

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

<http://obamakansasheritage.org/>

Interviewer: Teresa Baumgartner (with others)

Interviewee: Berry T. Harris

Date of Interview: September 2, 2015

Location: Harris home, Wichita, Kansas

Videographer: Steve Cless, with student assistant

Keison L. Walker

Transcriber: Jo Wilkinson April 26, 2016

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Run Time: [53:14] (transcript ends) and 1:03:01

Note: Q1. Teresa Baumgartner; Q2. Melody McCrae

Miller; Q3. Loretta Harris; Q4. Carole Branda;

and Q5. Steve Cless

Q1. Okay, now we're really ready. Okay. Well, we always begin with some identifying information, and so I'm going to state -- can you hear me okay? Do I need to speak up a little bit?

BH: (Nods head.)

Q1. All right. So I'm going to state that today is Wednesday, September 2nd, 2015, and I'm going to ask you to state your full name.

BH: Berry, B-E-R-R-Y, Harris, T., middle initial T. I won't tell you what that's for.

Q1. You won't?

BH: No.

Q1. I was going to ask. Okay. And your birth date?

BH: 11-27-29.

Q1. 11-27-29. Okay. And where we are right now where this interview is taking place is --

BH: Huh?

Q1. And we're in your home; right?

BH: Yeah.

Q1. Okay. So why don't we start. Maybe if you could talk a little bit about where you're from and where you were born, a little bit about your family, anything you want to tell us about that.

BH: I was born in Chockie, Oklahoma, which is in Atoka County. I was born between Highway 69 and Acadia Railroad tracks. And right across the tracks where I was born, that was Johnny McEntire's ranch, who is the grandfather of Reba McEntire. We moved from Chockie up into a place called -- up there to a place called Spenler's Ranch (phonetic), my mom, my dad, my uncle, and my aunt, and we moved back from down there back to Chockie.

Well, my grandparents came from Cheyenne, Oklahoma, my grandmother and my grandfather, my mother's sister and her son, Opal and Melvin. And my grandfather built a log structure right by the

highway where the tracks run here and the highway was here close to each other. My grandfather built a log structure with a deck floor, and he went down to Atoka and boughted him a tent. And he stretched that tent across that and made a house out of it. And everything was done in that one room: cooking, eating, sleeping and everything in one room.

My dad went in the CC camps 'cause he was a World War I veteran. And in the process of that, him and my mother divorced and she married Fred Carbin (phonetic) and they moved to Boggy Bend. But let's go back to Chockie. 'Cause this was the height of the school, right yonder the school was there in Chockie for black kids, was in Chockie. And then we moved to Boggy Bend, which was all-black settlement, and we moved to Stringtown, and I went to school in Stringtown and I end up going to school in Atoka High School. And I go in the Army in 1948, September the 9th, 1948. And I spent from 1949 to 1952, middle of 1952, in Osaka, Japan. I was a -- in 5627P Company. Do you want to hear the bad part of that or good part of it? I ended up with a heroin habit. And I got sent home and I kicked that habit in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. And I came back to Stringtown. Then I moved to McAlester, and I was all over Oklahoma. I hitchhiked all over half of Oklahoma, going to cotton fields and different places.

Well, always, I always was fooling around with a guitar because my cousin Melvin played guitar, or he -- he could just pick up an instrument and play it. I couldn't do that. But out there on Boggy Bend was three old men: Mr. Bernie Sanderson, Mr. Homer Watkins, and Uncle U.L. Washington, who was the uncle of U.L. Washington who played shortstop for the Kansas City Royals. That's kind of the beginning of my guitar playing. And I played a little guitar when I was in Japan. But I've always been musically inclined and telling jokes, that's 'cause I always do that.

I wasn't very -- I wasn't a very good scholar in school because I just never applied myself to be. It's always been -- it's always been more like wanting to be an actor or something, you know, when I was going to school. I was good in plays, and blackface middle school, we had blackface middle school. And I was good at that. I was good at doing my part. But I never could comprehend math. It just didn't boil in my mind. Well, I played no sports because I was too little to play sports. I didn't learn to swim.

I ended up in Muskogee, Oklahoma, playing in a band, and that's why I got here 'cause Jerry Burns, who was the uncle of Carla Burns, came and got me and a saxophone player and a drummer, and I came here playing that old Flagley Garden (phonetic), and from old Flagley Garden down on Ninth Street. Well, I left Flagley

Garden, I guess I played some on Ninth Street. I ended up playing at The Bomber Club out there on George Washington Boulevard as you go under McConnell Air Force base. The guy's name was Phil Beech. I was told that he was a test pilot. I wouldn't say whether he was or not but that's what they said he was, and he worked at Boeing. He had another club there on Harry called the Tick Tock Lounge.

And playing at The Bomber Club is where I met Madelyn. Madelyn, Nancy, I want to say her name was Suzanne Obenchain (phonetic). I don't know whether the first name was Nancy. I know Suzanne Oberchain, Madelyn, and another girl, and I think her name was Marilyn. I don't really know. But they used to come to the club all the time when we were playing there.

Q2. Mr. Harris, what year was that?

BH: Huh?

Q2. What year?

BH: It was in 19 -- we got married in 1957, so that's in 1957.

