs] And then the last name is R-a-n-d-l-e.

AW:

Great. While I'm filling this out, you mentioned earlier that you have a twin sister.

ER:

I do, yes.

AW:

Her name is also—

ER:

Her name is Eddie Jean Randle.

AW:

J-e-a-n.

ER:

Yes, J-e-a-n. And that caused us some difficulty growing up.

AW:

I'm sure at school they were completely confused.

MR:

Well, name and the social security numbers.

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ER:

Yes, and the Social Security Administration had a little problem with that, too.

AW:

Well, my—in at the age where I've gone down with my visits with social security and they don't need any more problems than they already have.

ER:

But by in large was not a big problem.

AW:

Well that's a good place for us to start, by getting an idea—I'm going to give one of these to you guys when we get done. But Eddie James Randle, what's your date of birth?

ER:

January the 11th, 1949.

AW:

Great. We're just half a year apart. It means we have a lot in common.

ER:

That is correct.

AW:

Lot of things to talk about. So, Margaret—and also Margaret is here, Margaret Randle, who's going to be conducting some interviews later on. And so, we're—this is also an interview—this is a working interview. We're doing some exploration as well. So, there'll a few things that we talk about from time to time that are not necessarily pertinent to the interview itself. Where were you born, Eddie?

ER:

I was born in Indianola, Mississippi. And that's I-n-d-i-a-n-o-l-a. It's small city in Sunflower County, Mississippi.

AW:

One of my favorite musical recordings is called Indianola Mississippi Seeds. Terrific. And your twin sister, Eddie Jean, J-e-a-n.

ER:

That is correct.

AW:

I'm going to make—just to know that for a future reference.

ER:

And she, by the way, Andy, is fifteen minutes older than I am and she—

AW:

And so, you louted that over her?

ER:

She is fifteen minutes older than I am and she's never let me forget that.

AW:

So, what did your family do in Indianola?

ER:

My dad was a laborer and my mother was also a laborer, primarily share cropping. She—my mother—my family moved from Tennessee up to Mississippi. My dad died and my mother moved to Mississippi because she had a brother who—actually it was her uncle, the person I'm named after, my great-uncle, Eddie Irving, lived in—well we lived out in the country in Indianola, Mississippi and so she moved on to his property. He built us a little house. It was a very small house. My mom at that time—I think when we moved to Mississippi, my mother was pregnant with my younger brother. So, there were—I had three sisters, one is now deceased, Mary, my oldest, Olivia, was second and then of course—

AW:

The two of you.

ER:

The two of us and then my younger brother, Willy. And so, we moved to Mississippi and we lived on my uncle's property in Indianola, Mississippi for a number of years before my mother decided to—she needed to leave Mississippi and we had—she had some other brothers who had already left Mississippi, moved to the north for employment. We were sort off on the tail end of migration, Andy, there was—

AW:

What—you said share cropping. I would guess cotton.

ER:

Cotton. Cotton, yes. Cotton exclusively, yes. She did that. She did some domestic work but mostly share cropping. And of course, in most cases, how that worked was you never kind of got out of the debt there and so that was a depressing thing. My mother didn't re-marry so she had the five of us children—

AW:

To support.

ER:

To support. Working hard. There was very little that my uncle could do, my great uncle. I'm not quite sure what motivated her, all of the decisions, to move to north. I'm sure her brothers had encouraged her to move and—

AW:

And to the north. Where—

ER:

Detroit. Detroit, Michigan. I think that many of the Mississippians who migrated north didn't go quite as far east, maybe Chicago and that part of the area because I think there was a migration—if you went—if you were further east, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, you kind of—the migration was up along the eastern seaboard. But she had two brothers, at least two, who had already left the south Memphis, Tennessee and had moved up to Detroit and they had been encouraging her to do that. And we finally did that in 1954.

AW:

So you were still a little kid.

ER:

Yeah, I was very little. Very little, yeah. One of my uncles came down in his station wagon and loaded up the five of us, the dog—we had a dog named Bob, and every worldly possession we had, which wasn't very much in a station wagon. We left Mississippi. I often think about that and wonder if I told my mother how proud I was. That was a brave thing for her to do, Andy, to pack up and go to parts unknown to start a new life for us. Of course, it was—took some bravery to stay in Mississippi. We're talking about the 1950s.

AW:

So, you were small.

ER:

Yeah, very small. Very small.

AW:

So how—without having to be elaborate, we know what that history was like in Mississippi in the fifties. Was it something that you were aware of as a four or five-year-old?

ER:

No. No, I really wasn't aware that history. I can recall my mother talking about it later on in life, the difficulties that she faced and many other African Americans in the South. I was about five years—I don't recall. The only thing I do recall, though, was being terrified of the road grader. I do remember that. We lived on a dirt road and of course, from time to time, the county maintainer would come down to grade that after—especially after it rains. I can remember hiding under the house because that thing was—big diesel engine and just terrified me.

AW:

They scared me too. They looked like a big insect or something.

ER:

Giant monster. I knew it was going to come over off the road so I would always kind of run under the house until that thing went by. So, I do remember that, quite clearly as something to be concerned about.

AW:

Did you—were you—you weren't really quite old enough to be doing much field work but did you have any experience in chopping or pulling bowls or any of that?

ER:

Sometimes it's hard to divide your reality from what you were told later on as a child. But I do recall, I guess, helping out or something. I don't think I was a worker. I don't really think I was a worker.

AW:

I recall—I lived on a cotton farm too when I was that age and I recall being an annoyance.

ER:

Yes, in the way.

AW:

I wanted to pull bowls and we had—ours was a small farm so we hired people to come in and help and bless—I remember two elderly women, who were African American, who came out every year—and I wanted to pull bowls. I remember them giving me a pillow case for my cotton sack, and of course, I'd get tired almost instantly and those two poor women would drag me along while they pulled those. So, I know I was annoying.

ER:

I recall her telling me that we did help out. I think that's how she phrased it, we helped out, I think, but like you, I think, we mostly got in the way.

AW:

So, did you grow up in Detroit?

ER:

I did. I did. I stayed—we—I stayed in the Detroit. I still have family in Detroit. My sisters—one is no longer living—

AW:

Is that your oldest?

ER:

No, my middle sister, Olivia. But my oldest sister, my twin sister, and my brother still live in Detroit. So yes, I did grow up in Detroit. I was there until, essentially, 1970—'69 when I went into the military. I've never really officially gone back to live there. But yes, from 1954 to 1969.

AW:

That was—Detroit was still pretty energetic.

ER:

Vibrant. It was on the decline to some extent but, I think, it was the fifth largest city in the nation in early sixties, middle sixties, early sixties. Very vibrant city.

AW:

Cultural center. Motown.

ER:

Love of my life, the music in Motown.

AW:

Me too.

ER:

And in fact, many of the Motown artists lived in my neighborhood. I actually happened to know some of them.

AW:

For the recorder, I'm bowing right now. What was the name of your neighborhood in Detroit?

ER:

It was—

AW:

What did you call it? What did people who lived there call it?

ER:

Oh, it has a name. There was an area around Detroit—I don't know—we didn't—well, it was called Black Bottom. That was one of the—I guess it was—

AW:

Pejorative name.

ER:

Pejorative for that area. We lived there. And it was near downtown, surprisingly, close to the downtown area. When we first moved to Detroit, we lived in on a street called Brush—Brush street. It was north-south street and the address I distinctly remember was 2210 Brush Street. That was—that had—that area now is called Brush—it's still—its Brush addition. I'm not quite sure what it's called but it's still there. Now it's mostly university now it's been torn down, rebuilt and so forth; revitalization process.

AW:

So it's becoming toney and gentrified.

ER:

Yes. Very gentrified, yes. But historically, those—the parts of Detroit—at least those parts that we lived in that we could afford to live in, had been—people who own properties lived there—and they were really nice houses in most cases—because of the proximity to the downtown area. Few people owned automobiles in the thirties and forties. But then as automobiles became more and more available, or prevalent, those property owners moved away to the suburbs but many of

them maintained ownership of that property. So, they were absentee property owners. So, they rented out a lot of their property. Some of the houses were relatively large and what they would do, Andy, is they would divide those houses into apartment buildings. And so, we stayed. The first house that we lived in—I'm thinking it was—I think there was at least four or five families living in that building at 2210 Brush. And I recall, distinctly recall, there was one bathroom upstairs and you had to get up really early to be able to go to school. If you didn't get in early, sometimes you didn't get a chance to go to the bathroom and that was—it's an important part of getting ready to go to school. So, there were some struggles like that but I recall my childhood in Detroit as being a wonderful experience. That was before the Mo—we were talking about the Motown. We lived there. We lived on a street called Malcolm and then Alford. But the school—the school that most of the Motown—many of the Motown singers went to was called Bishop Elementary. I tried to find information about that school. I go onto Detroit public school's website and there's nothing. It was so disappointing.

