

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

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Interviewee: Clarence Kerns

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Q. Any language.

CK. Just to tell you how much I admire being here and all that kind of stuff?

Q. Yes, that would work. Anything's good.

CK. You bet. Nice ladies always fascinate me.

Q. Always do. Yes; that's right. Oh, you're still a schmoozer. Let me close this door. Okay. We are recording any time you're ready to go.

Q. Clarence, what is your full name?

CK. Clarence H. Kerns.

Q. And is there a story about how you got that name? Is there a story behind it?

CK. I have no idea. They just probably couldn't think up any middle name for me so they gave me the middle name -- middle initial.

Q. I wonder, do you -- did you have any nicknames while you were growing up in El Dorado?

CK. I didn't understand your question.

Q. Did you have any nicknames while you were growing up in El Dorado?

CK. Not that I can remember.

Q. None at all. None at all. What we're really interested in is knowing what you remember about El Dorado growing up in the 20's and 30's, and I'm just going to open that up to you to share the first things that come to mind.

CK. Well, I think that's the most wonderful thing about the great changes that have happened through the years. And the --when my father first came to El Dorado, in fact, you... he ran an oil patch in Oklahoma, and he found out about staple number one coming in. In 1915 they moved up here and worked. They lived right there north of the fire station, and then later he decided that town was going to move out North, surely, and he went out north of the flood plain on Riverside and bought a lot out there, and they had a tent. They were living in a tent with a wooden floor, and he was working 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and in any spare time, he started to build a house. They had one room of it built -- fairly well finished -- when I was

born in that room. Otherwise, I would have been born in a tent. And it took a long time to ever finish that up.

But it was typical of what people lived in because no water on the premises. They carried water from a half a block away from half away across the block and the -- they lived in a tent, and I can remember about when my mother used to tell about laundry day came around. Had a kettle, an iron kettle, in the back yard and build a fire in it, and he carried water in it, and put in the tub. And they'd boil the water and wash and hang clothes up on the fence or whatever was handy. You know, wash day then was something. Now, we do the laundry while we're getting breakfast. But it's such a change that way.

Another thing is that everything north of the present river bridge, the North Main Street bridge, they didn't have sewerage out there for years and years. They didn't get a sewer north of the river until 1953. That's the reason all the North part of town now has a sewer. But they didn't have a sewer out there. They had pit toilets everywhere. And, at the same time, Oil Hill was a town out here that belonged to Empire Refining Company. And all of those houses, they just had pit toilets everywhere out there. And young people just can't imagine that - the uh, so many different things that have changed so much like that. In fact, toilet paper -- common place thing now --

you know, there wasn't toilet paper then. Sears and Roebuck catalog was a very handy thing to have around.

And so many things have changed so much. And the town itself has changed because where the railroad, at one time, came right down through Gordy through the middle part of town, and now, it's on the bypass -- on the dike outside of town. And, at one time, they had an intersection -- not too long ago they had a derailment up just north of Fifth Street and there -- well, that's where the intersection used to be. And I thought -- amusing thing for many, many years, in the State of Kansas, there was a law on the State of Kansas laws, and they finally appealed them just a few years ago, and it said: "When they had railroad intersection and two railroad trains met at the intersection they shall both stop and neither shall proceed until the other has gone on." (Laughs) I like that law, but they finally got rid of it. But the railroads have changed completely. The rivers in the town have changed completely. When I was a kid, the North Main Street bridge was at Sixth and Main.

Q. Mm-hm. Okay.

CK. At -- in 1934 and 5 they built the present bridge right out on the dry land. And there was a big loop in the river, came down and back up, so they just cut underneath the river and through

the years they filled that great big loop where all of the grocery stores --

Q. Oh.

CK. -- and the filling stations, all that stuff that was a river bed, so they cut that one loop out of there so that part's all changed. That bridge is now at Eighth and Main. Yeah.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. Then, out east of town on East Central is -- there used to be two bridges on East Central from the Dairy Queen on out East where the duck pond is now? Well, they changed the whole rivers for -- of everything. It's one of the biggest changes El Dorado ever made, where the West Branch of the river, at one time, came down through behind the ball diamond, went under the railroad flowing from west to east, and west -- I mean the other way around, the East Branch came under the railroad flowing east to west and joined the West Branch. And there used to be a Sharpeville area between the two rivers. You could go up around between the two rivers. They changed the channels to where now, the West Branch comes in there and goes under the railroad and joins the new channel they dug around. And it took all of the river out down where the park is and where the museum is. There used to be two rivers through there and they reclaimed all of that. So that all is completely different.

But when they built the present railroad dike, I remember they moved all that dirt with horses. And for some reason they had three horses hitched side by side and little dump wagons there - these horses moved just like ants -- moving all that dirt? And as a kid I thought, "My! Those wagons are so big." Well, during the service, I was stationed at Las Vegas a while and down on Fremont Street, by the depot, they had twenty-mule team borax wagon; huge thing there. And also one of these wagons, they used the type that they used here, and it would hold just about what a pickup would haul.

Q. It didn't look big at all.

CK. But times have changed. But they were just like ants. And they had steam driven pile drivers that drove the piles for the railroad overpass where the bridge is that big old black. They had been in there, evidently, since they put that in there when I was just a kid. So they must have been pretty durable. They were creosoted dikes and they had a steam driven power driver that drove those into the ground. And, evidently, they had been there because they looked the same to me.

Q. Well, now, you know what I never thought about in El Dorado? So many things are identified West Branch EHU or something like that, and I hadn't ever really thought about why things were designated West Branch and back to that history.

CK. Well, now, one of the most unusual things that happened, I was about seven- or eight-years-old and something happened that -- when I was in the service, one time, we were telling about things that happened back home, and I told that story and they almost threw me in the shower with my clothes on. I told them about the time the West Branch of the El Dorado River here caught on fire. And it did one Sunday afternoon, about where Carlyle's business is on North Main. A man was burning trash in his back yard and had an old automobile tire, and he threw that on, and it started making a terrible smoke, and he was going to do something with it. So he took a pitch fork, and he threw the darn burning tire in the river.