Q1. Okay.

BH: And we got married in -- she don't know, either -- 1957, 1958, 'cause Yvette was born in 1959. But anyhow, that's how I knew them. We lived in the 1500 block on Pennsylvania. And they drove a Thunderbird. They used to come over there all the time.

Q1. They drove a Thunderbird?

BH: I don't know whether it was Madelyn driving the car or Marilyn. One of 'em. It's a man in Augusta, I don't know if he's still living or not, that had run the D Club. You remember where the club used to be on -- on State Street, the D Club?

Q1. The D Club?

BH: Yeah.

Q1. I don't. I'm from Augusta.

BH: His last name is Hancock. He run that club up there. He's a white guy. R.D. Hancock ran Flagley Garden. R.D. Hancock had a greyhound dog, and that dog showed -- like told me 21 times out of 23 for first place. I know the dog's picture's in the Greyhound Museum in Abilene. And later on the Langovers, Levi and Goldie Langover, was running the club when I came here, it was called River City. I guess that's -- I ended up playing -- I guess I played in every club in town, you know. I end up being -- have -- running the bands and playing for the Masonics and playing for social clubs and playing for everybody.

And then a period of time come along there where we didn't have much places to play because people that were playing what I was playing, young musicians didn't want to play that. They were playing more Sly and the Family Stone or hip hop music, you know. And I wasn't -- really wasn't that active during that period of time. But I ended up -- a guy opened up a club down on Douglas down there, and the name is Rick's Rib Rack. And I

started playing for him and the Ninth Street Blues Band. And we played down there for him for about three years. And he sold it to Dennis White. And Dennis White named it Panama Red Roadhouse. We played there another four years. We played about seven years there on St. Francis and Douglas. Right next door to that was a lady that run a clothing store, and she was in the paper because she had -- she was in the concentration camp. You remember that article in the paper about her? 'Cause she had a number on her arm.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: And her husband had died. She died here about two or three years ago. That's where the club was at.

And I played all over, down in Oklahoma. I ain't never been on the road. I ain't never made no records, none of that stuff, because I got married, you know, and I done something I ain't never done before, I went and got me a job. That wasn't in my intentions, to get no job at that time before I got married because I didn't need one, you know. I didn't need very much because I would always live with not very much.

So not having much didn't bother me because that's the way I was raised. Didn't have much. You know, we were what you may call poor folk, poor folks. But I didn't know that. I didn't know that. Everything was all right in my life, you know. Then I met Loretta and I got married. And I worked all kind of

dead-end jobs, whatever I could find. I worked two jobs and played music at night. You know, wasn't making much money but I was working, taking care of wife and two children. And Loretta, she was working, too. She worked at an attorney's office and then she worked for the Wheatley Children's Home, she sold real estate. And we had two children. And one child died in January of '06. She was two years old when Loretta and I got married. I was -- she was always my daughter. She was never nothing else but my child. And she died and Loretta took sick too, two, three months later. From '06 to '09, Loretta was in the hospital three times and four nursing homes. And from '09 till this moment, I haven't been away from her over two hours. I don't leave her.

Q1. So Mr. --

BH: I don't go nowhere without her.

Q2. I know. I saw you all at -- absolutely, I saw both you and Loretta at the old Dunbar --

BH: Yeah.

Q2. -- when you played there. And, and -- Miss Loretta was with you. And I saw you, another event that I was at, so I know that you never leave her.

BH: Yeah.

Q2. With Madelyn, how did you know her last name?

BH: I didn't.

Q2. Okay. So --

BH: I didn't know her last name until -- but I knew who she was, I knew who she was.

Q2. So what made you -- how did you know who she was?

BH: By conversation. Listening to what Obama and them said about her, I knew who she was.

Q2. Okay.

Q1. You figured that out after the fact?

BH: After Obama.

Q1. See, 'cause there's -- it's a little bit confusing to me because they, in 1950 -- let's see, it was in 1955 or '56 they were in El Dorado and then they moved.

BH: No, it --

Q1. So I'm trying to figure out.

BH: I knew Madelyn in 1957, 1958.

Q1. Do you remember how old she was at that time?

BH: About 18. Somewhere. I wouldn't know. I'm presuming she was about 18. 'Cause I was -- I was twenty, what, 27, 28, I was 29 years old.

Q1. What club were you playing at?

BH: Bomber Club.

Q1. Bomber Club.

BH: Yeah. Phil Beech ran The Bomber Club. I told you he was a test pilot out there at Boeing. He went to Chicago and brought Kid

Thomas and Tricky here. I knew he flew airplanes 'cause he went to Chicago and got them. But I know who Madelyn was. I knew who she was. I know exactly who she was because I didn't know her last name was Payne but I knew that she was going with Stanley, who she married.

Q2. Okay. So you knew who Stanley was?

BH: Yeah, I knew who he was.

Q2. And how long had you known him?

BH: Oh, the same period of time I knew her.

Q2. Okay.

BH: 'Cause he come in the club, too. He didn't come there often but he came there. But he never came over there where we were on Pennsylvania. So I know who she was.

Q2. So Stanley was about her age or old --

BH: Yeah.

Q2. Okay.

