

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHNNY GRIFFIN

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

African American Collaborative

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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A Collaborative Oral History Project

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *African Americans in Las Vegas: A Collaborative Oral History Project*.

Claytee D. White
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PREFACE

As a young son of a black sharecropper family in the delta of Greenville, Mississippi, Johnny Griffin was thrilled that he could make more money as a golf caddy than farming. And, in spite of segregation, he managed to develop his personal golf skills and to become proficient enough to earn a scholarship to Jackson State University—a rarity in that time of the late 1960s.

However, as often happens, life situations modified his road to that dream.

In 1982 and in his early thirties, Johnny arrived in Las Vegas where his brother lived was living. In Las Vegas he found a new career path, as a dealer and casino floor supervisor. He also discovered a fresh place for his passion for the game of golf. He talks about how he developed friendships with local black golfers, participated in developing junior golf programs, and the value of First Tee and the Tiger Woods Foundation.

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September 13, 2010
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Claytee White

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This is Claytee White. I'm with Mr. Johnny Griffin in his home here in Las Vegas. It is September 13th, 2010.

So how are you today?

I'm fine. How are you?

So let's get started. Tell me a little bit about your early life, where you grew up and what your family was like.

Well, I'm from Greenville, Mississippi. I don't know if a lot of people ever heard of it. It's in the delta in Mississippi. Came from a very religious family. Father worked. Mother was mostly a housewife. And most people were going to the cotton field picking and chopping cotton. And I grew up on the golf course. I started on the golf course when I was about 11 years old. I caddied on the golf course and worked on the golf course in the pro shop. I did that until I attended college. When I graduated from high school, I got a golf scholarship to Jackson State University.

How did you at 11 years of age get that job?

Well, it was something my brother introduced me to. He had gone out. He and his friends were going out caddying. And what I mean by caddying is you've got a person's golf bag and you carry it for them for 18 holes. And back then the caddy fee was only two dollars, but a lot of them paid two-fifty, three dollars. You got a chance to maybe caddy two, three times in a day. And you might come back home with nine dollars and people that has gone to the cotton field and worked from sun up to sun down might not have but three when they get back home. So you tripled the money by going out caddying and not as hard of work as it was going to the cotton field.

So how did your brother get introduced to that kind of work?

Well, it was just my uncle worked on the golf course. And he went out with my uncle one morning just to look for golf balls so he could find them and sell them. He didn't know anything about caddying. So they took me out one day. So we looked for golf balls. And the guy that ran the -- we called him the caddie master. You know, it was a couple guys up there, but we didn't know anything about it. The caddy master said --

What is that that you're saying, what kind of master?

Caddy, C-A-D-D-Y, because that's what we were doing—caddying. And they called him the caddy master. This was the guy that put the people's golf clubs out, put them on the golf carts,

when they finish bring them back inside, clean them, put them up. He talked to us. He said, well, I need someone to caddy for so-and-so. And we were there. Okay, I'll try it. And once you did it, it was an everyday thing.

So was this a job that young black boys could get?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Matter of fact, that's all that was out there were blacks caddying, yeah, because it was country club. It was private and no blacks belonged to the country club. So that's all we did was caddy. And once we would finish caddying, we would get back on the highway and hitchhike our way back to town.

So how far was the country club outside of the town?

About five miles.

And did you live in the town or out on a farm?

No. I lived in the city. Never did live in the country.

But even the blacks that lived in the town would go and work on the farms?

Oh, yeah. To the cotton fields. Well, that was the only means of making money down there at that time because that's what was really going on, raising cotton.

Was there a black area of the city that had black businesses?

Oh, yeah. My friend's father, he owned a television and radio repair shop. And we had black plumbers and we had black storeowners. Yeah, it was pretty well done, but it wasn't enough. We had a lot of blacks, what you call them back during those days that had jib joints. Oh, yeah, that's what they were called then, jib joints.

Oh, yeah.

And we had tons of those around.

And just for the record would you explain what a jib joint is?

A jib joint? A jib joint is a place where you go and you have fun and let your hair hang down and you listen to all the blues and all the soul songs that were going on at that time. We have them today, but they don't call them jib joints.

They're a little more sophisticated than that.

Right. It's more sophisticated now. I don't know. It's something that we should get here is a jazz club or blues, blues and jazz club where people can take their wives and go out and have dinner

and have a double section, blues on one side, jazz on the other one. You can take your wife out and you can enjoy yourself. You don't have to worry about people coming in, shooting it up and stuff like that. We really need something like that here in Vegas instead of having to run to the casino to spend your money all the time.