AW:

I'm almost certain I've heard that mentioned in one of the television specials about Motown.

ER:

You might have but the Detroit public school system, apparently they don't care about that history or no one has documented it. And that's regrettable because we lived on a street called Alford. We lived on a block between Rivard and Russell Street. And there was an eastern market there, surprisingly, fresh fruits and vegetables, in my neighborhood, which was surprising. And then we moved from a house that was so—a building that had been divided into, I think, four units. We moved to what we call Long Alford. It was the longer block between Rivard and Hastings. The street Hastings has quite a reputation in Detroit for being a rather aggressive place. But across Hastings, on the West side of Hastings, was the Brewster-Douglass Apartments. These were high-rise apartments and two-level apartments, but predominantly identified by these tall buildings that were built. I don't recall when they were built. I think there five or six of them, maybe seven of them. Very tall buildings.

AW:

Rooster?

ER:

Brewster. B as in Brewster. Brewster-Douglass Apartments. It was low income housing units.

AW:

What were often called projects.

ER:

The projects, yes. That's what we called the projects. Many of the Motown artists live there. I believed Diana Ross lived there. Mary Wells, who was one of the three original Supremes. My oldest sister went to school with her. I have a picture of my oldest sister and Mary Wilson. They're standing on the stairwell in Bishop Elementary. It's their eighth grade graduation picture. I have a copy of that photograph.

AW:

That's great.

ER:

Yes. My twin sister, Jean, had polio in her right ankle as a child, from which she never did really recover, it left her somewhat deformed. And so at that time, in education, students were not mainstreamed—students were not mainstreamed if they had any kind of medical issue. So, she went to a special school. It was a public school in Detroit called Leland, L-e-l-a-n-d, Elementary School. I believe that building still stands. The Bishop Elementary still no longer standing. But that's where I got to meet Stevie Wonder.

AW:

I was going to ask about Stevie Wonder because I remember reading about how Stevie Wonder would ride his bike—which is interesting, not being sighted—riding the bike down to play harmonica in those sessions when he was just a kid.

ER:

That's correct, yeah. And there were times he got a ride in—I used to pull him in my red wagon, Radio Flyer wagon. So, that's how we met him, through my twin sister, because both of them went to Leland Elementary School. Later on, she was mainstreamed—

AW:

Stevie Wonder because his eye sight?

ER:

His eyesight. Because of his eyesight, yes. And later on, she was mainstreamed and she did go to Bishop Elementary, too, for a short while. That was up until the fourth grade and then my fifth grade—I guess we're talking about my education—fifth grade, the school in my neighborhood, was called Cheney Elementary, and it was full—

AW:

Cheney?

ER:

Cheney. C-h-e-n-e-y, I believe. It was at capacity and so we were bused to a school called Riverside, which was down near the Detroit River. So, for the fifth grade that's where my twin sister and I went to school, just for the fifth grade, and then for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades—in Detroit at that time, grade school went up to eighth grade—and so for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, we went to a school called Douglass Houghton Elementary School.

AW:

How do you spell Houghton?

ER:

H-o-u-g-h-t-o-n. And Douglass was spelled with two s's I believe. Named after a famous—I think he was an architect. I'm not quite sure. I have to look at my history on that. But anyway, so—and we were bused out of our neighborhood to that school, which was near the waterfront, near the Detroit River. I keep mentioning that and I'll come back to that in a minute. But I say that to tell you that the neighborhood that we lived in, there were a number of children—of kids, so the schools were overflowing. In fact, in some of our classes the—I think Detroit had—we had thirty, thirty-five. Some classes were close to forty. And so, it could be a challenge as a student—

AW:

Especially for the teacher.

ER:

Yeah, let alone the teacher—to get an education. But it was fair, Andy. The opportunity, the ability, if you wanted it, to get an education, it was there but you can see how that alone presented a challenge for students who did want to get an education. And if you didn't want to, you could hide. You could sit in the back. You could sort of be disruptive or do nothing and get by because it was just not possible for the teacher to manage that. Now I do, I do understand that Detroit—some policies were changed so Detroit school system that tried to limit the number of students, you see.

AW:

Could I interrupt just for a couple of questions, since we kind of got you almost to the eighth grade and finishing up. First of all, I also remember polio. I remember how in our neighborhood here in Lubbock, one child was taken sick in the summer and everybody feared it was that and so no one could go out in their front yard for months. And I had a cousin who had polio but never to the iron lung stage. Was there—and I just remembered this wave of terror—was it like that for you in your community, the publicity for it?

ER:

You mean the community in Detroit?

AW:

Well, in your neighborhood.

ER:

I don't think so.

MR:

Did she get polio before you left Mississippi?

ER:

Before we left Mississippi.

AW:

Oh okay. So it was—yeah. So it was there. So she already had got it.

ER:

She already had it.

AW:

Got it. Okay.

ER:

She walked with a limp and she had a deformed ankle, that's what happened. But no, I don't recall. I do know that it was important because we were all vaccinated for polio, probably, for my twin sister, maybe too late. I don't recall getting vaccinations in Mississippi. In fact, if you recall, I left Mississippi in a hurry and I ended the conversation, which was a good thing, which I think was one of the most important thing happening—things that happened in my life.

AW:

To get out of there.

ER:

My mother decided to leave Mississippi and I just think that was very significant in my life.

AW:

What did your mother do when she got to Detroit?

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ER:

Well, she worked. She worked as a domestic then she became ill. She had some health problems. What that ended up doing was causing us to need assistance, welfare. And so, she applied and received help from the state. And that was so important to us, Andy, because she never did re-marry so there was not a father figure—and I guess I can talk about that too in my life, too, which is an important thing. But we relied upon welfare for the kids. And without that help, I don't know what we would've done.

AW:

And was it enough help in that time to actually provide that base level?

ER:

It was. But it took—I called my mother a magician to manage that. There was no room for doing anything other than using the resources that were provided to keep us going, to—clothing and food and rent. My mother did an outstanding job of doing that. So, whenever I hear people talk about people abusing welfare, painting it with a broad brush, I always want to push back because I understand that there will always be people who choose to do that. But, you're going to hurt some people who really need that.

AW:

My experience—I was in police work twelve years before I—right as a young person—and that's the only time anybody ought to be in that business is when they're young. But I'll tell you, my experience is that the people—there's a very few people who abuse those things and they would abuse anything they were in. It's not welfare. Well see, it's not easy to get—

ER:

It's very difficult to get. You know, there's a pride issue there too, there's a stigma, but I don't know what we would've done without that. I am a product of—

AW:

I was about to say, that's the other side to it is that—and since we're talking about ideas here, universal health care, welfare and old age assistance, about which I'm old enough to get. Those are the things that have a practical benefit to the greater society because poor people cost us money, sick people cost us money, everybody. So, you wouldn't be who you are without that—is what you just said to me, right?

ER:

Absolutely. That is correct.

AW:

Case proved.

ER:

So, I understand what it's like when you need help.

AW:

We talked about Bishop Elementary and these different schools you went to and being bused and the size of the classes. Were these—and this was just shortly after *Brown v. Board of Education*—were these segregated schools?

ER:

No. Oh no. No. They were not segregated. There were whites in my neighborhood who were in the same—I don't want to use the word condition—but who had the same—

AW:

Economic—

ER:

—challenges, economic challenges, in the neighborhoods that we lived in. I might've mentioned that very few blacks owned property. I mentioned that we rented. There were some homeowners in the neighborhood, but by and large we were all renters. And we not all black. There were whites in the neighborhood. There were Hispanics, primarily Puerto Ricans. A few Orientals. Detroit was—it had so—

AW:

Yeah, it was a melting pot.

ER:

Now, there were pockets of—the Polish immigrants predominantly lived in an area northeast of Detroit, a little city called Hamtramck. So, there were various pockets of ethnic groups in the city, but there were also areas where it was a melting pot, if I can use that word. And certainly in my neighborhood; predominantly black but there were whites, Asian Americans, and Puerto Ricans. And we all went to the schools.

AW:

That's interesting.