Q. Oh.

CK. Well, the Old North Refinery put lots and lots of hydrocarbons in the river and it's a lot of, in there, and the whole river went. It burned the floor out of the bridge, the Ninth Street bridge, that they just recently made a new one there.

Q. Right.

CK. It was that old metal bridge. They burned the floor out, and they had a horrible time getting started. All of the trees started fire, but --

Q. Just from the tire?

CK. Well, the tire set that fire off with all of the different petroleum products in the river.

Q. Right. Right.

CK. And that was kind of an unusual thing to have happen.

Q. And how old were you about that time?

CK. About seven- or eight-years-old, I think.

Q. Oh, my goodness.

Q. (Second interviewer): Can I ask a question?

CK. Yes.

Q. Did you play -- did you and your friends play around the railroad tracks or around the rivers when you were growing up?

CK. Not if my mother had anything to say about it. That's the best answer I can give you.

But, uh -- and then another thing that I think is interesting here, that so many different things happen that are so much different. When the trains came through on the Santa Fe and crossed Central, they had to have some controls so they had a little house at the corner of the street, and a little man set in there all day long. And when a train came by, he ran out in the middle of the street with a little sign that said "Stop" and held it up -- until -- held the traffic up until the trains went by.

Q. How often do you -- were trains --

CK. Quite often then because this was a main line, and that's one reason they tried to build around town because it was bad. All that traffic going right down through the middle part of town.

Q. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

CK. But, of course, he, uh, he was not the only unusual person we had in that town because it was quite often that we had one weather prophet of some kind here in town. He had habit of coming into businesses and proclaiming what weather was going to be had for the day. And it might be just exactly what they had and it might not be anything like it at all. And they had another man that swept the streets all the time, and he was always in church on Sunday, but they teased him all the time because he was just susceptible to that kind of stuff, and they carried it too far; sometimes it was really terrible. They also had a little stand that had been built by the merchants at the southwest corner of Main and Central and a little fella is in there, they called him Shorty, he didn't have any legs at all, and he had that little stand to sell newspapers out of. And everybody knew Shorty in town.

Q. Wow.

CK. And then a real character they had in town too, at the time, a fella named Herb Curtis. He had a taxicab, and he must have been the poorest driver that ever drove in El Dorado because his car was just dented all over. But anyone that had enough courage to ride with him -- well, he was our only taxicab driver for many, many years.

But the way they built -- changed the rivers and the railroads are the biggest changes we've made. And, of course, a lot of things that -- right now they're talking about a better stadium -- to build a stadium. Well, that stadium was built in the very early 30's and it was interesting the way they got the money to build that. Cement then, if you can imagine, cost 60 cents a sack, and people contributed one or two sacks of cement. And that's the way we built the stadium.

Q. Oh, for heaven's sakes.

CK. So that's been quite an interesting thing there. But, then, of course, when 1927 -- as most of you know, why, they decided to have a junior college here which was more or less an extension of the high school, at the time. And their first classes, I believe, in 1929 and in 1935 I started into the junior college, so it was only 7 years old when I started. And then it was a wonderful day when, well, that one time it overgrew the facility down there and they put it out in the old Jefferson school --

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. -- and my oldest son went to school there. The boys, basketball players especially, had to get down on their knees to drink in the drinking fountain they were so small and things like that. And then finally, in fact, I think this would be a good time to say something about one interesting periodical they had. The little -- they were trying to get public opinion to go

countywide to build a junior college. And I thought it was rather interesting until my son came home and he and two or three other rather radical students in the school put out a little newspaper and he called it "The Eye Sore." And it told about this old Jefferson school building, how terrible it was and unsafe; the floors about to fall in and everything. And it looked like libel, just scared me to pieces, and he said, "That's all right, Dad. Don't worry about it. We know what we're doing and everything." Well, they put several copies of that out and I still think it had a lot to do with the election to go countywide. And I found -- later I found out that they had a lawyer downtown that was proof reading all the stuff for them. And Walburn, who happened to be the president of the junior college at the time, had fostered and perpetuated the whole thing. But it really had a lot to do with public sentiment.

Q. So that was Bainard. Bainard did that?

CK. That was Kenny.

Q. Kenny. Okay. And it was called "The Eye Sore"?

CK. "The Eye Sore."

Q. "The Eye Sore."

CK. And they put out, I don't know, quite a number of editions and scattered them everywhere around town. And I think it had a lot to do with the election. And I remember the day that they had

the ground breaking out here; real cold day. And I can't remember his name anymore, but the man down from at Latham somewhere had the main speech. I can't remember his name, but it was quite cold. We were out here when they had the ground breaking for it.

Q. Uh-huh.

CK. It was a wonderful day.

Q. Oh, my. Oh, my. You know, you brought up a really good point about all the changes but the conveniences you talked about what a job it was just to do laundry.

CK. That's right.

Q. And how did that change the entertainment that you remember your family enjoying then? Once, you know, bit by bit as conveniences even if it was indoor plumbing?

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. How did that change your entertainment in the time that you could spend together --?

CK. Well --

Q. -- as a family?

CK. The, of course, movies were expensive. The El Dorado theatre was rather ritzy; it cost a quarter. But they had two theatres on West Central, The Iris and--what in the world then -- I can't remember - Palace! And they were a dime so if you had any money, you could go. But during the depression, that's another

part of life that was really part of growing up, and we right now are in such a turmoil with things, but -- and I think this thing is enough scary it -- that to me I can remember enough from 1929 -- and this looks a lot like '29 except that this has been much different because in 1929 if you had any money in the bank or anything, and so many banks just put a sign on the front door, and that was it. And you lost everything you had. Well, with the bank investment insurance -- why, unless you -- if you have your stuff invested half way intelligently, why, you're pretty well protected. And so it hasn't been quite so sudden. But it's really a real problem. I'm interested in seeing how it's going to --

Q. A little Deja vu for you?

CK. Beg your pardon?

Q. A little bit of Deja vu for you?

CK. Yeah.