Did they have bootleg liquor?

Oh. Well, yeah, they had it. That was a common thing down there and it still is. You can still get that. I never did get introduced to it until my senior year in high school. We went over to Indianola, Mississippi, and you could get what -- you look at one of those plastic cups now, the tall one. You could get that full of corn whiskey for 50 cents.

And I don't remember how my buddy and my girlfriend got me back home. We had plenty of it. That was 50 cents, yeah. Something like that now would cost you, oh, my god, ten, 12 bucks.

So you did that through high school. Then you went away to college. Okay. But you didn't tell me how the young black boys, then, would start playing golf.

Well, it wasn't many of us. What happened was the ones that were going out there caddying, we would get a golf club or something. We had nowhere to play at that time. So what we did -- about three miles from where we lived they had an elementary school. They had a big field behind it. What we would do -- we would go back there and dig holes in the ground. We would put a hole over here, a hole way back down there, and we would play out there. Then we would do that. At my house my parents never could keep grass in the front yard because my brother and I was always out there chipping balls and doing stuff like that. So we wore all the grass out.

I, myself -- and I think I was the only one that could do it -- was -- the young white boys that were my age, I hung out with them on the golf course. When we would get back in the woods where we couldn't be seen, I could play with them. Once we come out, well, we wouldn't want anyone to see me playing with them, you know. And every day I would go out and meet them and, you know, they'd come on, Johnny. And we would play maybe three, four holes back in the woods where no one could see us. I did a lot of that. During high school we got it to where we could play on the air base. We had an air base in Greenville.

And they have a golf course?

And they had a golf course on the air base and the air force moved out. So we could go out and play at the air base. That's where I got almost all my playing in was at the air base. I had this close friend of mine, he was a high school football coach at a different high school than what I was at. He took up the game. He was like a second father to me. Whenever he would go he would want me to go with him. So I played out there and I got pretty good at it. I was good at golf and baseball.

I was the first black out of Greenville to sign a golf scholarship to a university. It was appalling at that time because, you know, everyone was looking at their newspaper like, oh, we got a black guy here that can play golf that good, you know. And a lot of the kids that I grew up with knew me. And I had one friend that he was white. He and I played out at the air base. We both were good. We had this gentleman -- I can't call his name, can I?

Yes.

Okay. His name was Mr. Buehler. And he owned two Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises there in our hometown. He sponsored Charlie to go and try and get his touring card to turn pro. And I'm thinking, well, Charlie and I, we're both good, why didn't he come to me and ask me did I want to do the same thing? And that was something that stuck with me for a long time. I said, aha, okay.

But after not being able to play on the golf and having to play in the woods, you kind of realized?

Right, right. But then the big shock hit me when Mr. Buehler, the guy that had all the money, wanted to sponsor Charlie and didn't come to me and say anything to me. I said, oh, okay, now I understand what's going on. But it didn't really affect me. But I've always kept that in mind and try to relay it to people that I think can do something, you know, not to let someone influence their thoughts on trying to achieve their goals.

Right.

Yeah. You can't let something like that hold you back. When I finished high school I attended Jackson State and stayed there for a year. I had a girlfriend and a kid. I'm trying to think of the name of that Temptations' song that ran me from college, made me go back home. After that she and I broke up and I stayed out of school for about nine years.

Then they had a problem over at Mississippi Valley. They couldn't get enough golf players in there. The gentleman I was talking about, Mr. Peyton, that was like my stepfather or something, he spoke to the golf course over there. So they came over to Greenville and they wanted me to come over there and play golf for them. And I went over there. I was in my late twenties then. I was a golf captain. I stayed at Mississippi Valley until '81, the end of '81.

My brother that lived here was down there. I had kind of gotten tired of school then. I was already 31, getting ready to turn 32 in about nine or ten more months. So he said he was coming back here. So I told him, I said, well, I'll go back with you.

So who else in the family had already been to Las Vegas, already lived here?

Just my brother.

So how did he first get to Las Vegas?

Girl, he came to Las Vegas, I don't know, about maybe around '72 or '73; something like that. Yeah, he was a loner. He never stayed in one place too much. He was a bricklayer. He just ventured out, you know, would go to California for a while. If he couldn't get work, he'd go somewhere else. Ending up coming here and this is where he stayed. He was here until I got here. He didn't leave until maybe '88 or '89. Then he moved up to Seattle and he's been there ever since. Yeah, he's been there ever since.