ER:

Yeah. That wasn't our problem. Now, there were parts of the Detroit area, the city west of Detroit, immediately west, was called Dearborn, D-e-a-r-b-o-r-n. Now that area was predominantly white and there was a reluctance to sell properties, to rent, to hire. There was a—it had a reputation. You knew that it was a—you had to have a reason to go there otherwise there was no good to reason to go to Dearborn. As a black person who grew up in a Detroit, we kind of knew that. But yeah—but no, we were—the schools were integrated, predominantly black—but no, everyone—there were a lot of people who were suffering economically. I don't want to say suffering but who were in the same condition—economic condition. And you know, that was at the time when automobile industries were—they were not—they were still doing well. You could have a job at the automobile—in a factory and make a reasonable amount of money to raise a family. Decent wage.

AW:

Family raising wages.

ER:

Decent wage. But many of the plants moved to the suburban areas. They started building them outside of the Detroit area and not everybody had automobiles, surprisingly, in the motor city. We didn't have an automobile for a long time. The next door neighbors didn't. I mean, somebody did. They would pick the next door neighbor—this man, the Tilly's lived south of us. So, we took the bus, public transportation. We walked a lot and when we can afford to, we hailed a cab, called a cab, especially when we would go downtown shopping. And there were some stores you could—you shopped at and some you didn't shop at. I'm kind of leading into some of the things that happened during the turmoil in Detroit, especially in 1967. But, to get back to your question, Andy, the schools were integrated. We didn't—there was no—in my experience, there were no segregated schools. Now, I guess I left off at the eighth grade.

AW:

Yes. So you graduated eighth grade.

ER:

I graduated eighth grade.

AW:

Did you go—was there a middle school after that?

ER:

There was a—there were junior highs that ninth—

AW:

And tenth.

ER:

Well no, just ninth, I think. And then they—I can't—I don't recall because I didn't go in the city—and I'll tell you about that in a minute—but the junior highs, there were some that started in the eighth, they would get eighth and ninth, and then high school started at tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. But I don't know what—my brother went to ninth grade junior high just one year, ninth grade, and then tenth, eleventh, and twelfth, my brother and my sisters, the high school for them was tenth, eleventh, and twelfth. While I was at Douglass Houghton Elementary, of course like most people, there was at least one teacher that made a profound impact in my life. At Douglass Houghton there were two. One of my teachers, an English teacher, her name was Elaine Washington—she is no longer living now—but she took an interest in me and one day she called me aside and said, “Eddie, how would you like to apply to go this school north of Detroit?” I said, “What?” And she said, “How would like to try to win a scholarship to go to this school? It's an academic scholarship.” She said, “The school doesn't do athletic scholarships but it's north of Detroit. It's in a city called Bloomfield Hills and the school is called Cranbrook Preparatory School for boys.” And I thought—you know, I'm thinking, Okay, I don't know, but sounds like it might be interesting. She said, “I think you could do really well,” and I said, “Sure, why not?” So I talked to my mother about that and she said she was okay. So, this teacher drove me up to the school, we looked around and then she drove me up for interviews, she drove me up to take the test to get into the school, and I got accepted. I was—I went to that school for the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. And so, that was a big difference in my educational career. This school was a private school. I started there in the Fall of 1963, right where all of the—in the midst of all this turmoil, this—the social upheaval in the United States. So, this school—the student body at that time was, I believe, 306 students, which included the seventh and eighth grades. We called that the lower school. The school was fashioned after English [Margaret coughs]. And there were three—the year that I started, there were three black students at this school and the remainder of the school was predominantly white. The governor of Michigan at that time was George Romney. He was a Republican. His son Mitt Romney—I know who you know who's run for president at least once—I know him personally. He went to this school.

AW:

Really? He went to the school? That's why I recognized the name.

ER:

Yeah. He was two years ahead of me. George was is dad, governor of Michigan. In fact, Mitt's wife, Anne Romney—her name was Ann Davis—her maiden name was Davis—she went to the sister school, it was called Kingswood School. It was across the lake. So, this school Cranbrook was a sprawling campus. Property bought by the Booths, B-o-o-t-h-s, they bought out this

property in 1920s, I think. The school was founded, I believe, in 1927, I should know that. Whoever's reading this, I'm going to be chastised because I should know this because I was on a—I was a member of what was called the Blue Key Committee—Blue Key Club. Our job was to take prospective students around the campus and tell them about the history of the school.

AW:

So, we call them, at the University, backwards walkers because they walk backwards.

ER:

Yes. I knew all the history. It's kind fading in the fifty years—I went back on my fiftieth reunion. But anyway—but my education took a dramatic turn then on a number of reasons. First of all, grade school, I think, it was easy for me. I worked but I didn't have to work hard. It's when I got to Cranbrook that I realized that there were a lot of things that I thought I was on top of but I really wasn't because it was a different—it was a challenge.

MR:

Tell him about your writing because Andy is a writer. He's a writer and teaches writing.

ER:

Okay. Well I won an award, the Detroit scholastic—

AW:

Before you got to—

ER:

After I was at Cranbrook—well, writing. This school was a challenge. One of the things that we—the school Cranbrook—one of the things that we did, Andy, that was required in every year that we English class was to write a something, an original something every week. If you read the book that Mitt Romney wrote, he'll mention the one thing that was probably one of the most significant things for him going to Cranbrook was they made us write. So, it was either short story, it was a research paper, a poem, or something we had to do once a week, and we dreaded that. Of course, we couldn't plagiarize because our instructors knew it all. They had seen it all and so we had to be original. We were forced to do this. But that single thing was probably the most important thing that taught me how to put pen to paper; get my thoughts on a piece of paper—and structure. It was so important. We just—didn't hate it but we certainly didn't like doing that every week but it had a purpose. So, one of the things that we would always do would be submit papers to the Detroit News Scholastic Writing Awards and I won an award for a poem that I wrote as a sophomore.

AW:

Really? Do you still have it? The poem, I mean.

ER:

It's somewhere. I do still have it. But that was a turning point in my education. I had to work hard. I failed to mention that it cost twenty-five hundred dollars a year to go that school in 1963, which is a lot of money into today's dollars.

AW:

That's a lot of money, yeah. You could buy an automobile.

ER:

Oh, certainly. You could buy several. And it was—the school did not provide full scholarship, was also partial scholarship. So, Elaine Washington formed a committee and these people raised—the scholarship was for fifteen hundred of the twenty-five hundred dollars.

AW:

So there was still a thousand bucks left.

ER:

Yes, and so Elaine Washington formed a committee and for four years, those people who didn't want me to know they existed, they remained anonymous to me, although I knew who some of them were. They raised a thousand dollars every year for four years while I went to that school. And I never got a chance to tell her how grateful I was for that—I kind of did but you just can't say it enough, you know, how important it was, but I do want to say that that was kind of heavy on me because I was—

AW:

I was going to ask, was that a burden as well as an awful an opportunity?

ER:

Yeah. You know, I couldn't fail. I couldn't fail.

AW:

Raises the stakes.

ER:

A lot people had a stake in me being successful—and I can mention a few briefly. But there were some people who didn't want me to be there. The first year that I was there, I got— [Margaret coughs]

AW:

People at the school that didn't—

ER:

No, not the school. Because the kids—there were kids there who lived in that area—Bloomfield Hills is sort of like the Beverly Hills of Michigan—and then there was another city south of that Birmingham, all the kids—people were wealthy there. The General Motors executives lived there. Some of the professional athletes lived in that area. People of wealth lived in that area. And so, one kid didn't even know how many rooms he had in his house. So, I was not a threat to them. I was a little kid from the ghetto in Detroit, just wanting to go to school there. There was no threat. They didn't—I never had a problem. Never had a problem from anybody, any professor—well, teachers—or any of the students at that school. The problem came from people outside looking in who didn't want me to be there.

AW:

You mean white people outside—people in your community outside looking in?

ER:

I presume—

AW:

—or people in your community outside looking in?

ER:

No, not my community. People were encouraging me. I was—I made all the newspapers. I can remember one of the headlines. I think it was the Detroit News. I still have that. It said, "Negro on Relief," that was welfare—

AW:

On the welfare.

ER:

—"wins scholarship to exclusive preparatory school." That was the headline. So, they neighborhood knew. The neighborhood knew. But I got mail my freshman year from the John Birch Society, from the Klan, from other organizations; just terrible mail. I was like fourteen years old, just a kid wanting to go to school. One of the teachers who was my counselor called me aside—because some of the mail went directly to the school and some of it was addressed directly to me. And so, we sat down, we talked about that and he said, "Well, what should we do?" He was concerned how it was affecting me, obviously, and I said, "Well, let's just put it up on the bulletin board so everybody knows," and that's kind of what we did, which is—

AW:

That was a great idea.