Q. How do you think people in this community, especially here you are still a member of this community--

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. -- so how do you see the character of the people living here now holding up to --?

CK. Well, I think --

Q. -- these kind of challenges?

CK. -- I think the American people come through because uh, they have before.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. But it's going to take a long time. And it may be our grandchildren -- great grandchildren going to bear the brunt of it. But --

Q. When you were a child and you watched your parents, what would you say, as an adult, to people now; the best piece of advice you could give them for weathering times like this?

CK. Well, one thing about it -- we've lived in real luxury for so many years and our young people, now -- so it's true that they want to get married and have everything that their parents have had after years of preparation and work and things and that. During the depression, you had to learn to do without. You didn't buy new things, you repaired them or whatever happened. And it was astonishing some of the things that actually took part. In fact, there was a movie, "Grapes of Wrath," that people moving out of Oklahoma to California -- and I still remember them on the part that was so true to life. They had this old car the radiator had gone bad and you couldn't buy a radiator and you didn't have any money. So they took a barrel -- took a radiator off, put a barrel on the front of that automobile, then hooked up to the engine. And they had put that thing full of water about 25 -- 30 gallons of water. And they

could drive that car as long as that water was circulating to cool the engine. And when it got too hot, you just had to set and wait for it to cool off.

Q. HCK. Did you see innovations like that in El Dorado?

CK. Oh, yes. In many ways.

Q. What do you remember?

CK. Oh, but uh, well, you just didn't buy new. You repaired.

Q. You repaired.

CK. And if you didn't -- couldn't repair it, you usually did without.

Q. You just did without it.

CK. But I know we never did miss any meals at our place, but we postponed one once in a while a little. But my dad was lucky. He had worked at Empire for years; Empire Oil Refining Company. And this town of Oil Hill was an interesting study. The company owned every home in town, and the employees got charged a small amount, seven dollars a month or something, to live in the houses. And the houses were three rooms -- well, the original ones were what they called a "box car house." And there is a few of the residues still in town, one or two I helped build in something else. But they were just a straight box car with a flat roof and things, but they were, more or less, a wooden tent.

And then they started building the regular three-room houses that they had dozens and dozens and dozens of them out there although I don't know how many people lived there. And they also had a real nice high school out there, and a swimming pool, nine-hole golf course, a fire station, barber shop, grocery store. It was a regular little city, but the company -- the only people that lived out there worked for the company, and we never did live out there. We lived in town, and Dad drove back and forth with the 1914 international truck that's in the museum now. Have you ever seen it?

Q. Oh, yes. Yes.

CK. Okay. That was my dad's truck --

Q. Oh, for heaven's sakes!

CK. -- and he drove that thing back and forth, and we didn't have a car. Otherwise, we walked to town or whatever. But that thing was so hard to start that finally he had a chance to get a Model T Ford when the 1921's came out, and '21 Fords -- you had to crank them by hand. They had more broken arms than you could shake a stick with in cold weather.

Q. Ha, ha. Yeah.

CK. But then the 19 -- after '21 had they had a starter on them so the old truck got more or less retired and put in a shed at home and stayed there for years and years. And after my dad died, why, we finally -- I wanted to restore it -- and that's not a

poor man's hobby -- it gets pretty expensive. So we gave it to the museum, and they have had it completely restored, and we've had it in parades several times. I've driven it in several parades; it's been fun. But right now it's -- they've moved it out of the main lobby down there out in -- they have another building. It's got the stagecoaches and trucks and things in it, and it's out in another building. But that is a residue of the oil boom. What they used that for to haul their tools and things when they went out to build the houses in Oil Hill, and it's got wagon wheels, you know, and everything.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. But that's a -- was in our family until we gave it to the museum.

Q. Was a huge part of El Dorado's history for sure. What kinds of local gatherings and events when you're thinking about the entertainment had your family --?

CK. Well, the biggest thing we had from, I don't know when it started probably 1914 or something -- some back in there, they started the Kaffir Corn Carnival, and it lasted -- and I think what stopped it really was when the 1929 -- when the depression hit money was so scarce. I think that was the end of it. I can't remember anything after that. But each year they had all of the exhibits and things. They had a big parade; the kids got out of school and all took parts in the parade. Had all kinds

of floats and all of the booths -- every school district and everything had booths and everything had to be decorated with kaffir corn, it's a type of maize that's headed -- heads of the corn. And they had some of the neatest booths that's just covered all over with kaffir corn. And there was one year they had a, a derrick setting right between the -- on Main and Central intersection they had big derrick there. I think it was the anniversary of Thomas Edison's birth or something and they had lights all over it. But those booths were up and down the street. They had all kinds of rides in town, you know for the kids and everything to ride in. And they had the parade and had a queen for the parade that made a lot of publicity. And then one of the parades, I still remember, I think it was the same parade my dad helped build a booth that had an oil well derrick on it.

Q. Oh, my.

CK. And one of the interesting things that happened in that thing, might bring another story up too, the Ku Klux Klan was so active here at the time.

Q. And that was what year?

CK. I think it must have been '28.

Q. Okay.

CK. About '28 they actually had a float in the parade with big, beautiful white horses pulling this float with all kinds of

signs on it, and three or four outriggers in their white uniforms and things were riding on each side of it, and they had the parade in there. And not only that, I was -- remember two other things that might be interesting they were thick enough apparently that at one time my dad came home from work one evening and said, "Hurry up. Let's eat a bite." Said, "There's going to be a Ku Klux Klan rally out south of town tonight and the public is invited." They were trying to recruit members.

What in the world's going on? So we got in the old Model T and drove down south of town where you go up Eightman [phonetic] -- Weller Ewing's home was right near there.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. And just on the other side of that big old hill was an open place became an airport, at one time, too for a while. They had this rally going on. So we drove up there and there was an old boy in all of his paraphernalia out there in the street, and we drove up and my dad stopped and he said, "Hi, Frank." Said, "Go down here and go through that gate and go on down there and they'll tell you where to park." Somebody he knew. So --

Q. Did he recognize the voice?

CK. No. So he drove on and said, "Wonder who in the world that is?" Got down there and somebody else says, "Hi, Shorty" Said, "Go on down here and they'll park you." And they did.