So you came here in 1981?

Eighty-two.

Eighty-two you came to Las Vegas. So what kind of work did you get when you first came?

I couldn't. I couldn't find any. I had enough money. And then when my money started running out, I got a cooking job over at the Frontier. They were on strike. So I had to cross the picket line because my money was running out.

I had gone out to the Desert Inn and I had talked to the pro out there because what I was trying to do, I was trying to get somewhere I could play golf and by the time I turned 50 I could try to get on the seniors' tour. And he told me he was going to give me the job. I don't know. Maybe three, four days later I went back to see him and they denied me the job. For what reason I don't know.

And this was in the 80s?

Uh-huh. And my money started running low and I had to find a job. And I went in and started cooking at the Frontier. Then my father passed.

Back in Greenville?

Right. Then I had to go home. Then I came back. I was walking down Las Vegas Boulevard. And a gentleman from a gaming school came out and said, well, you look like you should be in a casino as a boss, because I wore a suit, had my briefcase and everything. And I took him up on it. Then I went in and learned how to deal.

So which casino was this?

At the California Club is where.

Oh, downtown.

Yeah. But I wasn't there no more than about a month or two. Then they moved me to Sam's Town because Boyd owned all those properties. When I was in school I wasn't learning craps because I had been messing with cards all my life. All they had to do was show me how to pitch them because I knew how to deal them. And once they showed me how to pitch them, I didn't even have to look at the surface. I could just do this and hit them all. All my friends that in craps were getting jobs. I said, whoa, wait a minute; they're getting jobs and we all started together and here there's three months and they're out getting jobs. So I went over and started learning craps. And I hadn't learned enough. But when I went down to the California Club they put me on stick. That's the guy in front moving the dice. My voice was so heavy that they hired me because everyone could hear me.

That's right.

And they started showing me little by little at the Cal. And I had some cowboy boots and some of my friends stayed at the California Club. So they sent me to Sam's Town, which was a country and western joint. And I guess, you know, they look at us and say, hmm, he's got cowboy boots on; he must be a cowboy. So they sent me down there and I've been with them ever since.

So you're still with Boyd Gaming?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, ever since '84.

Fantastic. So what do you do for Boyd Gaming now?

Casino floor supervisor. That's the guy that stands there and watch everything, 21 and dice, try to

make sure everything's being done the right way. Yeah, that's what I do.

Okay, good. So now, tell me about the golf here in Las Vegas.

Well, when I got here I didn't know anyone. My brother and myself, we would go out and play.

Where did you play at first?

Muni (Municipal course). Yeah, at old great Muni. And then I met Lee Daniels. And he and I became real close friends and we would go everywhere. I met the other guys, like Eddie McKenne -- he's deceased now -- and Jimmy Bell, Senior. These were people that were members of Valley View. And then I started meeting people through Lee, being with Lee. And I just about met everyone that was a member or had been a member of Valley View. And we used to have outings and we would go to California, Arizona, you know.

To play golf?

To play golf. We would all get together, all the black Valley View members and stuff. And I can't remember what year it was Lee Daniels' wife, Isabelle, came up with the idea of him and I starting a junior golf program. She was the brain thrust behind this because all we were doing was just going, playing golf and whatever. I went over to the house and we discussed it. We redid the junior golf program.

Years ago they tried to have a junior golf program with Valley View, but it didn't last. And then Lee and I came in and we started having kids out at Craig Ranch. We started with about two, three kids. And our sole purpose behind it was for kids that would never be introduced to golf and their parents didn't have the money where they could support the kid if they decided they wanted to learn how to play golf. That was our main purpose. And we started that off and it grew like wildfire. And we have kids that have gone to college and attended college on golf scholarships and some of them that are living productive lives now.

Great.

Very productive lives, yeah.

Oh, this is wonderful. So which year did you start the junior golf revamp?

You know, I don't want to lie. It might have been back in '90 or '91; somewhere up in there. I don't want to lie.

Okay, that's good.

But I'm sure Lee -- have you talked to Lee yet?

Yes.

Well, what year did Lee say? Do you have that?

I'll have to go back and look.

Okay, go back and look because I'm sure it had to be around '90 or '91 when we started that.