BH: I imagine he might have been -- I guess he was 21, 22 years old. I don't know.

Q1. You were never in Wichita before that, though?

BH: Huh?

Q1. You were never in Wichita before 1957?

BH: Me?

Q1. Yeah.

BH: No, huh-uh.

Q1. Okay. So during that -- at that time they would have been married. And I'm just trying to figure out. There must have been an overlap somewhere but I know that Madelyn loved the music.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: Yeah.

Q1. I know that she, you know, I know that she -- she and her classmates were all crazy about the Swing and the Big Band. But what kind of music did you play?

BH: We were playing Blues.

Q1. You were playing Blues.

BH: Right. Up till what we doing little Richard and Blues. You know, we called it Blues, but we were playing whatever was on the jukebox, you know.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: We was playing music. Well, this other girl, Suzanne Obenchain, she lived 805 State Street. That's right there by the bridge.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: Huh? You know?

Q1. Well, I know State Street.

Q2. In El Dorado?

Q1. Oh, no, Augusta.

BH: Augusta.

Q1. Yeah.

BH: That would be about the 800 block. 805, I'm pretty sure that's what -- because she liked me.

Q1. Okay.

BH: You see, I was kind of cute back then. And I hadn't met Loretta. I hadn't met Loretta at that time.

Q1. Uh-huh.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: I didn't meet Loretta until I moved from Pennsylvania down here on Elm. I didn't know who Loretta was.

Q2. Uh-huh.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: But she came there. Well, I guess we had -- had talked about getting married, but she had one child; right? And then she ended up pregnant again. And I wasn't going to take care of two kids. And then the next thing, the fact that I had to look at taking her home to my mother. After all --

Q1. She was a white girl; right?

BH: Yeah. You know what I'm saying?

Q1. Yeah.

BH: Well, my mother said that would have been all right but I don't know that. You understand what I'm saying? So I met Loretta. And when Loretta and I got married, I knew I could take her home. But I don't remember no sexual involvement there. I know it wasn't there between us two.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: And I don't see none there with the other two girls either.

Q1. Uh-huh. But yet -- but I think Sarah, who connected us with each other, I think you told her that they also -- they didn't just come to listen to the music, but they also came and spent some time interacting with people in your neighborhood?

BH: Yeah.

Q1. So tell me about that.

BH: Yeah, they just came over there. They come over there in the daytime. It'd be in the daytime. There's always somebody drinking, playing music, you know. They said -- the white police wanted to say we were all over there getting high, but wasn't nobody smoking no weed. None of us smoked weed at the time. None of us. We all were a bunch of drunks, you know, just drinking whiskey, partying, having a good time.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: And we sure didn't like laying around with each other because there's too many people in the house that weren't part of us. It's a rooming house, you see, so I don't see no sexual thing going on there at all. As a matter of fact, it didn't happen. It was that -- everybody was just friendly with each other.

Now who liked who, I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if they -- anybody liked the others. I have no idea about that. I

know that the only person that come close to having an idea was me and this other girl. And I was not going to raise two kids.

Q1. Uh-huh.

Q2. So you and Stanley were friends?

BH: Huh?

Q2. You and Stanley were friends?

BH: No.

Q2. You just knew him?

BH: I just knew who he was. No, we were not friends. We -- just them three girls. And I'm sure Madelyn is the one that I know -- well, I knew all three of them, so I can't help but know her, see?

Q1. Uh-huh.

Q2. How long did they keep coming out to the club? How long did they come to the club?

BH: How often they come to the club?

Q2. How long, a year, six months?

BH: Well, I guess -- I guess I played out there, what, a year?

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: I guess. I don't know. Seven, eight months I played out there.

Q2. Okay. So a year or less.

BH: Yeah. And then when I quit playing there, I didn't see them anymore.

Q2. Okay.

BH: Because I started playing on Ninth Street.

Q2. And they didn't come up there? They were out by the base?

BH: Yeah. They never come to the clubs over here.

Q2. Right.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: They come to the house where we lived at in the daytime.

Q2. Oh, okay, back -- oh, where did you live at then?

BH: 1500 block on Pennsylvania.

Q2. Okay. So they would come up -- they would come and hear you play --

BH: At The Bomber Club at night.

Q2. -- at the club at night but they would also come up to the house?

BH: Yeah, in the daytime.

Q2. The rooming house?

BH: Yeah.

Q1. They made separate trips?

BH: Huh?

Q1. They made separate trips?

BH: Yeah. Well, we were friends.

Q2. Uh-huh.

Q1. Uh-huh.

Q2. That's not unusual.

Q1. Now, how were they received by other people in the neighborhood?
You said the police were bothered by it.

BH: Well, police, you know, wherever black musicians and white people were coming, we'd all be dopeheads. That was standard procedure here in this town --

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: -- you know.

Q1. So did they break it up? Did they make the girls leave or --

BH: No, no, no, they never came. They never came there. But we got word, because her mother's friend worked at the courthouse, Loretta's friend worked at the courthouse, and she told her son to tell us to move from up there because the police was going to raid the place.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: I don't know who else moved. I moved down on -- I moved down there on Cleveland, and then I started playing at The Sportsman on Ninth Street. And then Loretta come in there one Saturday night. And I seen her and I said, "That's what I want right there." And I went on home that night, and I didn't know -- I didn't know her name, didn't know where she lived or nothing. I woke up Sunday morning wondering who in the hell was that. And I got to talking to somebody, Kenneth Rogers, and he told me, he said, "What's she have on?" I said, "She have on a red dress."