Q. Oh.

CK. And --

Q. Wow.

CK. -- they had a big bonfire --

Q. Wow.

CK. And all kinds of things -- trying to recruit people.

Q. Oh, my.

CK. And I guess I don't remember much more about it. Probably found some other kids to play with because, you know, because I was nine-years-old or ten.

Q. Uh-huh.

CK. But shortly after that we were at a neighbor's house, and we were playing hide-and-go-seek. And I got the bright idea to really hide. I'd just go in the house and hide in the clothes closet. And I went in the house, into their bedroom, and got back in a clothes closet, started digging back under clothes and good night nurse there was a Ku Klux Klan uniform hanging there on the -- and did I get out of there in a hurry.

Q. Wow.

CK. It was quite a surprise cause you never knew who they were.

Q. Yeah.

CK. They were thick and everywhere.

Q. Yeah. Yeah.

CK. But fortunately it didn't last.

Q. Did it attract quite a few people?

CK. Oh, they were quite interested just it's a curiosity.

Q. Right, right.

CK. Uh-huh.

Q. Right.

CK. But they were pretty active at that time.

Q. And when you say active, do you remember violence? Do you remember any --?

CK. No, I don't remember --

Q. It was more that they were kind of showy --

CK. No.

Q. -- members?

CK. No. Mainly I think it was just -- I think just an oddity because the bad part, I think, has gone just to history.

Q. Okay.

CK. But --

Q. (Second Interviewer): How did your parents talk to you about race and the Ku Klux Klan; if you can remember?

CK. Well, they didn't have any part in it I know that. And, of course, I lived on Riverside, and one of my closest friends going to school was Vertie Tomlin; only died a few years ago. Vertie was a great guy. Now, when we were in school, if someone had come to me or any of the other kids and said, "Say, aren't you going to school with this Vertie Tomlin?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything different about him than the rest of you?"

"Yeah."

I would have probably said, "Yes, there's one thing different about him. He can run faster than anybody else in school," or something like that because Vertie was a wonderful guy.

Q. Yes, he was.

CK. And that, uh, we -- Riverside School, of course, is an interesting thing too.

Q. Now, where was that Riverside School?

CK. At one time, where Carlyle's business is on North Main.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. There was a two-room school there.

Q. Oh.

CK. And they called it Riverside School, and it had just a first and second grade. They did not have kindergarten at the beginning; first and second grade. And I lived just over on Orient, just two or three blocks away, so I went to first and second grade there and also my, my sister did too. And it was a very modern looking school, two-room school, and I didn't know about it at the time I went there because it did have a little boys' and little girls' toilet in each room. But when I got in junior college, things were mighty tight and I had a good luck to get a job as a janitor out there while I was in junior college. And well, I can't imagine our kids nowadays doing -- the requirement

if you got the job, you signed a little contract and went to the superintendent's school and drew your equipment and your keys and you went out there and to show your good intention, you prepared the school for the year's school; the building. You washed all the windows, you painted the steps outside; and one of the rooms had a painted floor, cleaned all the black boards. It took about two weeks and you did that on your own. That showed your good intention. And boy oh boy, when school started, all you had to do was go down in the morning and open up -- take care of the heat, the fire, the lights, put out the stop signs, put out the American flag, and go on to school; come in that evening and clean up in the evening and, boy, you got one dollar for every day. Five dollars a week and, boy, was it a life saver. And so I remember that, but the thing that surprised me so much when I got in there taking care of it, I was amazed to find out that one of the things you had to do, about twice a year, you had to have 'em, I don't know what you call the company, come in and pump out the pit toilets. They had toilets in there, but they were just pit toilets. See, no sewer on that site.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. And so they just had pit toilets in the schoolhouse.

Q. Oh.

CK. And I don't remember how long that school house stayed there, but I know I sure enjoyed being the janitor out there for two years.

Q. Oh, good. And was it cinder block or was it wood?

CK. No, it was wooden --

Q. It was wood?

CK. -- wooden building and it had a lot of windows. You had to wash all those windows.

Q. It's gone. It was totally gone?

CK. And one time -- it's Vertie Tomlin happened to be in our class, and they built a little box and put the most beautiful load of beautiful white sand in it. Oh, it was pretty sand. And we got out there -- spring time came on -- and we were having a barrel of fun out there playing. We prevailed upon Vertie Tomlin to lay down on his back with his hands behind him and we buried Vertie except for just his head sticking out. And about that time Verla Towna, the teacher, came out and rung her hand bell and we went in, at noontime, we went back into the class and she ran her little bell and she went looking around and, "Where is Vertie?" No one knew a thing about Vertie. So she went out on the porch -- the step -- and poor little Vertie was out there, "Teacher. Teacher. Come get me out of here."

Q. Come get me out.

CK. So she came back in and Mac Burnham, who used to be a painter here in town, he's a real close friend of mine. I went all the way through school with him. For some reason she picked on Mac and I; she thought we might have had a hand in it. So we had to go out and dig Vertie out.

Q. Dig him out.

CK. And I still remember that.

Q. I know his granddaughter, and I will have a lot of fun telling her that story, Harlan's daughter.

CK. Is she the one that just got married? No, she was the queen.

Q. High school queen.

CK. High school?

Q. Yes, homecoming queen.

CK. Well, I thought that was --

Q. Janelle.

CK. -- that was her Rudy's son's daughter.

Q. Yes, it is. And she will get such a kick out of hearing that story.

CK. Well, you tell her.

Q. How long do you think he was laying out there 'til the teacher --?

CK. Oh, probably 15 minutes. He couldn't get out cause he had his hands under him. Yeah, I saw her picture in the paper; real pretty girl.

Q. Beautiful.

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. Yes. Isn't that wonderful? That's a great question to kind of segue into race and how the community handled race. Did you, dis you find yourself being aware of segregation race in El Dorado during the 20's and 30's?