Okay, good. I'll check.

Okay. Yeah, check on that. We've been going ever since. I don't get a chance to participate with the juniors anymore because I work graveyard. By me working graveyard I don't get off until 10:45 in the morning and they're done by then. And then on Thursday when they're out they don't start until around five and I have to be in bed asleep by 6:30 or seven because I've got to be up at one o'clock. So I don't get a chance to spend time with them. But I'm still there.

Okay. And you have a lot of other golfers working with the juniors?

Yeah. Paul Pradia. We have Luke. We have Jim Hart and Lee. There's a couple of women that be out there, but I don't know their names because every now and then I can get a chance to go out and look at everything, say, if I'm on vacation or something and don't leave town. Then that's the two days I can be out there with them.

Good. So this started in the early 90s and it has continued ever since?

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Oh, that's wonderful.

We have grown from just being Valley View and a part of Western States. Now we are a part of the Tiger Woods Foundation, oh, yeah.

So when you say Western States, is that --

That's all the black golf associations all over the west out here. Oh, yeah.

Okay. Now, tell me what the Tiger Woods Foundation.

We have kids -- hold on just a second. Let me see if this book is still in here. You did your interview with Paul Pradia, right?

Right. I think you did that one with Paul. And Lee Daniels' granddaughter just won a \$10,000 scholarship (I think it was up in Pennsylvania and Jack Nicklaus was there). She did an essay on golf and she had the best essay.

Wow. And she's a golfer, as well?

Yes. Part of our junior golf program. Yeah.

Wow. Oh, that's amazing.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, she won a \$10,000. One of the juniors did real good and he's pictured in the monthly golf magazine that they have out here at the golf courses. Yeah, we had two of our students in there.

Oh, that's wonderful.

Yeah. But they're doing very good. And once you -- I don't know if you talked to Paul or not.

I think I did.

I think you did. And Paul could enlighten you on a lot of it because he's with the junior golfers. That's my buddy.

So, yes. Just speaking of Tiger Woods, what has Tiger Woods meant to black golfers?

He's meant more than any athlete has done as far as mind-set for black kids to me because you had Aaron in baseball, you had Brown in football, you had Kareem and all these guys that were role models in other sports. But Tiger took everything to a new phase. Not only did it help black kids, it helped whites, Mexicans, every race on Earth. When he came in it was something different and new to them. And the trend has carried over because we have, I don't know, it's thousands upon thousands of kids in golf now that before Tiger came along it wasn't.

Yeah. It wasn't glamorous until he came along.

Right. And you didn't have the kids interested in it like they are now.

Right. Yes. So when the most recent episode about Tiger took place, what did that do? Did that damage any of that influence?

Well, to me it's damaged him as far as his sponsorship and stuff like that. He might have lost a little bit of that. But for someone to hold this against him, then they need to search their lives because he's not the only person in life that has made a mistake.

Oh, yeah.

And not the only athlete that has made a mistake. But by him being as big as he is, blowed it way up and out of proportion. And we have athletes right now that has done worser than Tiger. But by him being up on this pedestal where -- you have to excuse me, but this is how I feel about

it -- where there are white kids, he's their out. And when they play golf they don't recognize Phil Mickelson, John Daly, know people like that. First thing out of their mouths is Tiger.

So it's a hurting thing, but like I tell people only the weak-minded people are you going to hear things that's negative about Tiger every time they speak of him. Because if you speak of Tiger, speak of the things that he has done to elevate golf to where it is now because before Tiger to win a million dollars on the pro tour was -- it wasn't even thought about. I can remember when they would win a hundred thousand. That was a super year. And he raised the bar on money, what they can have money. He's the one that's got it so they can make the money that they're making. And whenever you hear one of the even pro golfers say something negative about Tiger, he's saying something that later he will regret because once he sit down and think about it and realize, hey, without Tiger I wouldn't be making the money I'm making. Even though he messed up, he did something wrong, then why can't we accept it and let it go? You've got to let it go. To me he'll be just fine.

So has it damaged the foundation, like the foundation doing all of this for --

No. No. No, it hasn't damaged that. And, plus, Tiger has -- I think he has a school.

He does.

Right. Where kids learn on computers and all this. No, I don't think that has damaged any of that.

Okay, good.

Because I don't think they can stoop that low. I really don't.

Good. What has playing golf meant for your life?