He said, "What's she looked like?" I told him. He said,
"That's Loretta Anderson."

So I called her and asked her could I come to see her, and she said yes. Her mother told me I was welcome. So I walked in the house. I walked in the house and I walked over to Mr. Anderson and I introduced myself to him and I introduced myself to his mother -- to her mother, and I turned around and picked Carla up. She was two years old. I picked her up and I picked her up, I'd pick her up now, she's been dead since '06 but I still pick her up every now and then. And I started going with this girl. She started talking about going to Washington, somebody wanted her to. I said, "Let's get married." She said, "Okay." So we went and got married in Newton. We've been married 56 years. It's been a pretty good ride. Ain't it been pretty good, Loretta?

Q3. Yeah, yeah.

BH: Don't think she ain't got nothing to say. She got plenty to say.

Q3. Yeah.

BH: So that's kind of the story of my life, you know.

Q1. So do you have any idea why these -- you said that it went on for -- we think it went on for about a year that these three white girls came to listen to you play, and they were the

only -- were they the only white people who came in and listened at the club?

BH: Yeah.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: At the club?

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: It was a white club.

Q2. It's The Bomber.

BH: The Bomber Club is a white club.

Q1. Oh, okay, okay.

BH: Yeah, everybody there was white.

Q1. So what was unusual was when they came to your neighborhood, that's when it became very unusual.

BH: Well, they're the only ones that came to our neighborhood.

Q1. Sure. Okay.

BH: But we played in a white club. The Bomber Club is a white club.

Q1. All right.

BH: See, we integrate the white clubs. But you got to understand this, see, black musicians have always been able to play in a white club. We could always go where other black people couldn't go. It's always been that way.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: Huh? Always been that way, see? 'Cause they like that black music, that (using onomatopoeia), that funky music, you know, doing the Funky Chicken and all that stuff.

Smile over there, girl. [Laughs]

Q3. I didn't go there.

Q1. So did you think much of that at that time, that what you were doing --

BH: No.

Q1. -- was something that your peers couldn't do?

BH: No.

Q1. It was just --

BH: No, I never thought about it one time. I ended up playing at old Rock Castle out there. I played out there for the McVicar's, McVicar's Oil, McVicar's Clothing. Bill McVicar lived in Park City. I ended up playing out there, and that was the Rock Castle. Then I played out there when it was something else for James (unintelligible). I played out there when it was the Cowboy Inn 'cause they burned the Cowboy Inn down on West Street. I played at the -- what the heck was the name of the club on Main Street? You start playing at 9:00, the fights start at 9:05. You seen that movie where they got the thing up to keep the bottles from hitting you? That's the way it was. Can't recall the name of it.

Q2. Was it on Ninth Street?

BH: Huh?

Q2. On Ninth Street?

BH: No, no, this white club on Main Street.

Q2. On Main Street.

BH: Right off of Douglas, right off of Douglas. And they would come out to the Rock Castle and they'd give them a section over there where nobody would fool with them. The Greeley Club, I think, is what they had on their shirt. Oh, I played all kind of dumps, you know. But I played -- I played for the Topeka -- in Topeka for the Shriners and the Pleasionnaires Club (phonetic) [Legionnaires Club]. I played 26 years for the Pleasionnaires and 28 years for the Shriners in a row. I been through the mill playing.

Q1. Yes, you have.

BH: I hated Junction City. I did not like Junction City.

Q1. How come?

BH: I didn't know nothing about prostitution. I had never heard the word prostitution in my life until I went to Japan. Well, I seen prostitution in Japan because the people were poor and the women were selling their bodies to survive. I seen that.

When I come back to Oklahoma, I don't see prostitution. That's just like doing drugs, (unintelligible) nothing because I don't see nothing. I come to Kansas, right, and I go to Junction City and I seen prostitution.

(Doorbell rings.) Is that somebody at the door? Un-huh. God dammit.

[Break]

BH: We had prostitution in America, but I didn't like Junction City because Ninth Street in Junction City come right off of Main Street and there's a hole like this.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: And that was the black part of Junction City. And I never seen prostitution until then. And I hated Junction City because we couldn't get no place to stay in Junction City. We couldn't sleep in the motels. And this is 1959, 1960, you know, no place to stay in Junction City. We slept in the bed where the whores slept. I didn't like that at all. I still don't like Junction City. I like Manhattan.

Q2. Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BH: But Junction City's changed.

Q2. Yes.

Q1. Well, so other places you played that were out of town, were you able to stay in the hotels there, or was it just --

BH: Yeah, later on we played Topeka, we could always get rooms in Topeka.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: I played Kansas City, Kansas. We could always get rooms there. My last venture I went to -- I went to Nags Head, North

Carolina. You know where that is? Nags Head. They call that Outer Banks.

Q1. Oh, Outer Banks I know of. I never been there.