CK. Well, I felt that things weren't fair. The first real shock I ever got, I believe, I was probably about eight- or nine-years-old and my mother had someone in Oklahoma that became ill, and she took me with her and we went on the train down to, uh, west of Tulsa to where the -- and somewhere we had a layover at -- and it had a -- we were at the depot, and in the depot I needed to go to the bathroom, and I started down there and there was a bathroom. You could see in there, and I started in there and my mother yelled at me to come back, "You're not supposed to go in there." And I found out why. It was the colored sign, "colored bathrooms." And they weren't very well taken care of. And that actually happened just across the line into Oklahoma that the bathrooms even in the, in the depots were segregated. And that's the first time I ever run into that, and it startled me. And there was a lot of that. And in the service, even, during World War II there were a lot of the units that they did not treat some of the black soldiers like they should.

Q. What about El Dorado as far as, not as overt in signs of segregation, but the way the community was set up as far as residential areas and so forth?

CK. Well, we had such a small number of black people too that -- there were only most of them lived on Riverside and then there was a cluster back down near where Washington School used to be; there were several in there. But, I don't -- my wife owned the Dairy Queen here for many years, and some of her best customers were black people that she'd call on every once in a while when things that she'd need, and they were always responding to do things that she -- you know, once in a while she that -- she had one black young man, a football player here, that cooked in her burgerteria when she had it going, and once in a while, some of the black boys would come in there and be a little boisterous and she'd see him and she'd say, "Can you do anything about that?" "Yes, ma'am." He'd go up and lean over the counter and he weighed about two-forty-four, or something like that. So he'd lean over the counter and talk to them a little and they'd (waving hands) -- but she always got along great with them.

Q. Yeah, yeah.

CK. In fact, one time, her maiden name was Hill -- had one basketball player that came in to visit with her a lot and one time, his name was Hill, and she'd kidding him about his name

and say, "My maiden name was Hill. Do you think we're related?"

And he'd say, "No, ma'am. I don't think so."

Q. I don't think so.

CK. And another time I remember too, that, she -- we belonged to both Eastern Star and White Shrine, it's a part of the Messianic thing where ladies belong and men, too, and they wore formals; and one night she went down to the Dairy Queen before she left and, all dressed up in a formal, and this young man came in, "My, Mrs. B" -- said, "Miss B, you sure do look nice tonight. Where all you going?" She said, "Well, I'm going to a White Shrine meeting." "Oh, my goodness. I didn't think you'd be a racist." So she had to explain to him that what that White Shrine was; the birth of Christ in Jerusalem, you know? But he said, "I didn't think you'd be a racist." But a lot of that could be comical.

Q. Uh-huh.

CK. But she's always got along with them.

Q. That's wonderful. I'm interested in a little bit more in your school days; your classmates and -- what do you remember about school? What are the things that stand out in your mind, from your, especially your high school days?

CK. In high school, especially, I wasn't too active. Too darn little to play basketball or football. I was real skinny then, but I did in grammatics and stuff we was all in that. And then

it followed through when I was in junior college. Lester Nixon, as you know, is a forefather of your library, [L. W. Nixon Library, Butler Community College] and I still am their family, according to the boys, because they were in a nursing home for about six years before they died at 102 and 104, I think it was. And all that time my wife, because the kids were out of state, you know, we kind -- took them to the doctor and all that kind of stuff and those kids have adopted us. And they're wonderful kids. And the -- that kind of a connection is nice. But I happen to be -- carry on into the junior college and ended up being in Pi Delta Theta and Delta Psi Omega both, and so was my first wife. And we had a lot of fun with the Nixons. In fact, I still remember the night that they had the initiation for Pi Delta Theta in the basement at the Nixon's house, and had a bunch of things going on; part of it was foolish and one thing or another. And I still remember -- if you know Dr. Overholster, used to live here. He was a year older than I was, and he gave me a big speech about the fact that if you were going to be a Thespian of any kind, you need to use your diaphragm to get -- to project your voice. They had a big old kettle full of cold ice water and they had you on your hands and knees, heads against a post in the basement, and you were supposed to spell "diaphragm." I'm the world's worst speller and every time I'd misspell it, they had a great big paddle, it

was two boards together, and Dr. -- it was going to be Dr. Overholster later, he'd swat me with that big ol' paddle. And they finally gave up. I never was going to spell it right. So then the next thing, they had the kid's coaster wagon and they'd haul you around in a coaster wagon. Well, I was a little taller than the rest of them and there was a clothes line in there and it flipped me off the coaster wagon. And that was the roughest initiation I ever went through. The Nixons were wonderful people.

Q. Yes, they were.

CK. And of course, Doug Nixon, the oldest boy, I had him in boy scouts when he was a kid, and he is now still in boy scouts --

Q. Is he?

CK. -- out in Colorado Springs. And Keith, the middle boy, had been principal of a high school in Phoenix, Arizona; now retired. And the youngest boy, Wendell, he was always just like one of my own kids.

Q. Of course, they ended up being my neighbors --

CK. Wonderful --

Q. -- because we live on North Emporia. And we just lived around the corner from them, but --

CK. Yeah.

Q. Wonderful family, that's for sure.

CK. And Keith, we just the other day -- we got a great big box of oranges right out of the tree in their backyard at Phoenix and they're wonderful people. That's the kind of memories that are really wonderful.

Q. Mm-hm. Mm-hm. What were some of your favorite subjects in school? Because thinking of Mr. Nixon I can certainly picture -
-

CK. Well, I enjoy about everything. Of course, the -- I like all of the shop courses too. Woodwork; I've always been interested in woodwork and things, but history and geography, especially, and physics. I really enjoyed physics, and it's a good thing because I ended up in the laboratories out at Skelly for about almost 40 years but --

Q. I'm curious to know -- you shared so many memories, have such a fabulous memory about people's characters in El Dorado. What do you think your classmates would say to describe you? How would they remember you from those high school days?