It has meant everything because without golf I don't know where I would be. I learned years ago when I was young in caddying—you have doctors, you have lawyers, everyone that's in business out there on the golf course. And while I was caddying I could hear them talk. And I sit up, okay, this is where they're transacting their business; they're doing it right here on the golf course.

And I learned when I got into the business, the gaming business, it has really helped me because when I came through they didn't think -- you know, they always think black people can't play golf. So when I was at Sam's Town, all the people they had that they thought could play golf and were so good, when I came there and they found out I could play, they were all obsolete now because here's Johnny. And it helped me because I could play and that meant all the bosses

wanted to go and find out. Look, let me see how he play, too. And that gave them respect for me, as much as it did me for them.

That's correct.

And it has helped me a whole lot. Yeah, it has helped me a whole lot. And I get to meet people on the golf course that I might not have met if I was doing something else. And the people say, hey, Johnny, if you need anything call me. And these people have power. So that means golf is a bigger contributor for you if you apply it in the right way. So even though you could be a lawyer, if you learn to play golf, you can transact a lot of business there on the golf course. And that's what they do. And I found out that's what golfing was all about was people transacting their business on the golf course.

That's correct. And Jimmy Gay, the person I mentioned earlier who came here in the late 40s, he was one of the first blacks who held an executive position at the Sands and he used golf in the same way.

Right. Right.

The men that you play with here in Las Vegas, how much do they talk about or know about the history of black golf in this city?

You got very few, very few that really know about the history of golf because a lot of them hadn't been playing long. Some started four years ago, some started ten years ago, and some started 15 years ago. But, see, for me I've been doing it for, what, about 47 years. So I've been around it and doing it. And we've had a lot of black golf pioneers that could never have a chance to get on the golf course and show their talent because blacks weren't allowed to play on the PGA tour. And we had quite a few of them -- Ted Rhodes. I think Ted was out of Nashville, somewhere down in there. We've had quite a few.

I never will forget back in '68 or '69 my friend and I went up to Memphis to watch the St. Jude Classic. Pete Brown was playing in it. He was a black golfer. I think Pete Brown was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. I watched the white folks -- Pete would hit a ball over the green. They would just walk on it. Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Instead of just letting it be there, they would gather up, look around and walk on it, you know. Oh, yeah.

And it was tough when I played college golf and we played against white kids and stuff.

We would have their parents standing up with change in their pockets and you're getting ready to hit the ball or putt or something and they'll do this. But you had to learn how to block all that out. Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was something. Yes. A lot of people doesn't know it, but it's still there.

But the people you were playing with, the other students had no problems?

Oh, no. Oh, no, no. Just a black golfer. Oh, yeah, just a black golfer. Oh, yeah.

But, no, I'm talking about the white kids that you played against in college?

Yeah. No, they wasn't --

They didn't have any problem?

No. They wasn't going to do that to their kids. Their kids, I'm saying the white folks would do that.

No, no, no. That's what I'm saying. But the kids themselves didn't have a problem playing against black golfers?

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no. They didn't have no problems because they felt like, oh, I can't let him beat me, you know. Just kids being kids.

It was just normal competition.

Right, right. And when I was in college everyone's about grown now anyway. Yeah. And I had fun one time down in Tallahassee. We were playing Florida State's golf course and had one of Lee Trevino's kids playing with me, one of his sons. I had fun with him, because he wasn't that good, by saying, hey, your daddy is a pro and you can't beat me? And I just had fun with him all around the golf course. And I got to the last hole and I told him, I said, I'm going to have to hit this one like your daddy. Yeah. Now, that was one time I had fun with one.

But most of the time it was just a grind. It was just a grind. You're trying to play your best. When you got white people out there, it could be a challenge. Yeah, it could be a challenge.

When you were playing at that level of golf, did you have black parents at the games, as well?

No. No. Very rarely because if we were -- say, we played a tournament in Tallahassee. You got different universities there. No. Matter of fact, we were the only blacks there from Mississippi Valley. Yeah, we were the only blacks there. Most of them were your white -- I call them white

universities because, you know, they are predominately --

Yeah. They were white at that time.

Right. At that time, yeah, that's what you called them.

So the school where you got your golf scholarship was one of the few schools that had a golf team?

No. We had them in the SWAC. But we were the ones that went to this golf tournament at this particular time.

I see. And when you say the SWAC, what do you mean?

Southwestern Athletic Conference.

Okay, good. Do you play in any of the golf tournaments here in the city now?