ER:

We just posted it on the bulletin board.

AW:

That was your idea?

ER:

It was my idea.

AW:

That's a terrific idea. So, how did that affect your classmates, particularly the classmates of privilege who would've been shocked that anybody would do that.

ER:

They were surprised. They were surprised. In fact, I went back for my fiftieth reunion this past summer and I was explaining that to one of my classmates. He was white, quite wealthy, didn't have no problems at the school, was not on scholarship. We were talking about our days of glory and he said, "I didn't know you were on scholarship." First of all, he said he felt like he didn't fit in at the school and I said, "What are you talking about? I don't think you had a real problem." But anyway, they were surprised, some of them. They were surprised that that was going on. But you got to remember, this was 1963. People, many people, were not ready for those kind of things. So, that was—but my experience—that education informed my life, I think.

AW:

You mentioned Ms. Washington.

ER:

Yes.

AW:

But you said but you said there were two teachers.

ER:

Yes, Ernest McClendon, I failed to mention him. He was a science teacher. And he—

AW:

So you got both barrels. You got English and Science.

ER:

Yes. And I don't know where he is. Elaine Washington is no longer alive. I don't know if Ernest McClendon is still alive. I need to find out. But he was a science teacher. In fact, he was my science teacher—the school—I did a science fair project, and I submitted a science fair project at the Detroit Metropolitan Science Fair when I was in the seventh grade. I was the first student at Douglass Houghton Elementary to ever submit a science fair project. I mean, he drove me around to pick up the items and assisted me in assembling the things. I won an honorable mention. I was the first student at that elementary school not only ever to submit a science fair project but to win something. So, it was all because he took an interest in me and helped me buy the things I needed. I didn't have any money. I worked in the summer but I spent my money buying a camera to take pictures, which I guess was a good thing. But anyway, but Ernest McClendon made a tremendous impact on me. He would take me—but when I'd come home from Cranbrook—because I was a boarder. I failed to mention that the Cranbrook school was a day school and a boarding school.

AW:

Because you were a long way from home.

ER:

More than twenty-two, twenty—if you lived more than twenty-two miles, I believe it was—the school was twenty-two miles north of Detroit. I don't remember what the cutoff was but if you lived further than a certain number of miles, you had to be a boarder. And so, I think about two-thirds of the students were boarding students and then there was about one-third that were day students. And so, he would bring me home on the weekends when I could come home and take my back up to the school and so forth. And so, even after I graduated from grade school, he kept up with me.

AW:

Let me ask this because somebody's going to want to know, were those two teachers, Ms. Washington and Mr. McClendon, were they African American?

ER:

They were, yes. We had white and African American teachers in our schools.

AW:

Yeah, just curious.

ER:

Yeah, those two were black.

AW:

What was it like, for you, because now you're living in two really different worlds in the same town, sort of in the same town.

ER:

You mean when I was in high school?

AW:

Yes.

ER:

Oh yes.

AW:

You're in here with the Romney's and then you're here with the people on relief. What was it like navigating that, not just culturally? Because kids—as kids we're pretty adaptable. But I mean, but psychologically, what was that like? What was that experience like for you?

ER:

All the kids in my neighborhood knew where I went to school. They all knew but they were all my friends, I don't—I didn't have any enemies.

AW:

So it wasn't difficult to come back—to go back and forth.

ER:

No. I knew the kids not to hang around with. Even those kids knew me. The kids who—the kids I hung around with growing up—we played basketball and went to parties and that kind of stuff—but there was no problem. I'd come home for the summers and so I would be back in my environment that I grew up in. And so, it was not a problem because I just—I guess I got along with everybody. I don't recall not getting along with any students ever. I mean, there were kids in my school who were—sometimes I would have to stand up for kids who were bullied. And there were kids who didn't do as well. I would tutor them and so forth—back in grade school. I don't recall not getting along with any students. There were a couple of bullies that kind of bothered me, higher grades. I remember getting into one real fight. I don't want to go into that but I had to actually fight one bully and I learned a valuable lesson from that, and that lesson was that when you can't take anymore and you have to defend yourself. Often times that'll turn it around. That guy walked—whenever he—after that when I would walk down the hallway, he would move over to the other side after that and never mess with me ever. But I didn't want to get into that. I was terrified. I was terrified—

AW:

We all are but it is a valuable lesson to realize that bullies are mostly cowards.

ER:

Yes, I found out that this one was. But I had no problem, Andy. I just don't recall not getting along with anybody at Cranbrook or in my neighborhood when I'd go home.

AW:

Being in these two worlds, did that make a difference—did it inform your outlook on the racial tensions in Detroit and the other troubles that were really brewing at that time period? Did that—would it have been different—I know it's hard to say—would it have been different had you not gone there? But I think you get what I'm trying to say.

ER:

I do. I could see the turmoil. In fact, in 1967 when the city exploded, that was the year that I graduated. So, that was the summer after my graduation, which leads me to the University of Michigan, which is the rest of my story. I could see that there were people who were working to try to resolve America's problems that I wasn't aware of. I mean, there was—there were people who were protesting from my neighborhood. On the college campuses there were protests and so forth. I had to—I guess when I was at Cranbrook, I wanted to do some of the—I wanted to do some things. I wanted to speak out. I wanted to be an advocate, but I had to be, not careful, but I had this scholarship that I needed to protect. So, I think it kept me from being as vocal—personally—kept me from being as vocal, speaking out the way that perhaps I would've otherwise because—I don't want to use the words "rock the boat" or anything. But I have an opinion about everything. Even to this day I have an opinion about something. But I could see that there were people at Cranbrook who were trying to make a difference. In fact, another person I want to mention, one of the teachers at Cranbrook, Ben Snyder, who was—I guess he was a father figure for me. He was a track coach—

AW:

Is that an S-n-i—

ER:

S-n-y-d-e-r. Ben Snyder, who just, in fact, he just died earlier this year. But he was instrumental in helping me be successful at Cranbrook. This man was—I learned so much about him after I'd gone there. I didn't know he was a combat veteran, World War II. He was an officer and a bombardier in the Army—in the Air—in the Army Air Force, that's what it was called at that point. But anyway, he was remarkable man. He—the year after I started Cranbrook in 1963, which was—or was it '65—he started the Upward Bounds Program there at Cranbrook.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Um-hm. And that program was designed to bring kids from the inner city up to school during the summer for summer programs, educational programs. And then out of that program, I believe, one or two students would be awarded a scholarship to go to the school. And so, he did that and he did so much more. But efforts like that were going on by people that I would not have known about, in other words. So, there were people in positions of power, positions of authority, in many cases white people, who were doing things to try to make a difference in America that I think was making a difference in America. People sort of—there was a family at Cranbrook who adopted me, I suppose, the Host, h-o-s-t, Margaret Host is the lady's name. She would take me to downtown during my stay at Cranbrook. We'd go to the—I saw—she took me to see the Sound of Music. There were families that would go out eating, this white family and there's this black kid and it's like 1950s, sixties and so forth. They were doing this because they wanted to expose me to a lot of things plus they were setting an example for people. And so, a lot of that was going on. The track coach, Ben Snyder, went to school at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. One of the students who went to Cranbrook, his dad was an executive, general manager, of General Motors. And every year, General Motors would donate new station wagons to our school just to let us use. We would—during the Spring Break—I never really got to go home too often because we always had something going on, Andy—spring break we'd go down to North Carolina, we being the track team and also the tennis team would go down too.

AW:

So, although there were no athletic scholarships, there were athletics.

ER:

They were very, very competitive. Very competitive. I'll tell you about that in a second—which is another remarkable thing I learned. But we would go to North Carolina and stay at the field house in North Carolina. This was in 1964, '65, '66, the summers of—the springs of—springs of '67. So, that was an experience for me.

AW:

So, did they tolerate a group of kids who were black and white in North Carolina?

ER:

Well, they did us, now.

AW:

Because you're from Cranbrook.

ER:

Well, yeah, right. But occasionally we would eat in downtown and I know the coach would go into town and have a conversation with the restaurant owner before we showed up because I was going to be part of that group. And so I knew that was going on. They never did tell me that but I knew that kind of stuff was going on. And I'm staying in the—this was North Carolina. This was the sixties so there were still issues going on. So, there I was down in North Carolina with all these white kids. But yeah, that was—that was important.