CK. Well, I'm sure they'd say I was a pain, but I don't know a pain where. But there are not very many of us left that really were together quite a bit. But there are five or six that were pretty close, and one of them I know you've had connections with too, Ronald Milan from Bella Vista, Arkansas. He's been back for so many things here. And -- but all of them have health problems anymore. But Ronald Milan was head of a pipeline up in

Michigan somewhere, general superintendent of the pipeline, before he retired.

And then, of course, one of my favorites I went through grade school and everything with was David Shirk that -- we were all poor during the depression, but he and his family were dirt poor. They lived in a little shack down by the railroad track and I don't how they existed, but they did. But he happened to be a good enough football player that he went to KU on a scholarship; ended up becoming quite a football star. And when the war came on, why he went in as a physical trainer like most of them did and ended up a captain in the service, and he married a lady up there whose folks had had a big horse ranch out north and west of town; had a big barn and all that stuff in there. Well, they're long gone, but the barn is still there. And it's a party barn for the kids at KU, now. And I know when my one grandson was up there, well, I asked a question to him about KU, and he didn't know where the public library was or this, that, and the other, but, boy, he knew where the party barn was out at Shirks.

Q. And that's what they call it? The party barn?

CK. It's up on Shirk. Shirk's party barn.

Q. (Second Interviewer): I might have been to some parties in that barn.

Q. Did you spell it S--SHIRK?

CK. Uh-huh.

Q. Shirk.

CK. David Shirk and Margaret's his wife. She's a little go getter. And I keep in fits with them all the time.

And then we had two Harlan Smiths in the class. And one was in oil business somewhere; he's long gone. But the Harlan L. Smith was a minister. Another interesting thing, you couldn't find any other kind of work I guess in '35 or '6 when you got out of school, so many of them ended up being ministers. We had nine ministers out of 169 people.

Q. What does that say about your upbringing? Do you think that's a commentary on what it -- the values and --

CK. I think --

Q. -- religion played?

CK. Now, the one that was the closest to me was a Presbyterian boy, Kenneth Locke. They had a dairy up at Burns and he and I were close enough that my oldest son's name is Kenneth for some reason. And he had a milk route in town, and I lived in the north part of town and he'd bring in the milk in the milk truck and stop at my house and we'd deliver the milk around over town and then go to school. And that went on for years through high school and junior college. And he became a minister and died not long ago, but he -- in Missouri Presbyterian churches head of Synod -- quite active but and then the Harlem Smith is up at

Concordia somewhere, now. I hear from him once in a while, but he can't drive anymore, so many of them can't, but we try to keep --

Up until -- see we had the high school reunion, as you know, how they work here. And we had our regular reunions up until the 50th reunion, and we decided that was so much fun we were just going to have one from every year then on. And from the 50th to the 70th we had 'em every year; those that could come back to them. And my wife and I had--took care of the correspondence because the lady that was our secretary didn't have a computer so we helped her with that. And when she got where she couldn't do it, so -- but up until the 70th, we finally just decided to join the ever -- and then the last two times we just met with them. But we only have four or five people that can come back anymore.

Q. Now, Jeanette Locke was she --

CK. Jeanette Locke was a lifelong friend.

Q. And the same Locke as the other one?

CK. No. That's -- yeah, they were cousins.

Q. Okay.

CK. Her late husband and this Locke were cousins.

Q. Okay.

CK. But yeah, Jeanette and I have been about like brother and sister for many, many years. And she had been sick this weekend.

Q. Oh.

CK. But she's out at Vintage Place, now.

Q. I contacted her.

CK. Did you?

Q. Yes.

CK. Well, I talked to you about it.

Q. After you told me.

CK. Well, Jeanette's -- yeah when Myrrl Houck was the go-getter out at the school for so many years in the library, she had student librarians. And if you met certain criteria, well, instead of using study hall you could work in there as a librarian assistant. And heck, I'd learn more in helping kids look up stuff and things before you were just studying and reading a magazine. And she had a little social club along with it and we were with her all the time and it was probably --couldn't know Myrrl Houck, but she was a wonderful person; she was a very thrifty person. But I must have been one of her favorites because when I got married a few years later, she sent me a five dollar bill for a wedding present and from Myrrl Houck --

Q. How lovely.

CK. -- that meant something.

Q. Yes.

CK. But she's the one that started all the reunions and stuff. So, but we had -- now, our class did not have a 20 year reunion because in 1945 most of us were scattered all over the world.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. So in 1955, we had our first real reunion. And at that reunion, Stanley Dunham was living here in town, and he and Madelyn were there. That's the last time I saw Madelyn. And Ann, undoubtedly, she would have been 13-years-old so she must have been in the middle school here. They lived on Olive --

Q. That was what year again?

CK. That that would have been '55.

Q. Okay.

CK. So she would have been 13. And -- but the schools keep no records unless you graduate from high school. So they don't have any record of her being in school, but I wouldn't be too surprised that my oldest boy might have gone to school with her at middle school, but you know, you don't know all the kids in the school, because he was born in 1943. So the chances are they were close to the same age. But at any rate, they did live on Olive and lived here then. And then the only other time that Stanley ever came back was in -- for our 50th reunion in 1985. He and his brother, Ralph, came back to the reunion. That's where I got some of the stuff.

Q. Oh, he did he did come to that one?

CK. And then the last letter I got from him would have been in 1990 and he died.

Q. Could you share that?

CK. Would you like to --

Q. Yeah that's the one with the tab. That would be lovely.

CK. All right.

This was to the 55-year reunion, May the 11th, 1990, and we received this letter from Stanley Dunham and Madelyn. It says, "My wife and I have one daughter, Ann. We have two grandchildren, Barack and Maya. After leaving Kansas, we lived in Seattle for five years. Then we moved to Hawaii where we have lived for over 30 years. I am retired after 20 years in the furniture business and 20 years in insurance. Madelyn retired as vice-president of the Bank of Hawaii. Sorry, I can't be there. It would be a long ways to go for a golf game.

Signed Stanley Dunham".

Q. What do you think of when you read that from a classmate who mentions our current president?

CK. It's amazing.