BH: Well, Matt Walsh (phonetic), a young white kid, played guitar. He's from Statesville, North Carolina, but he lived here for a while. And so he went back to North Carolina. They flew me from here to Charlotte and back. And they paid all my expenses down there. I stayed with Matt. We drove from Statesville down to Nags Head, and I played 45 minutes. They paid me \$1500, and they offered to send me to Europe for six weeks. I can't go to Europe. Loretta's in a nursing home. I can't go to Europe. I'm too old to fly. I'm not going to do that flying. I'm what, let's see, I'm 85 now, I guess I'm 78, 79 years old. Uh -- 'cause I'm going Sunday to a blues festival. I go to Oklahoma for Labor Day Blues Festival, Dusk Till Dawn Blues Festival. And I'm thinking that this is going to be my last trip.

I want to go home. I want -- I want to go home. I don't know whether I'm going to be able to go home or not when I go to Oklahoma. There's something strange about going home in my life. The last time I went home, I went up on the hill, and all the people I knew were up there on the hill, and it was a kind of an eerie feeling. Everybody I knew was up there on that hill. I got sense enough to know that I'm on my way out of here. I don't know when, but I know I'm on my way. I can look

over there and see the hole in the ground. I used to couldn't see it. And everybody will be able to see the hole in the ground if you look.

You understand where I'm coming from, don't you?

Q2. Yeah.

(Phone rings.)

BH: I wish that phone -- tell them people, whoever it is, I'll call them back.

Q3. Berry will call you back soon.

BH: Is that Mark?

Q3. He hung up. I don't know who it was.

BH: So, anyway, I want to go home.

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: I don't want to go and spend no time. I just want to drive through Stringtown. I want to drive up -- up on the road and come back down to Stringtown and get the highway and come on back home. And I'm more likely to do that Monday morning. I'm going to leave here Sunday morning and go play in the festival. And my daughter going to drive, and I'm going to go home. This is going to be my last trip going home.

I have lived a good life. I've been a well-blessed man. I've been well treated in the people of this town. I never knew -- I never thought that nobody ever know me. It's strange how things come into your life that you don't know gonna come there. Well,

I ain't got rich. You come and see that, I haven't got rich, but I've lived pretty decent.

I played last Sunday. They give me a hundred dollars for playing.

They tipped me a hundred dollars and then they turned around and donated me a hundred dollars. I left home thinking I was going to get a hundred dollars, I end up back with \$310. I played Pig in Pig Out Barbecue. I been there over three years. I am not a great guitar player. I'm just an average guy. You know what I mean? But I play. I like to play. I play keyboards. You see I got all that junk sitting over there. I can play a little of everything I got in here.

I been a very fortunate man. God has blessed me. I ain't never been in jail in my life. I don't have no kids. I never lived but with one woman. That's the only woman I ever lived with. I got a little habit, I do, and I don't care who knows it. I smoke a little bit. I have to do something to maintain sanity 'cause I'm a little out of stress. I'm under a lot of stress. I'm under a lot of stress. I worry about this woman, you see. It's stressful. I got to make sure that the medicine is right. I got to make sure that she's clean. I got to make sure that everything is right in her life. I can't walk away from this, can I? I wouldn't be a man, would I? I wouldn't be a man to walk away. I'm a man, baby. I'm not a pair of pants walking around here.

Q3. I understand.

BH: I'm a man. My mother raised me to be a man. I understand.

Lots I didn't understand. I didn't like my mother. I didn't like her. Boy, but when I went in the Army I knew what discipline was because she had demanded it from me as a child growing up, you see, when she finally got a chance to raise me. She knew what I'd do.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: She knew what I'd do. She knew when I was telling the truth and when I was lying, and I usually got a good ass-whipping when I was lying. So it shaped me. It shaped me to treat everybody right. I got no charge (phonetic) for people. I treat everybody right.

I don't know nothing about segregation, to tell you the truth. I don't. Because where I was raised at, there was none. Everybody was poor folks. White people and black people, were all poor. We were all eating out of the same bucket. You understand what I'm saying to you? They didn't have nothing. We didn't have nothing. And they was all getting drunk together and sleeping with who they wanted to sleep with. I was a kid. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know nothing about segregation.

I never ate beef until I was 16 years old. I was never called a nigger until I was 17, 16 years old.

Q2. Can you tell us what --

BH: And I ain't never been called that but about once or twice in my whole life. What else can I say?

Q1. Did you -- did you go to segregated schools?

BH: Huh?

Q1. I was thinking that the schools in Oklahoma, you said, were segregated. But no?

BH: The schools?

Q1. Yeah.

BH: Oh, yeah, so --

Q1. You went to segregated schools but you didn't think it was unusual?

BH: Well, I didn't think nothing about it.

Q1. Uh-huh. It's just the way it was.

BH: The black kids went to the black school, white kids went to the white school, you know. Just like I said, I didn't know about segregation because I was raised in the country. I went in the back door all the time, you know, in momma's house and any other door I wanted to go in, you know. And the first time I knew anything about segregation, I went to a cafe because I wanted a hamburger. You know, hamburgers was good back then, because I hadn't ever ate any beef. And Popeye was eating them hamburgers, Wimpy was eating hamburgers in the comic book, you know. And I like mustard, pickles, and all that stuff. I keep

jars of mustard with crackers. I still can. Sandwich bread and crackers, that's one of my favorite diets, mustard.