AW:

Athletics. You were going to mention—

ER:

Athletics, oh yes. I learned a valuable lesson and that is never judge a book by its cover. Okay. That has stuck with for the rest of my life because when I got up to Cranbrook—not that I doubted but—“Oh man, this is a private school. These kids are very rich. We're going to get creamed in athletics.” I was very wrong. [Laughter] I was very wrong. Now, I want to say that there were many athletes who didn't have a lot of natural talent but you can make up for natural talent with skill, with intelligence, with dedication, with hard work, and leadership. And so, those things all came out. And what that did for us was allowed us to be state champions in tennis. We were even state champions in track.

AW:

Really?

ER:

Yes. We beat the powerhouse black schools in Detroit. We always competed against schools larger than we were. And we won the state championship in track in 1966.

AW:

What was your event?

ER:

A sprinter. I was a sprinter.

AW:

Hundred?

ER:

Hundred. I won the state in the hundred yard dash in 1966 and ran the leadoff leg of the winning 880 relay team. We won the state in the 880.

AW:

I'm glad to hear you say 880 because that's—when I was—

ER:

Yards. I left that out.

AW:

That's—we had the 440, 880, and the 13—whatever it was, 1340, 1320. It was the next—when we were school kids here.

ER:

Yes. So yeah, we were a force to be reckoned with in track. We were very respectable in football. Delvin Walden was the football coach. I saw him going back to the my fiftieth reunion. But the thing is—but I don't want to hang on that. But athletics was really important part of our educational experience there. I mean, you were expected to compete. If you could—because the were what, three-hundred of us. That was counting seventh and eighth grade. And so I played three sports a year: basketball, track, and football. And if you were able to compete and contribute, you were expected to do so. Plus that kept you busy. But we were successful in many sports because of the dedication and commitment. To give you one example: Ben Snyder, the track coach, was a consummate technician. We would spend hours doing a handoff on the relays and you could see it in the relay, you could see us gain the advantage on the blind handoffs. Man, we would just never drop the baton. It was always a blind handoff. Just little small things like that made up for, perhaps, the speed issue. And in the big relays—I was usually the fastest sprinter but I always ran the first leg because we always handed the baton off first, because you always want to be first. You don't want to be behind the pack in a sprint relay because it ends pretty quickly. But anyway, so those kind of things. And I'd put the fastest on the anchor—but things like that. But anyway—but my lesson, again, is you can be successful. You can overcome obstacles with dedication, hard work, leadership and those kind of things that. So, I hang on to that idea. I've hung on since then.

MR:

He won't say but I'll say it. Eddie still holds some records.

AW:

Oh really?

MR:

Since 1967. This was a long time ago. He still holds some records.

AW:

Oh really? What in, in sprints?

ER:

In sprints, yes.

AW:

So what did you run a hundred in?

ER:

Well, my best time was 9.87, 9.875. I think that was a windy day in Ohio.

AW:

Anything under ten is a pretty impressive number.

ER:

Yes.

AW:

And it still stands?

ER:

Well, I don't know. I haven't checked lately but, of course, they run the hundred meter now.

AW:

Right, maybe it will still stand.

ER:

Convert that over.

MR:

But then and you—the relay team, then the number of points or something.

ER:

Yeah, I think I was third for the number of points scored on the track team. Interestingly, I didn't run track as a freshman. I played baseball all of my life growing up in Detroit. You know, growing up in Detroit, big baseball—walk to the stadium every game. My friends, we would walk over to Tiger Stadium from where we lived, which is several miles, because they would open the doors in the eighth inning and so we'd get to watch two innings of baseball and then we would walk all the way back home. We didn't mind.

AW:

You got to watch two innings of baseball for free.

ER:

For free. We couldn't afford it. We couldn't afford the bleachers.

AW:

Yeah, but what a great deal. And the Tigers were—

ER:

Yeah, '68 world champions.

AW:

They were a force to be reckoned with. What was your position in baseball?

ER:

I pitched and I played center field. But we didn't have—we didn't have a very good year, that year, of freshman. And interesting the track coach—excuse me, the track captain, came over to one of the baseball games and saw me rounding the bases and he called me aside and he said, "You're in the wrong sport." And I guess I probably wouldn't have changed except I was—I wasn't disappointed but we weren't doing as well. So, in the last two and a half—

AW:

Your shoulders and arms are still good now aren't they?

ER:

No, this one's—this one I know of—I think I did that playing air hockey in college.

AW:

Baseball, pitcher, that's a tough—

ER:

This one, I have problems with this one. Yeah, my right. I know I pitched. But the last month of the season, I went over to track. But to make a point of what Margaret said, had I run track in my freshman year, I probably would have the highest point total for any athlete but I didn't really start track until my sophomore year. But anyway, but Cranbrook was a great experience and it was something that I treasure and the education was phenomenal. But you wouldn't know that once I got to University of Michigan.

AW:

Well, can we take just a short break and then start—because this is a good place to stop for a moment. And so, Margaret will just hit that pause button. [Pause in recording]

AW:

Okay, we're back. It's still the morning. Andy Wilkinson with Eddie Randle and Margaret, also. You failed to mention?

ER:

I failed to mention that I was the first black student to ever win a scholarship at Cranbrook.

AW:

Oh really? Oh yeah. What inspired your teacher, Elaine Washington, to think that was possible?

ER:

It must've been something I did in her class or at the school. Well, I guess, the science fair project perhaps.

AW:

I don't mean so much about you being capable. I mean, was it possible for an African American student to wind up at Cranbrook?

ER:

I'm not sure I understand.

AW:

How did she—that was sort of a venture from—

ER:

How did she know about the school? Or—

AW:

Well, if you were the first student to get a scholarship there, then that was breaking ground. And so, that had to be something on her radar to think about how this could work.

ER:

Yes. Apparently she knew about the school. I had not even—I hadn't heard about the school so I didn't know. Obviously she knew about this school and I guess she saw something in me and she wanted to make a statement, I suppose. She wanted to do something for—I guess she wanted to improve my life, I think. I guess she felt that was an opportunity for me. Of course, she was right

about that, to improve the quality in my life. I guess she felt like I could be successful. I mean it's—she had confidence in me. All those things, I suppose. I never did really ask her, "why me," but I'm glad she did choose me.

AW:

Before we move on to University of Michigan, this had to have been something that your family, too, would've been inspired by and very proud of. Quite an achievement for a Negro on relief.

ER:

Yes, that's what we were, Negros. Yes, my mother was very proud of me and regrettable that she wasn't always able to come up to the school to see me compete and participate. But she did. And as I'd mentioned, some of the parents of some of the students would drive to Detroit and pick her up and bring her up to the school to watch football games and other athletic events, et cetera, and so forth.

AW:

I don't remember the sixties, though, and I didn't have any distinguished athletic career. I played the tenth position in softball. That was the guy—the kid out by the curb that when the ball went into the street, you were supposed to go get it. But I don't remember parents, when I was in junior high in sports, I don't remember parents being as a rule as participatory in those years, as they are now. It was not quite the thing.

ER:

Right. Well, let me tell you. At that school, at Cranbrook, the parents were there.

AW:

Oh they were? Wow.

ER:

Oh they were there. Well, many of them could afford to be there because they owned their businesses and had the ability to do things like that. In fact, that school was part of what was—it no longer exists—but it was called the Interstate Scholastic League. It was a league of—I want to say—six schools: Cranbrook, Shady Side, I believe that was in Pittsburg, Buffalo School—no, no, Nichols School in Buffalo New York, Cleveland University School and there was one or two others in other states. So, we competed and we'd travel. We'd get on the bus and we would travel to these schools. One year, for basketball, we would compete, say, in Buffalo, New York at Nichols School and then the next year that school would come Cranbrook. And so, the parents would go also. I mean, they would—we would drive—so they were always there. That was when I—it was impressive to me to see the parents at all those games, and so that kind of set a standard for me to always try to be at my kid's games. Of course, I was going to be there anyway. But that

was remarkable to see that the parents, the participation that the parents had. In fact, there were the Sanders, I think by the name Sanders. This man, I don't know what he did, but—I guess I should know—but he was very active in baseball. Think he had a son that went to Cranbrook and a son that long graduated, but he was always around and he funded the program in certain respects; bought equipment, et cetera. But anyway, there were parents who took a vested interest in the school, but they were always there at the athletic events. We were never shy of participation at the athletic events, even games away. I'll tell you. Pittsburgh, Buffalo, New York—and so we travel.