Q. Quite awesome.

CK. My wife is deep in genealogy and she has just been amazed that it couldn't happen anywhere else in the world but here. And that's what Obama has acknowledged himself.

Q. Exactly.

CK. But it really couldn't. Sometimes I wish that he'd less stress so much that he is a black person, but he's 50 percent

white. I wish he'd stress that a little more. But he is an intelligent person. There's no question about that.

Q. How do you think -- one of the things that we were interested with in this project was, what were Barack Obama's influences because of his heritage: his grandfather and grandmother's roots here in Kansas. And he certainly mentions it quite a bit. He did just this morning when I was listening to him introduce Kathleen Sebelius --

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. -- as his new appointee. So how do you think that he might have been influenced? What are the things that you're seeing? You met him a little over a year ago, but in the time that you've seen him in the public eye, are there certain things that you could trace back to his heritage?

CK. Unfortunately, I didn't know Madelyn well enough to know, but she was an intelligent person. She was an intelligent person. In fact, I think she was more intelligent than Stanley, but she's real successful in the bank and everything. But I'm sure that Kansas influence on both of those kids is bound to show through, I'm sure. And I do know that there was times that she sacrificed for Obama.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. And he knows it.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. But I think that the Kansas influence undoubtedly showed through.

Q. Mm-hm.

CK. But it's a fascinating thing to think, like you said, there's nowhere in the world that this could happen but here. And I think it's true.

Q. Well, you had mentioned the sacrifices during the depression and they were your peers Stanley you knew that he was your peer, and the sacrifices that were made. As you said, you either repaired it --

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. Renovation, or you did without. You didn't buy new. And so certainly those are things stories would you imagine that were shared with him as he was growing up as their grandson?

CK. Well, I think the experiences Stanley had especially made an impression on him the rest of his life. Finding his mother like he did, and that's such a sad thing. And then the family was split. They weren't -- he was living with their grandparents and things. But of course I was with Ralph a lot. We were in the same Boy Scout troop; same patrol together all the time. But Stanley never was in scouting. He wasn't interested in it. But, those boys were -- it wasn't normal living with two parents and everything because they were moved around. And while they

were living here, as far as I know, they were living with their grandparents when we went to school.

Q. Mm-hmm.

CK. But --

Q. Very interesting then he had, Stanley Dunham, had the experience of being raised by his grandparents and did quite the same with his grandson then.

CK. Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

Q. And so I'm sure that that must have had quite an influence on him, as a grandfather, to know what he'd experienced as a child being raised by grandparents.

CK. Well, if Miss Scott ever gets her book finished, I'd love to see what she's going to write on the --. After we're done, if you want to, you can look at the clippings I did that newspaper. Cause it's quite interesting because she's going to write a book. She's taking time off from her job on a leave of absence to write the book. And she said she's going to call me back about some stuff --

Q. That's wonderful that she's going to contact --

CK. That I haven't got all the answers for yet.

Q. Well we're getting a little bit towards the end of the interview here and I --

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. You have been so delightful and forthcoming with wonderful, wonderful memories. I'm interested a little bit more about major historical events that you remember in the 20's and 30's that you think had an impact on your family.

CK. Well, the things of historical interest -- really not too many things happened in a little town like this. But I know one time I was downtown when I was a kid, it must've been -- it was after Hoover had gone out of office, and word went around that Herbert Hoover was going to give a little speech down in front of the post office. And the crowd gathered around there, and pretty soon the car drove up, and they helped him up on the back end of the truck and Herbert Hoover gave a little speech in front of the court -- the post office one time.

Q. Oh, for heaven's' sakes.

CK. And one of the most interesting things, I was in high school; I don't remember, I think I was probably about a sophomore, and word came around through school that if anyone was interested in going over to the Methodist church, they had an interesting speaker who was going to talk to the young people over there in the afternoon. And I went over and Billy Sunday was there, and that's an experience I'll remember. He jumped up and down on the pulpit, beat the Bible around over everything, and it was fascinating to see; he was such a wonderful dynamic speaker. I

remember that. And, of course, one time I did see FDR when he was in Wichita.

Q. Oh, my. Wow.

CK. But -- and now, I've seen another president.

Q. Absolutely. Did more than see a president.

CK. Yeah.

Q. And what were some striking moments to you in the conversation that you had with Barack Obama, January 29th?

CK. Well, just over all that he had such a friendly feeling and he -- when I just brought up something that didn't mean anything like Stanley's brother, Ralph, immediately he came right through -- and I'm not sure about Ralph too. He now lives in Arlington, Virginia, so he may have had some kind of connection with the government or something and had wintered in Florida 'cause he mentioned he was in Florida. But he's living outside of Washington D.C. now, at Arlington. At least that's what Scott told me the other day. I hope she calls back 'cause I've enjoyed talking to her.

Q. That's wonderful.

Well, I can't tell you how delightful this has been to share this hour with you, Clarence, and how much we appreciate just initiating this project. You're one of the first pieces of this really important heritage project; The Butler County Barack Obama Heritage project. And we really want to thank you for

giving your time, sharing your memories and your mementos and thank you, very much.

CK. Well, I'm sorry I didn't have any more about -- connected with the family but it's been a long time ago.

Q. You did well.

CK. Thank you, very much.

Q. Thank you.

CK. I'm pulling my ear.

Q. Are there -- are there any questions or memories, once we stop the interview that you just really thought, "Well, I wish I'd been asked that."?

CK. Well, if my wife were here and heard what was going on she would've said, "As usual, you talk too much."

Q. Not at all. Not at all. We would have been disappointed with less.

CK. Mm-hm. No, I can't think of anything. Did you want to see anything that's in the magazine?

Q. Would you like to share? Would you like to just open your notebook and share, particularly, what you were given after the - talk.

CK. Oh, you mean --

Q. Anything you'd like to share from that notebook?

CK. Oh, you mean on camera?

Q. Right.

CK. Well, if you wanted to.

Q. Or your yearbook; your high school yearbook.

CK. Well, this stuff, like I have told so many people, anything that I know about Obama and everything is common knowledge. Now, a lot of this stuff that you see and the museum and everything started out of our living room. To start out with -- we're not on camera now are we?