No, no, no. I don't really have the time.

So before you were on this shift, though, did you play any of the tournaments?

Oh, yeah. I was a member of Valley View. We had a little get-together on Saturdays and Mondays. Like on Monday, Lee Daniels and myself and Eddie McKenne, Jimmy Bell, Senior -- we're the ones that started the Monday group of guys that play on Mondays that get together. We're the ones that started that. Eddie passed away, Jimmy got older, and Lee changed jobs and I changed casinos or something and changed shifts and couldn't do it. But we turned it over to the other guys and they're still carrying it on.

The monthly tournament of Valley View, I used to do those. They have a Saturday group where they will play every Saturday a monthly tournament. Then we have a yearly tournament where people come from all over the country to play. I haven't played in them in quite a while because I'll be working and we might have something going on. And in the casino business if you've got something going on and it's a holiday or something, you have to work it because that's when business comes in. They want everyone working. Every once in a while I could sneak one in.

Which location of Boyd are you working now? Are you still at Sam's Town?

Yeah. I'm still with Boyd Gaming.

But still at Sam's Town location?

Oh, yeah. Yes.

Okay. Are you aware of the NAACP's golf tournament here in Las Vegas?

Yeah, I'm aware of it. I've never played in it.

Oh, yes. I think this is only probably the eighth or ninth or tenth year.

Probably. I've never been able to participate in it. I've had people to call me wanting to know what I be able to play in it. I'll tell them it all depends on when the tournament falls, see. We've had a couple where I was having a crap tournament. We've got people coming in from Hawaii, everywhere, for the tournament and I can't get off. I can't get off because I've got to be there. This is business.

Of course.

And I've got to work and I can't take it off. So, no, I haven't played in one. No, I haven't gotten a chance to play in one. I think Frank Hawkins has put on a tournament or two.

Well, he is the president of the NAACP. So it's probably that same one that we're talking about.

Well, he had one, one time where he invited out to (Lee's end).

Oh, yes. I remember that one, as well.

What do you see as the future of black golf here in Las Vegas?

Here in Las Vegas? I see it being successful because we have introduced a lot of black kids to it that has gotten grown now. When they start having a family, I'm sure they're going to keep their kids doing it. What I be wanting them to do is -- I can't be out there with them. But the ones that has gone and finished college that golf enabled them to do this, when you come back, come out and be a positive influence for those kids that hadn't made it to where you are and you can remember when you were there and in that same position that they are in now. Be an influence for them. Say, hey, I was like this, I did this, now I've gone to college, gotten my education, all because I started right here, and let me help you. This is what I want our kids that has come through the program and has been successful to come back and do. And the ones that haven't been successful that may have fallen off and gotten in trouble and now gotten their life back together and can realize what that junior golf meant.

Now, do you see any of that happening yet because you guys started junior golf long enough ago that you have some college graduates?

Oh, yeah.

Do you see any of that happening yet?

Well, I wouldn't want to lie and say yes or say no because I'm not out there with them enough to see anything like that. Now, I could probably when I talk to Paul or Jim Hart find out, yeah. But as far as me, I can't verify it because --

I'll be asking some of them the same questions.

Right. I'm sure they'll be right there to give you that answer because they're there every week with them.

Right. Which golf course is your favorite in the country?

I don't know. I would say the Greenville Country Club back home --

Oh, really.

-- where I grew up because I could never play it and this is where I grew up on it. I worked on it.

But what about today, you could go back and play it, couldn't you?

Yeah, I can play it now. I just went back and played it in May.

Oh, okay. Good, okay. So what is that like playing that golf course? What was that like the first time you were able to play that golf course?

It was to me a dream come true where I could get out there and I could play it and I didn't have to hide from anyone.

Didn't have to go into the woods to play it.

Right. I didn't have to hide from anyone. When I went back a lot of the people were deceased, but a lot of them knew who I was. Oh, Johnny, Johnny. It was a joy because this is where I grew up and I knew what it was like there and I knew how some of the people was. I didn't grow up in a racial thing like when you see some of Mississippi. I know how rough it was. But I was lucky because I grew up on the golf course.

That's correct.

And that discrimination thing, it was there with the older folks. But by me being young, they didn't deal with me. I dealt with the kids. And me and the kids, we were just like kids, you know.

But there were still some of the rules.

Well, yeah, there were rules you had to go by. But that was everywhere.

Yes.