Q3. Not one of mine.

BH: Well, Wimpy was eating that mustard.

Q3. He was.

BH: And so we stopped -- I was 16 years old. I was running with the big boys. They were 21, 22 years old. And we were drinking that Silver Fox beer. 'Cause the war was on, that's the only beer you could get, the Silver Fox. And we stopped at the service station because we had a flat. And somebody went over there and got some hamburgers. They was a nickel apiece.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: So I don't know, I go over there to get me two. I went in the front door and ordered me two hamburgers and a sodie water, you know. [Laughs] And the man back then, his office -- well, the girl is cooking the hamburgers. Well, he sees me and he comes out there and told me to get -- "You get your black ass out. We don't sell to niggers in here." And I said, "What you say?" I ain't never been called a nigger in my life, you know. We didn't use that word when I grew up. I said, "What you say?" He said, "Goddammit, I'll show you." So he run behind the counter there to throw me out. Well, I got to ease out a special knife in my pocket, one of them long-blade knives, and I got a reach out a (unintelligible) under that blade 'cause we

have a quick draw. I come out of my pocket with that knife quick draw, and after that blade, he back up, and he stopped with his hands up. He said, "Get out." I said, "Throw me out." He said, "Get the nigger his food and get out of my goddamn place." I took my food and walked on out the door.

Q2. Uh-huh.

Q1. But you did get your food?

BH: Huh?

Q1. You did get your food?

BH: Yeah. I didn't know nothing about that kind of stuff was going on. I didn't know nothing about it. I -- I ain't never been called that by a white person since. Since. I don't know nobody calling me that. Black people call me that all the time. Well, we said that's all right. It's not all right.

Q2. Uh-huh, I hear you.

BH: It's stupid. It's not all right. Well, you shouldn't be mad about somebody else call you that if you turn around and use it all day long. I don't know.

Q2. Uh-huh.

BH: I don't know. But I been wrong. People, people have treated me very nice in this town. Black people, white people, any kind of people. I don't do nothing to nobody. I don't bother nobody. I don't fight. I don't go to jail. I don't do none of that, none of that.

So I've lived a pretty good life and I'm thankful for what life has brought to me to this point in my life, you know.

Q1. Uh-huh. So can I ask you what do you think -- do you think your life would have been any different if you didn't have your music in it?

BH: Yeah, yeah. Well, let me talk about that music aspect.

Q1. Okay.

BH: See, I say to you that there's only been three girls in my life that I thought that I liked. The first girl I thought that I liked, her name was Kayako (phonetic). And she told me one time, she said, "My heart speak of you. Too much I love you. My heart speaks." She said, "I love you. I love you too much." She said, "Tell me, son, do you hear my heart?" I said, "Hi (unintelligible)." That means yes. She said, "No, you don't hear my heart." She said, "You're too far from home. You don't hear my heart."

Well, I come back to the states and I meet another girl, in high school. And I'm crazy about this girl but her mother don't like me. And she took this girl and went to California. Well, that ended that. And I met this girl and I'm trying to play music at this time. Well, I'm glad I didn't marry this girl over here because I would never have been able to do what I wanted to do. This girl didn't stop me from doing what I wanted to do. She never supported me by going and hanging out with me, but she always

understood that what I was doing was to supplement with what I was making. See, this was supplement to what I'm trying to feed me, her and the kids.

Tell you a little story. I go to work at McConnell Air Force base, and I'm staying the 1800 block on Green. They tell me, they said, "You can eat when you come to work and you can get a hot meal in the morning, breakfast." So that morning I ate half a dozen eggs, almost half a loaf of bread, and two or three big slices of ham, and some -- whatever they had, I just gulled (phonetic) myself. And I ate this, I ate. And I done that for about three or four mornings in a row. Well, this white man who was the cook, he said, "Berry, you can sure eat." I say, "Yeah, it takes a lot of food for me." Is this thing still on? He said -- so I confronted him one morning. I said, "Hey, man, I got -- I have a wife and two kids at home." I said, "How about letting me take my breakfast home?" He said, "Oh, all right." I got me a half a dozen eggs. I got me a half a loaf of bread. I got me two great big potatoes, and I got me whatever else I needed and some sugar and this, that and the other, and some jelly, and I took that home. Every morning I took that home. Every morning I took all this food home every morning. So I got -- I stocked up my refrigerator.

So I'm pulling -- I'm walking through the building and they got big old locks on the doors up here where all the food is stored, and

I'm pulling these locks. I pull one and it come open. I said, "Looky here." So I reach up there and I got me a -- I got me a steak, a good, big steak over there at the officer's club. I wrapped that steak up and went in the back and got me a steak, I got all these eggs and all these potatoes and all this bread and all this steak; right? I'm taking that home. I went through another one and I found some pork chops. I reached and got me a pork chop, a steak, all that eggs and stuff, I'm taking that all home. I got in the liquor cabinet. I'm bringing all this home, with the (unintelligible) standing on the street, I'm keeping them drunk and feeding them. We've got plenty of food. I'm hustling. I'm struggling. You understand what I'm saying? I'm feeding me, my family, and everybody else.