AW:

That really is impressive. I wasn't in sports by the time I got to Monterey High School here but at Atkins Junior High, I was in sports. And there were a few parents who did that but that wasn't the rule. In fact, a parent—parents who would drive would have four or five of us that they would haul because there weren't other parents. So, that's a really interesting thing. So, at Michigan, at University of Michigan—

ER:

Well, Michigan. I won an athle—excuse me, academic scholarship. Bo Schembechler wanted me to play football. I had some offers. The track coach wanted me to run. But you know, I don't have any regrets, but if I had to do it all over again, I probably would've done that part of my life a little differently, Andy, and let me tell you why: because I won an academic scholarship to go to University of Michigan because my situation didn't change. I mean, my mother didn't win the lottery or anything. We were still in the same boat that we were in in terms of financial—economics. And so, that was—I needed that to go to the University of Michigan. I couldn't afford otherwise. So, I went to the University of Michigan. My freshman year I did relatively okay. The sophomore year I guess I just didn't—I don't know why—how do I put this? I didn't have my head on straight. I don't think I was—I don't think I was ready for that.

AW:

You've been looking at my background. [Laughs]

ER:

I have—I don't have an excuse but I do have a reason that I think—I've tried to rationalize this. The four years at Cranbrook were tough. I mean, I enjoyed every year. It was an experience but I never got a break. I had people raising money, not wanting me to fail. I had that on my shoulders. I had demonstrated my ability in athletics and so, you were frowned upon if you didn't come—well not frowned upon, but everyone expected you to come back the next year; three sports a year. During Christmas break, we did holiday basketball tournaments; didn't get to go home. Spring break, I already mentioned, the trip south to Chapel Hill. Summer was cut short for going back to early football practice, of which I didn't always prepare for properly. And

Delvin Walden, he made me pay dearly for that. Oh my goodness, he made me pay dearly for that. So, my summer was cut short. And then while I was there at school, the academics were tough, let me tell you. There was nothing easy about that. School was a breeze going to school, public school in Detroit. It was not a breeze in Cranbrook. It was not meant to be a breeze. I think after four years of that—I don't want to say I was burned out but I didn't handle it properly. So, my sophomore year—and during the summers—let's see I had a summer job when I was there. I worked at Ford Motor Company. I worked at the transmission and chassis division. I was a mail clerk so all during the summers I was working. I was away from my environment that I grew up in. And I enjoyed being around my friends at home, not that I didn't enjoy Cranbrook because these kids were my new home. We lived together at Cranbrook, we went to—we ate in—we didn't have dorm—cafeteria—we had a dining hall. We ate three meals at the dining hall, for the first three years we had chapel that we went to and of course, all the sporting events, all the athletic events. That's where I was telling someone—when I went back to my fiftieth reunion, it was like going to see my family because I lived with those guys for four years. That's also why we were so competitive at athletics because John Pavlov in basketball, I played with him for four years and I knew if I got double teamed on the base line, I knew where he was. I just passed the ball, I knew he'd be there. So, that's how we were able to beat teams. But, back to University of Michigan. I did not do a job of—as a student academically and I lost my scholarship. And this is not a good thing to do if there's a war going on and you don't want to go to Vietnam. But I did that. I did that. I guess I don't regret, because if I did regret it—had I done it differently, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now.

AW:

Rilke, the poet, said, "In any case, life is right."

ER:

That is correct. Right, but I don't encourage others to do that, do it the way that I did. And so, I dropped out of University of Michigan and my intent was to go back home, live with my family, my mom, and go to school at Wayne State University in Detroit, something that I could probably afford because I was going to save my money up and work that summer, work two jobs actually, because I knew I needed an education. There was no doubt I needed an education. I just didn't demonstrate that very well with my skill and ability level at the University of Michigan. Not that my skill and ability—it wasn't my skill and ability level, it was something in my head, I suppose. But anyway, during the interim, there was a building in downtown Detroit called the Cadillac Tower, I believe it was. There was an agency called the Local Draft Board, number 97. They knew about me. And needless to say, they wanted to make sure they knew about so they sent me a letter and it said, "Greetings." I mean it wasn't from them but it came from—

AW:

What year was that?

ER:

This was 1969.

AW:

I got mine in '68.

ER:

Did you? Before the lottery. This was before the lottery.

AW:

There was no lottery.

ER:

Yes, '68. So, you can appreciate that "greetings" from the President of United States. "Let's spend some time together." It didn't quite say that but yeah, that was—

AW:

So you got drafted?

ER:

Oh, I got drafted, yes. That was not in my game plan, Andy. I didn't—I wasn't ready. I didn't want that.

AW:

I don't about you, but when I got drafted, I'd just gotten engaged to be married to the woman I'm still married to.

ER:

Congratulations.

AW:

Yes. I had my friend Terry Allen, he and his wife Jo Harvey got married right out of high school also and he said—it had been one of their—fifty-fifth anniversary, I think—he said, "It's amazing how long two people can misunderstand each other."

ER:

That's true.

AW:

But there was that other factor in the late sixties and that was, not all of us were enthusiastic

about that war. It wasn't like the second World War. So, I remember going to that physical and I wound up getting 4F'd because I was allergic to shots, tetanus shots. It's a silly, sound world. They didn't mind shooting a bullet at me but they wouldn't give me a tetanus shot. But I just remember the angst, the decision that young men all over America were having to make at that time. What was that like for you?

ER:

That was very, very disturbing to me because—on a number of levels, Andy. I knew about the war, of course, what you see on TV and what you read, which was not always indicative of my reality. I ended up going to Vietnam, which I'm sure we'll be talking about that. But the problem for me was probably the same problem for many young black men at that time. We were still working on trying to gain our own freedom—rights. I want to say rights. I don't want to say freedom—certain rights and certain privileges. In this country, we were still working on that.

AW:

There wasn't the equality that—

ER:

No. No. So, I was being asked to go help other people gain something that I'm working on gaining for myself. And so, that was troubling to me, number one. Number two, the concept of physically getting—of getting shot at didn't excite me very much. And number three, I didn't understand why we were there. And I never did get an answer to that question even when I was there. Still troubles—

AW:

I still don't think we know.

ER:

No we don't. It's still puzzling. So, I was very conflicted about that, on that level, but on the level that my country called on me. I could literally stand on my rooftop and see Canada.

AW:

I was going to say, you were closer to Canada than we were down here.

ER:

Oh yeah. I could walk to Canada from where I lived. But that was not an option for me. I don't hold any ill feelings for those did choose to go to Canada, because it was a tough decision. I don't hold any animosity. That's not—that's fine. But my country called me and I was struggling with that. I actually did try to get out of it. I tried to—if there was somebody I knew—I mean, I didn't have a heel spur. I didn't know anybody yet.

AW:

You weren't allergic to tetanus shots.

ER:

I wasn't allergic to tetanus shots. I had flat feet but that didn't work. I still have flat feet. I should say I have flat feet. You don't get well from flat feet. I didn't know anybody. Well, I did know a lot of powerful people, but I just—it didn't work. There was nowhere for me to go but to come in when I was called. And I did. And I got drafted and then September 22nd, 1969 was when I went into the military. I just—I was kind of disillusioned, regretting that I had not done well at University of Michigan and kept my student deferment, wondering if I was ever going to—and I was concerned about my physical well-being, make no mistake. But it weighed heavily on my mother. And that was important to me. I just felt like—I felt like I had let her down. I mean, that she was going to be worried. My whole family was going to be worried about me and that was a real problem. That bothered me more than anything else. And I think that—and then after I got drafted, there was an induction center where you swear the oath, the same oath that everybody else swears to when they become a government employee, and they put us on buses and headed us down to Fort Knox is where I was supposed to take my basic training. But before we left the induction center—I think it's called the—I can't remember what it's called. It's on Jefferson Avenue in Detroit. Right after we swore in, [Margaret coughs] there was guy, this kid, he had a green uniform, green fatigue—it's called fatigues—and they were so green, I think it still had the dye in it. I don't think it had ever been washed. But he had on green and we had on civilian clothes and therefore he outranked us. And so, he said, "We're going to do police call." I said, "What the devil is police call?" So, we started—we went outside and we started picking up trash. That's a police call. I was thinking—the police I knew were the police that used to pull us over, put us against the wall in Detroit and frisk us and take our cigarettes and call us names, which I just—you know, I skipped right over that in 1967-ish in Detroit, the riot. We might want come back to that.

AW:

We do want to come back to that.

ER:

But I learned what police call was. And that's an important thing, too. I kind of glossed over that 1960s, that summer of '67, July in fact, was the year that I started at the University of Michigan.

AW:

Yeah because you had just graduated.

ER:

I just graduated.

AW:

And so you are—you're living in two worlds.