You see, that was everywhere. But that was a release being out there because I tried it one time because my mother would haul cotton choppers and stuff like that to the fields. And I went out one time. And I never will forget. You had the cotton sacks that go over your shoulder. I'm a little kid.

I grew up like that.

Oh, I'm a little kid. Now, I'm a little kid. I go out there, girl, and I thought I had made so much money. I think I made about 25, 30 cents. I didn't have nothing. I said, Lord, have mercy. I said never again will I come out here.

And you had worked all day.

Oh. But I wasn't doing nothing because I would get back on the truck and get an orange or a cookie or something and eat it. But it was just an experience. And I said, oh, no. And when I got on that golf course, then the field was obsolete. That was obsolete.

That's right. You were very fortunate.

Yeah.

Give me the names of some of the golf clubs around the country that you've been fortunate enough to play.

Oh, quite a few. Oh, girl, I've -- down in Shreveport, I think it's Chennault. And then down in Nacogdoches, they've got a club there named Nacogdoches that sits on the highway. I played at Texas A&M. They're in Houston, right? I think. Yeah, they have a golf course. I played their golf course. We used to play a couple of other golf courses there in Houston when we would have a golf tournament there, say, Mississippi Valley going to play Texas Southern and stuff like that. Yeah. And I played in Missouri. I played in the Carolinas. You know, I played in a lot of places.

So where is your dream golf course? Right now if you could play anyplace, where would it be?

If I could play any golf course I would like to play Augusta National where they hold the Masters. Yeah, I would love to go or be invited to play there. But I know that would never happen. Yeah, I would love to play that one, yeah, because Tiger made them redesign the whole golf course.

Oh, yes.

Yeah. When he won that first tournament, he won by so many shots they had to redesign most of the holes.

Yes. Okay. Tell me about golf fees. I know how popular golf is. But for somebody who wants to start playing golf here in Las Vegas, what kinds of fees are we talking about?

It's expensive.

So what are we talking about?

Just a normal golf course like Muni or something else similar to Muni, you're talking about maybe 30 bucks per round.

So that means 18 holes?

Right. If you're riding a golf cart. If you want to walk, it might be 17 or \$18. That makes a difference, but who wants to be out there walking in that heat? Now, the other golf courses you're talking about a minimum -- this is Muni down here. Now, the one above Muni, you're talking about 55 to 60. Now, the next tier up here --

So is that Steve Wynn?

Oh, no, no, no, no. Steve Wynn -- you're in the hundreds' range now. If you want to go play Bali Hai -- that's the one out on the end of the strip out there that hadn't been long put out there, it's all the way on the or end of the Hacienda, way down on the end down there.

Oh, so the other end of the Mandalay Bay?

Yeah. It's way down there. It's past all your casinos. Okay. That one, about 200, 250, around.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

So what makes the difference between the Municipal Golf Course and the one that you just described for \$200? What is the difference if I want to play a game of golf?

The condition of the golf course. Yeah, the condition of the golf course. Now, say Muni, it's not as well manicured or groomed as this expensive golf course. And they be expensive like that to keep people like me out. It's for the elite, the ones that can afford to pay that kind of money. It used to be like Pebble Beach out in California. Pebble Beach used to be, I don't know, 50, 60 bucks you can get on there and play. Not anymore. You know what I'm saying? Since Tiger came along, he raised the bar.

And golf has become more popular.

Right. Right. And the golf courses that are well manicured, they're going to charge you to play them. Yeah. Go ahead.

I was going to get back to some of the intercity kids that play golf. Are there special intercity games now or were there special games?

Back during those days?

Uh-huh, when you were playing.

Oh. No, no, no. Not when I was playing. No, we didn't have anything like that. No.

When you started --

Oh, the junior golf program?

Yes. Did you have any intercity games?

They might have, but I can't remember because our sole purpose was to help kids that parents couldn't afford to send them to do nothing.

Okay. And some of those kids were kids we consider intercity kids?

Oh, that's what they were. Yeah, that's what they were.

Okay, good. What is the First Tee?

First Tee? That's the Tiger Woods Foundation, First Tee.

So that's what it's called?

Yeah, First Tee.

Okay, good. Tell me about the Senior Games. At one time you said that you were looking forward maybe to playing on the senior --

The senior tour.

-- tour. What is that?

That's the one after they leave off of the regular PGA tour; they go to the senior tour. And that start at 50 and above.