Okay. So now my dad told me when I was a kid, he said, "Boy," he said, "I would never go to jail." He said, "I'd shovel against the wind." You know what he said right there, don't you?

Q1. Uh-huh.

BH: Well, I did that. Because they built a golf course out there. And they brought it stacked this high, flaky. I'm on top of it with a shovel shoveling. And it gets down about like this, it changes the complexion of it. It starts to getting kinda loose. And by the time it gets here I'm in rubber boots, and we're shoveling it in the hopper and it's blowing back on my clothes. I have to throw my clothes away. I get home, home with them

clothes on, I got to throw them in the trash. And then every morning I got to take some old raggedy clothes to do this job with 'cause I'm trying to make a living.

I never would have been be able to do what I've done with another woman, 'cause she stood by me and let me do what I wanted to do. And I -- and I still play, you know. I ain't been perfect, but I been good. I made some mistakes. There's thing's I've done, some things I wish I had not done, but not many, not many. I'm not walking around with no guilt trip. I don't even think about it, you know what I mean, because the good outweighed my bad part of my life.

I'm a Christian-thinking man. I read the Bible. I believe in what it teaches. What else can I say? I'll treat you the way I want you to treat me. And that's the way my life has always been. And that's the way it'll be until I die. I'm thankful for God that he woke me up every morning of my life, so I make sure -- I pray, and I ask God -- my cousin, he's a pastor at a church. He said I'm selfish. But I'm gonna tell you what I ask God. I ask God to take my wife first. And there's a reason why I ask God to take her first. Because if he takes her, I will be ready to go, like Mr. Carter said in the paper. You read about what Mr. Carter said he was prepared to do? Did you read that article in the paper? Mr. Carter had brain cancer, he said --

Q2. Yes, President Carter.

Q1. Oh, yes.

BH: Jimmy Carter. He said, "I worship the God that I serve, and I am prepared for whatever comes down the road." I am prepared. And, God, take this woman first, because I know that I will take care of her until that goes down. But if he takes me first, I don't know what happens to her. I am not selfish. I want to take care of her, make sure that she's taken care of. I don't care what they do to me. Maybe they stand me up beside a tree. I could care less. If my daughter don't take care of me, that's all right with me. See what I'm saying to you?

Q1. Yes.

BH: 'Cause I've been alone. I've been by myself all my life to a degree. It won't hurt me by myself 'cause I can be peaceful with myself as long as I take care of Loretta. I don't want to leave here and leave Loretta in the hands of nobody. Uh-huh? I want to take care of Loretta. I want to bury Loretta, and I know that everything has been all right in her life. And then you can put me in the hole too right there the next day. I don't care.

I lived my life. I lived way past my allotted time. Seventy years is my allotted time, isn't it? Ain't that what the Book says, three scores and ten? I'm not living -- I'm living in the grace period of my life. I may live to be a hundred years old. I feel like I could live to be another 30 years. I feel that way.

I don't feel like I'm dying. And I don't know how long she's going to live.

I just asking God to let me take care of her until she die. Don't leave her in Yvette's hands. That's our daughter. They don't come to see about us that often, so they ain't going to come now. You understand what I'm saying?

Q3. Well, they go to work, you know.

BH: You always got time to go see about your mother. I don't care what you do.

Q1. The mother's got to stick up for her kids.

Q2. Throw that in.

Q1. I know how that is.

Q2. Yeah.

BH: You always take time to go see about your momma, but daddy ain't so important. Momma's the important person in your life. She's the one that lay down and brought you into this world. Your daddy, he just helped. He's a good man. And I love that, too. I think some people got good daddies and you love your daddy, but your momma's the one that brought you here. If you can't take care of your momma, you can't take care of nobody. That's what I think. Now, that may be wrong, but that's the way I feel. I'm entitled to believe what I want to believe, am I? Am I -- am I talking stupid to you people?

Q2. No.

BH: Huh?

Q2. Not at all.

BH: That's what I believe. That's what I'm going to do, take care of Loretta, you know. After that, if Loretta die tomorrow, I'll be ready the next day. But I ain't gonna to kill myself. I've been to the point if I wasn't -- if I wasn't really a strong man I'd have done jumped off the bridge two years ago. Whoo, don't nobody know the trouble I see.

Q3. Hallelujah.

BH: Don't nobody know what's going on in my life and my mind and the hurt I go through, 'cause I ain't got nobody to talk to. I can't tell it to her. Huh? I smile a lots, but I cry a lot, too. I sat there on that crouch and cried a many a night. From '06 to '09 I sat right there where she's sitting, and I sit there. And you can think the hell out of me if you want to, that's your business. If it hadn't been for having a drink and a smoke and a little weed, I'd have lost my mind, huh? I can't sit here and not do something. I'm the only man that get up in the middle of the night and go to the nursing home and stay all night in the bed with his wife. The people at the nursing home at Andover say, "You're an exceptional man. We ain't seen nobody do this but you." I ain't do that for show. I had to go. I couldn't do -- her brother said, "You need to stay home,

boy. You're killing yourself." I said, "Let it happen, Lake (phonetic). I'm going to see about Loretta."