Q. (Camera man): Yes--

CK. Are we?

Q. Yes, as a matter of fact.

CK. But, at any rate, when the campaign first started, a friend -- he didn't want to be publicized -- called me up and said, "Clarence, have you found out that this new -- some guy named Obama is running for president and that he is related to Stanley Dunham that we went to school with?" And I started my research because I had all the historian -- through all the years. And we gathered all that. And we got Lisa Cooley up at the house and went from there, and she started getting interested in the thing, and then it wasn't very far into the thing until we had a call from a fellow named Harden, who was the American editor for the London Telegraph. And he came to the house and that started a bunch of stuff and he spread it all over the United Kingdom. And it's kind of funny it wasn't very long 'til young George Holbert, grew up here in town, he called Wendell Nixon out in

Colorado Springs said, "Hey what's this about Clarence and Rubella Kern?" Said, "We just got something from somewhere in the United Kingdom, I don't know where, and their picture's in a periodical over there."

And, and from after that -- and then we've had about a dozen in all people, but the one we got the biggest kick out of was about two months ago. A fellow came from Holland and came to see us, and he was with the newspaper in Holland, and the thing that was bothering him, it was so funny -- the man from the London Telegraph had asked me, "What kind of a person was Stanley Dunham?" And I said, "Well, he was just one of those regular old boys just kind of center of the road kind of a fella. Blah, blah." And he had misinterpreted what they had in the newspaper over there and he kept saying, "But what is this middle of the wheel thing?" Middle of the wheel, he kept coming back on it, middle of the wheel, and finally my wife said, "I think that it came from that, that you told him he was a middle of the wheel sort of -- a middle of the road sort of person and he couldn't -- middle of the wheel thing." But it's been kind of interesting. If you wanted to see any of those pictures, that what you're talking about?

Q. Yes. That would be delightful.

CK. Well, this everything here is what we gave him. You saw all of the periodicals and they even have his signature and everything

I'd saved through the years. And, of course, this memorial thing we've had -- but Stanley Dunham is just about half way down on Memorial List and this was in '92 so we've lost this many since '92. But, uh, the -- and this is the class reunion in 1955 and Stanley Dunham is right here in the picture. And then the other one -- now, I didn't have that in time to send it to, with him, but we did have the class -- whoops, going the other way. The 19 -- in 1985 when we had the 50th reunion.

Q. And he attended that?

CK. There's Stanley right there.

Q. And where was your reunion held?

CK. Well, (scratches head) I think I was master of ceremonies, but it's -- the write-up's here, but I don't remember.

Q. But he came -- he and Madelyn both came to that reunion?

CK. No. Madelyn, Madelyn wasn't here after 1955.

Q. Oh, okay. Okay.

CK. And -- where in the world?

Q. Well, Clarence, how did you happen to become the class historian? You mentioned that was one of your favorite subjects in school.

CK. Oh, I don't know. Just like Topsy, it just grew. Mm-hm. Yeah, here's a couple of pictures that --

Q. Just beautiful. Wonderful.

CK. And then here's the Governor.

Q. And January 29th, 2009 - at the college --.

CK. Mm-hm. Yeah. And then I've always gotten a kick -- but I don't know what was funny, but something must have been funny there. And then a while ago I said -- I used that phrase, "Who ate the cabbage?"

Q. Right.

CK. Well, that came from Helen Case not long ago. I helped her write part of the history of our church, and she was talking about somebody that finally had done something and said, "Finally, someone told 'em who ate the cabbage," did this, that, or the other. If you knew Helen Case --

Q. Oh, yes, I did. We had the same teacher, Joy Williams.

CK. Oh, yes. So did I.

Q. You did?

CK. Yeah, she was my third grade teacher. There's a --

Q. That's a wonderful picture. Just right, I think, as he's probably departing. That's the door there to the gym. But what a wonderful day.

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. Well, Clarence, I think now we're ready to conclude again, but thank you so much again for sharing.

CK. Well, I'm sure you have other things to do. If I get home, there will be things for me to do there.

Q. And I would love to see --

CK. If there's anything else you want to look at feel free --

Q. (Second Interviewer): We would use the rest of the afternoon --

Q. (First Interviewer): Exactly.

Q. (Second Interviewer): It's just that we have another appointment.

Q. (First Interviewer): And I don't know if Steve is -- I don't know if he's cut or not. He can cut it, I guess, later.

I would love -- is there any way for me to have copies of those pictures from the talk that he gave here when he was visiting with you? Is there a way for me to get copies of those pictures? Just Xerox copies, even?

CK. Mm-hm. We could.

Q. Are you comfortable with that if I some time, and not today, but sometime if I --

CK. Well, one thing about it, I know my wife said one thing about it as time goes on, those pictures are going to be more and more valuable.

Q. Oh, absolutely.

CK. And if you scatter them around all over the place but --

Q. Right. Right. Just a Xerox copy would be delightful from talking to you, you know, as he left. But we can talk about that more later. No, but I understand. I guess his autograph alone is quite pricey -- autographed some of his books.

CK. We're really happy. We have given some of them out but the -- and, of course, Mary's involved too. You know she was in here.

Q. Right. Right.

CK. But what would you use them for in this --

Q. Just for me. I'm just starting a notebook because I'm sure Lisa already has things at the exhibit, doesn't she?

CK. Well, I think I've given her about everything I have.

Q. Yeah. Yeah. I just thought it would be wonderful just to have one, you know, maybe one of those pictures of all four of you together.

CK. Mm-hm.

Q. But we could talk about that sometime. I know Caroline -- now we're headed to Caroline's house.

CK. You've got to go out there?

Q. Yeah. Yeah.

CK. Where does she live now?

Q. She lives in Harold and Linda Harmon's house on First Street where they used to live. Do you remember that? And then I live just around the corner; we're neighbors now. So --

CK. Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Okay.

Q. Thank you, so much.

CK. I think we can probably work out -

[END]