ER:

Yes, I'm going—yes. I'm living in this chaos, fire, fires, gun shots at night, the National Guard. I think there was a 101st Airborne and I think there was another unit that was called in—governor Romney called those in, you know, to quell, what they called the riots. But I was working everyday. I would go—we would leave the Detroit and I would go out to Livonia, Michigan which was a city west of Detroit. That's where I had a job at the Ford Motor Company. I worked in Transmission and Chassis Division. I was a mail clerk. I bought groceries out there to bring home to—because all the stores were closed. You couldn't get gasoline in Detroit, the stores were closed, there were these National Guardsmen standing on corners with M-14s looking terrified and that terrified me. There was a curfew. I wanted no parts of that. And this was the summer of '67 in Detroit. It all started on 12th Street. There was a—the history's well known on that. In fact, there's a movie out right now, Detroit, which I want to go and see and compare that with my experiences. But that whole neighborhood—

AW:

I'd be interested when you do hear it. I'd like to know what you think about it.

ER:

That neighborhood was where I lived. I lived in that neighborhood where that started, that incident started. It was provoked by some of the things I just mentioned about police, the way police treated people in my community, predominantly black use in my community. It was a large part of—the housing was a part of it, employment and other things but—

AW:

It's really very interesting because in 1967 and '68, I was a policeman.

ER:

Were you?

AW:

Here—right here in Lubbock. I got my degree and I went on to be a police man in Colorado and I was in that business for twelve years. So, I saw on that side, the injustices that my colleagues perpetrated, and not just on black—mostly male—but black Americans but also brown and that other color, poor.

ER:

That spans a lot of people, the poor.

AW:

I really am interested to get you to talk a little bit more about what it was like.

ER:

Do you want to do that now?

AW:

Sure. Yeah. Because and that comes before Vietnam. The other thing when we—I want to talk a little bit about Vietnam today but, you know, we have the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech.

ER:

Yes. I am on the board.

AW:

Well, have you done your oral history with them?

ER:

I have not yet.

AW:

Okay. I would like to get them to do that. They will have a better and deeper understanding of the war than I do and the interview will be better on that. But let's talk about 1967.

ER:

Okay, sure. Yeah. My story in Detroit growing up—of course when I was at Cranbrook it was a different issue, although I did get looked at kind of a little strangely when I would go outside the campus, which was rare, in Bloomfield Hills.

AW:

It didn't seem like you had time.

ER:

Didn't have time. But when I did it was rare. Usually it was with a group, the athletic team or so forth. But in Detroit, it was a different story. I mean, the guys that I grew up with, August Gabriel, Herbert Pickett, Levon, Edmond Senance, Sydney Senance was the older brother. Those guys—we played baseball probably every day, every day during summer or basketball or we were going to a party, a dance or something. We just—we were playing cards. Every now and then we'd buy a bottle of wine. We'd drink that too. And so, that was our story. We didn't—we weren't getting—we had no desire to create problems for ourselves.

AW:

Yeah. It sounds like exactly the same thing that I did.

ER:

I just—we were enjoying life the best we could in our environment, in the situation. But sometimes you could be at the wrong place at the wrong time and get involved into something that you didn't have any control over. But we would be walking, say, to go play basketball, just laughing and talking and joking and there's this unit called Big Four, or they called it the Tack Unit in Detroit. They drove these big Chryslers. There were two uniformed officers and two detectives—

AW:

All in the same car?

ER:

All in the same car. Four—

AW:

Which is the Four?

ER:

The Big Four, yes. They would pull up, stop us, put us against the wall—

AW:

Shake you down.

ER:

Shake us down, take our cigarettes, say things to us that—we couldn't talk back.

AW:

You wouldn't want to tell—

ER:

No, wouldn't want to repeat that. And just harass us and then get in the car and drive off. Ask us for ID and so forth. We just—I thought sometimes I just make a mistake or if I look the wrong way or something, if it looks suspicious—that was the exception. It wasn't the rule but that did happen to me more than one time. In fact, in our neighborhood, sometimes it was not a good idea—when we call for help from the police department, it was really bad, usually. It was a situation—

AW:

You didn't call them unless you just really had to.

ER:

No, because sometimes they would come and—the wrong person would end up being arrested or something. So it was a big deal. I mean, we tried to take care of our situation in our own communities. But that was my experience. So, the relationship between the police department and the community was not good. I think, what, 93 percent of the population—the policemen were white in Detroit in the sixties, '63, '64, '65. And many of these people, Andy—I tell people—we talk about that mass migration to the North for jobs. Not only blacks but there were whites who migrated North. And many of them ended up on police departments. And so many of them had ideas about other people and they brought those ideas and those philosophies with them. And they had badges and guns. And so, you knew that and sometimes those kind of things would happen. But I was lucky. I was lucky that I never did run into a situation that got out of control or out of hand. We never did—the guys I hung out with, we never did anything to have the police want to know about us. But you could end up being in the wrong place at the wrong time or one of your friends shows up and you didn't even know. Well, let me give you an example. I kind of hung out with people usually older than me. So, we were at this party one night and then we left the party and me and August and a girl named Myrna and a guy named Jim Loving. We left the party, Jim was driving, and we—from the parking lot, we went out to the street—Detroit has a lot of one way streets. Big cities have those to help move traffic—and he turned the wrong way. And there was a car coming the right way and you never guess—you'd never guess what car that was. That was a police car. And so, they stopped us. Of course, Jim went the wrong way. And so, he owed traffic tickets and August owed traffic tickets and so they took us all down to the police station and they found out how old I was and so they put me in a separate room. They go, "You go over here." And they put them in jail because they owed traffic tickets. And then they let Myrna drive the car back and so they called my mom to pick me up. I was just so embarrassed. That was the only time in my life that my mother ever had to come and get me from a police station for curfews. But anyway, my point is that you could just be in the wrong place at the wrong time. At the police stations.

AW:

Sure. But it also gave you—or has given you an understanding of that side of the relation—the power relationship

ER:

Yes. Oh absolutely. With great respect, we—the incidents that happened in 1967, that was a motivating factor, how the police department, how the policing of that community that I lived in. It was—I don't know how to describe it but it was—we were tired of being treated a certain way. And that was a push back. It was against that. In fact, what precipitated that was what they called

a blind pig. It was an after-hours dance hall and liquors. There were throw overs from the prohibition. The clubs would open up and you know, they'd sell liquor and so forth; illegal. They didn't have a license and so forth. But by buy and large it was just people dancing and enjoying themselves. Well, there was one on 12th street and it got raided. I guess a number of people just had enough of that and they started pushing back and there was conflict between the—I wasn't there, but there was conflict between the people at that club and the police. They called in more police and, of course, it just snowballed from there. But it was bad. I was the hot summer, too. That year the summer was hot. People were upset about—the unemployment was high. I think it was like fifteen percent for blacks, double the unemployment rates for whites in that summer. Housing was always an issue. There was never enough housing because they were doing urban renewal; removing houses and not replacing them with houses that—

AW:

That were affordable?

ER:

That were affordable, yeah, and all those kinds of things. Pressures were building and so it just kind of exploded in 1967. But I lived through that. I saw people going down the street with sofas in there convertibles. They would break into places, the looters, and I thought, No way. Who in their right mind would want to go steal a colored TV and possibly get shot. But, you know, I saw—

AW:

And then have to live with knowing that you were a thief.

ER:

Right, knowing you were a thief.

AW:

How did those friends of yours make it through all this? Did they do well too?

ER;

They did well, yeah. Most of them are still in Detroit. There's one, Herbert Pickett, owns an upholstery shop, automotive upholstery shop. August, one of my best friends, is no longer alive. Sydney, I haven't talked with him in a long time and Edmond, I don't know. I haven't spoken with him in a while. I don't go back to Detroit very often. The first time I've gone back was in a while, this summer. But they did all right. They were doing okay. I think they all had jobs basically.

AW:

Well, and that certainly would complicate your—this issue of being drafted.

ER:

Yes.

AW:

You know, the number of Native American friends, colleagues and people that I've done interviews with, it's always interesting to hear their perspective on being military service to the nation that had historically been on the wrong side of their relationship. So, that's a complex thing. You were going to say something?

ER:

Yeah, authority. There's—I think in some cases, some people have difficulty with authority. I mean, they don't—authority—they have authority but they don't know how to use it properly. It has a—authority has an inherent—I don't know—authority is inherently controlled. And so you have that as a given. If you're wearing a badge or if you're wearing a uniform and so forth, there's authority, and I kind of learned that in the military, too. [phone rings] But it can be abused. It can be easily abused. And sometimes the wrong people have positions of authority and so they are susceptible to abusing that authority and I saw a lot of that in Detroit.