Q1. You've done well.

BH: Huh?

Q1. You've done well.

BH: I've done what is right. That's what God asks -- told me. I told God when I married this woman that that's what I would do. I didn't say I was going to half-ass do that. I said I would do this. And that's what I been doing. I been -- I made them mistakes. I tell you that. I ain't been perfect, but I been good. You understand what I'm saying to you? There have been times when I should have kept my (gesturing), but I been good, you know.

Q3. Just keep on talking. [All laugh]

BH: I try to be -- I tried to be a good man. I tried to be a good person. That's all I know to do. I guess that's about all I can tell you about me. Anything else you want to know about?

Q1. You have told us a lot. And I thank you very much.

Does anybody else have a question? No?

Q4. No.

BH: What'd she say?

Q1. I asked if anybody else had a question. She said no.

Q4. Where was your favorite place to play your music, where did you like to play the most?

BH: No certain place.

Q4. What was that?

BH: No certain place.

Q2. No certain place.

Q4. No certain place, just everywhere.

BH: Anywhere where I could get the guitar on the band stand.

Q4. As long as you had your guitar.

BH: No certain place. I play, don't care whether it's nice or a dump, don't matter to me just as long as somebody is listening. No certain place to play.

Q3. I don't even go to some of those dumps.

Q5. How long you been playing an instrument?

BH: I guess there's a lots more, you know, that I could talk about, you know, because -- I know I'm leaving out something that I really wanted to tell you, but I can't remember what it was because my mind is not that sharp like it used to be.

Q1. Steve had a question.

Q5. How long you been playing instruments and how many instruments have you played and can you name them?

BH: How many years I played? I think it's 70.

Q5. Seventy.

BH: Seventy.

Q5. So how many instruments do you play and can you name the ones that you do play.

BH: I been playing -- you mean, playing in the band?

Q5. How many instruments can you play? How many instruments can you play?

Q1. Guitar, keyboard, how many instruments, different instruments?

BH: Oh, I play keyboard, harmonica, and guitar. I'm also a comedian. I do dirty jokes, very dirty. I could do them for two or three hours at a time. When I was a boy growing up, we didn't have no radio.

Q2. So they're bad.

BH: So the old men sat around and told jokes; right? So the boys told jokes. Well, we sat on the railroad tracks till 1:00 or 2:00 o'clock in the morning telling jokes. Well, when I go in the Army, boy, you really learn 'em in the Army.

Q2. Oh, yeah.

BH: Well, we learned this toast in the Army. It's a difference in toast and jokes. You know the difference in toast and jokes? The signifying monkey, the pool-shooting monkey, the cause of the freak, the revenmo (phonetic). These are toasts. They'd be 10, 15 minutes long. So when I get into that stuff, too, I tell all them signifying monkey and all these short jokes I know. Well, I could have been rich because this guy want to record me, but at this time, 1952, 1953, this is pornography, you go to jail for this stuff. Well, here come -- what's his name --

Q2. Redd Foxx?

BH: What's the name?

Q2. Redd Foxx.

BH: No, no, Denny Bruce -- what's his name?

Q1. Lenny Bruce, yeah.

BH: Lenny Bruce opened the can up; right?

Q2. Yeah, he did.

BH: But that ain't who opened the can up. Lenny Bruce just got the lid halfway up. Richard Pryor broke it all the way open.

Q1. Oh, he did.

BH: Huh? Well, you see, but there are a lot of good comedians that I like. I like Red Skelton, and I like Jonathan Winters, and I like all them, too, back there, see. But Redd Foxx broke the vulgarity all the way open. You say what you want to say? See, so now he can get rich, but I can't get rich in 1953 because I'm going to jail if I do this. I can record underground but I'm still taking a chance in going to jail. And jailhouse is not where Mr. Berry Harris wants to be. I want to be out there where they're drinking whiskey and looking at the girls. I have no desire to go to the jailhouse. So I'm not going to record. But I'm good at that, too. I can tell, I can tell them jokes. I can tell them as fast as you want to hear, and the more I tell the more I hear, and don't let nobody start telling them with me, because every time you tell one I'll tell three.

Q1. Ahh.

BH: And they're just long. I got a tape in there if you want one.

Q1. Might make me blush.

BH: I've got -- I tell good jokes, dirty jokes. They're just -- all of them are not so dirty. I have some racial jokes that I could tell. I had a guy --

Q3. Well, don't tell 'em.

BH: I had a guy while I was working on the missile bases. I worked on these missile bases, put all these missile bases around the Wichita. You know about these missile bases?

Q1. Oh, yeah, the missile bases.

BH: Yeah, they got 18 around here. They had 18 around Wichita. I worked at them. On worked on Site 13 for almost over a year. Well, this white guy he wanted to be funny with me. Every time I looked up he was telling me one of them racial jokes, (unintelligible), Lila (phonetic) jokes. And I told him, I said, "I don't like that," you know, "I don't like that. Don't tell me."

[END]

NOTE: End of interview transcript, 53:14. Music, including singing and playing guitar, chatter, and un-transcribed conversation with student assistant Keison L. Walker to 1:03:01