AW:

In the latter part of my career, I was not only in charge of but I established our internal affairs division in Colorado. So, I had to deal with that. I had to investigate other police and it was always—it was a very interesting dynamic, you know. One of the things that we finally realized was that most of it was ignorance and fear. And that's kind of the same thing that happens—creates that bully that we were talking about in school.

ER:

But like—as I was mentioning earlier, Andy, if we ever had to call the police, when they would come to the neighborhood, they would be white. Not that there's anything wrong with being white but it was—immediately there was a potential for someone not understanding the situation. But now let me get back to University—I've done University of Michigan and I'm on my way down to Fort Knox, Kentucky to take basic training. Well, but before we left, we were picking up—I was picking up cigarette butts—I learned what police call was—and I think that moment—especially when we went outside of the gate, we were on the city street in Detroit and I'm thinking, Now if my buddies drive by and see me out here picking up cigarette butts, I'm not—they're going to laugh for good reason. But anyway, that helped me decide—help me think, You know, I need to try to do something to try to have more control over what's going to happen to me in the military.

AW:

Cigarette butts did this.

ER:

Yeah. Cigarette butts did that. This one kid—the kid was Private E-1. He had on the fatigues and I had on civilian clothes and so he outranked me. And I understood immediately what that meant because he could tell me to pick up a cigarette butt and if I didn't pick it up, I was going to the brig. And so, I understood that. So, I thought, I've got to have—I've got to figure out some kind of way to have some kind of say in what happens to me. I decided I'm probably going to Vietnam because of the color of my skin. And so, when I got to Fort Knox, you're given this battery—

AW:

And you knew that at the time. You certainly knew that retrospect.

ER:

I was pretty certain that I was going to go to Vietnam. I mean there was—the probability was high. And when they give you—you're given this battery of exams and I took them and then if you do well, in general, you may offered opportunities; and I was. The counselor called me in and said, "You did real well." Of course, I had been to Cranbrook. I'd been to University of Michigan and the battery of tests that they gave me—I mean, it was not something I couldn't do successfully. So, he mentioned medic school. He mentioned other technical schools and some of them required staying in longer than my two-year commitment. Because I was a draftee, I had a two-year commitment. And then he mentioned what he called WOFT, W-O-F-T, Warrant Officer Flight Training. And I said, "What is that," and he said, "Well, you learn to fly helicopters and you become an officer through that training but you have to give up three years of your life to do that." And I thought, That might be a good idea. But I thought, What am I thinking about here? I've never flown in an airplane ever. I'd never flown in an airplane, but I thought you know—

AW:

That's only one year extra.

ER:

Right. One year extra. I'd become an officer and I could learn a skill, maybe. And I knew, had I done that, I was going to Vietnam—I mean that's what you do with a helicopter pilot in 1969, you send him to Vietnam. And so I said, "Well, let's—let me look at—what about that?" This guy—he had real southern accent—he said, "Oh, I don't think that's adventurous to you. You probably wouldn't be—that's a tough program. You probably couldn't do that." And that's when I said, "That's exactly what I want to do." And so, I said, "Okay well, I want to do that." I said,

“Should I go to the library and read anything about aerodynamics or aviation?” He said, “None of that stuff is on the test.” Of course, I’ve had physics in high school and college and so forth. And so, they ordered up the test and I took it, and of course there were questions about aviation on that test. It was a sergeant. I went back and told him—I couldn’t tell him, “Look guy, how about not lie to the next person.” I said, “There were some test questions having to do with aviation so, just so you know, it might be a good idea to mention that to the next person.” But anyway, he was trying to discourage me from even considering that. And so I was successful and I got accepted to the flight program. So, when all the other guys in that reception area went on off to basic training at Fort Knox, I was held back to—because everybody at that time—this was in 1969—every person who went into that flight program, no matter where they came in to the Army in the United States, had to take basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. And so—

AW:

Tigerland.

ER:

Tigerland. Yes. The advanced training is Tigerland, yes. And so I got held back.

AW:

Home to every species of poisonous snake in North America. That’s a fact.

ER:

Absolutely. And more soldiers leave from Fort Polk to Vietnam. That was highest percentage of—

AW:

That was a way station to Vietnam.

ER:

Sure it was. And that’s why they—we took the train. And so there I was, alone. All these guys—we were terrified by—I failed to mention—specialist Ford Pence—what was his name? Not Pence. Not Pence. Anyway, I’ll come back to that. But anyway, they all went to basic training company and I was in holding company—headquarters company until I got my orders to Fort Polk. And that’s what got me to Fort Polk. And that was an experience in 1969 Louisiana. At Fort Polk, the good old Coonass is, in fact, the basic training company that I was in was—we were known as the Coonasses. And the city outside the fort, Leesville, was a tough city. There were a lot of communities that embraced the military installation and there’s a good relationship. I just don’t feel like that relationship was very good between Fort Polk and Leesville. And you may hear other people say that who talk about that experience. They wanted you to come in and spend your money. But—

AW:

But don't date our girls and don't try to move.

ER:

Don't date our girls. So, when we went to town, we had to be careful. But anyway—but I had basic training there and that was quite an experience. I learned to—there were people in my class, my basic training company, white soldiers, who had never ever had a conversation with a black person on a personal level. And that's a thing I want to point out, too, that executive order, that Truman signed—I guess I don't remember what the number was—where the military was integrated. That was an important thing in this country, Andy. That was very important because it allowed people—it forced groups of people to come together. So if you're going to dislike someone, if you're going to foster—if you're going to hate or dislike someone, you need to learn to do that because of what they do or say to you. And you can figure that out if you have a chance to sit down and talk. And that was—and I was surprised that there were a number of people who—in my basic training company—who had never had a conversation with a black kid. You know, we were kids then. And so that was getting—in fact, one of my best friends, he told me—we were having beer—"I never talked to a black person. Didn't like you at all when I first met you." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, I didn't like it but you're just a regular guy." I said, "Yeah, I am." But anyway, so, finished basic training there. Guy that was left was in a holding company because I didn't have orders to go to Fort Walters. I'm going to kind of speed this up. When I finally got my orders to go to Fort Walters, which is in Mineral Wells, Texas—

AW:

I was going to say you had to wind up in Mineral Wells at some point for helicopter—

ER:

Right, that was the primary helicopter school there. I got there in March, March of 1970. I'm going to be brief there. My first weekend passed—now the story gets exciting. My first weekend passed—when we were able to get a pass, I had heard about a city called Denton, Texas and there were two universities there: University of North—North Texas University and Denton and I knew that there was a whole university full of women there. I thought, My goodness, I need to go up there and see what's going on. That can't be true. And surely it was. I was at a party—the party was actually at University of North Texas—I think it was one of the fraternities—and then Margaret, my future wife, was there. And we met. We met at a dance in 1970.

AW:

That's great. In Denton?

ER:

Yes. In Denton, Texas, yes.

AW:

Denton, which is the ancestral home of all my Wilkinson clan.

ER:

Is it?

AW:

They all are from Denton.

ER:

Really? And so, my life changed dramatically since then. I just—I saw that woman and I said, you know, “I like her a lot.”

AW:

That’s very cool.

ER:

And so we—

AW:

Let’s look at our time here. It’s eleven o’clock and we’ve been going pretty hard at it. I would like to suggest something, which is that this is a great place to stop and I would like for us to take this up and the sooner the better. Next week I—I feared that I was going to be on jury duty but I’m not, so I would like to start with Mineral Wells and, of course, we’d just now met Margaret, and that’s great. Would that be all right with you?

ER:

Sure. I didn’t know how long we were going because—did I go over too—

AW:

No. No, no, no, no, no. The only time an interview is running too long is a person going over the same story four or five times, and that does happen. My children say it happens with me all the time. But I can tell you this, that on either side of the recorder, two or three hours is about all you have energy for. Then at some point you want to hurry things along and that’s not good. Interviews should take as long as it takes and not any other thing. This is a good spot, though. Minerals Well. And I’ve got that down here—and Margaret. I’ll go ahead and mention Margaret. And then I’d like to—we can compare schedules after we turn off the recorder and see what would be a good time. I would also ask one of my colleagues over in Vietnam about this next section, too, when we get into Vietnam, if they’d like to be part of this or just leave it to get the segment and see if they have follow up questions. So, that’ll be up to them. But very cool. I’m

anxious to get to that. I'm going to say right now, thank you, Eddie. This has been terrific—and Margaret. I'm going to stop the recorder at this moment.

End of Recording



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