Oh, I see.

Right. Right. And that was the one -- I knew I wasn't going to be able to make the regular tour because I was in my late 30s then. And then by having to work, when you're working you're not able to get out there and practice and do what you need to do every day. So I said, well, by the time I turn 50, I'll see can I be ready. And if I could've gotten a job on the golf course, all I

wanted was access to a golf course where I could play and hit all the golf balls I want and didn't have to pay. And that didn't happen. So I had to start working and I've been working ever since.

Okay, good. So does that mean that you would never be able to do something -- in retirement one day would you ever be able to do the senior tour?

No. I don't think so.

Your skills would be too rusty?

Yeah. My skills have diminished and I don't put in the time with it like I used to. It would be kind of hard right now because you've got to go to qualifying school and all that kind of stuff, same thing you would have to do even when you were younger. You've got to have the finances to be able to do all this. You have to do a lot of traveling. You might be in California this week and then the tour might be in Florida the next week. That's a lot of traveling. So, yeah.

Okay, good. What do golfers mean by the 19th hole?

That's when you're done. That's where you go sit back and talk all the talk you want and have your drinks. Yeah, that's where everyone go to talk about how bad they played or how good they played and have their beer or their shot or whatever. Oh, yeah, that's the 19th hole. That's it.

Okay, great. Well, I thank you so much for this information. Now, is there anything else that I skipped that I should be asking about?

You know, I can't really contemplate right now on that. But if I think of something, I will call you and I'll let you know. If I can't get a hold to you, I can let Lee know because I know Lee sees you.

Yes. And if you think of something that I'm missing in the questions that I ask, when I send your interview to you, you can always tell me about it, okay? And one of the things that we can do -- let's say that you think of something that was really important in your golf career, your golf life and I didn't mention it or we didn't talk about it today, we can put in an appendix and you can just write about whatever that is.

Okay.

So that's another possibility. So I would like to be very, very comprehensive when I talk about black golf, black golf in Las Vegas. I'm really interested in the subject and want to do a good job with it.

Okay. Yeah. I've enjoyed it here. I really have.

Good.

And I've met a lot of people. A lot of the black people. It's really been good. Yeah, it's really been good. A lot of them are deceased now.

But I have a list of names I think from Paul and from Lee of people who are still playing and who should be interviewed. So I want to get about four or five more good interviews. I have a list of people.

Okay, good. Okay. Well, that's good. That's beautiful because -- let me see. George Simmons, you might have him down.

I have to look at my list again.

Okay. Because I don't know a whole lot about his history. But George Simmons, Jimmy Bell, Senior, I know those two, and Ron Ward. These are some of the foundation of Valley View -- Ron Ward, Jimmy Bell, Senior, and George Simmons. I think at one time George was the president of the club years and years ago.

And Valley View is the golf course located where?

No. That's the name of the golf --

That's the name of the golf club.

Right. Right.

The group that you guys are a part of. Why did you name it Valley View?

Now, that I don't know. That was the name of it when I got here and that's the only name I'm familiar with. I don't even know if Paul knows that, but he probably could get it for you.

Right. And Valley View was always a black club?

Yes, it was. It was a black club in Las Vegas, Valley View. Now, I've heard that we've had a couple more of them that's trying to start up.

Oh, good. Valley View I believe is also that early one that Dr. McMillan, Jimmy Gay, Q.B. Bush and some of the early, early players coming here in the late 40s, early 50s --

Okay. Well, yeah, those are the guys. Woodrow Wilson.

Yes.

Woodrow Wilson. And Woodrow and them started Westside Credit Union over there.

That's correct. That's correct.

Right. Right. Well, you've been here a long time, then.

No. I have just done a lot of research.

Oh, okay.

Interviewed a lot of people.

Oh, okay. Okay. Yeah, those guys were the backbones. I love Woody to death. He did me wrong. We used to have barbeques over at his house and he was my homeboy. I said, Woodrow, you need to give me the recipe to your barbeque sauce. Homeboy, I can't do it, can't do it. I said, Woody, if it was me and I did something good like this and you said, Johnny, can I have -- I would be more than glad to give it. Woody wouldn't give it up. I mean Woody had some of the best barbeque I've ever tasted and he took it to the grave with him.

Oh, my goodness.

Yep, took it to his grave with him. I got so mad at him when he passed away because I can't believe Woody didn't give this to me. And I would have him make me a whole gallon of it, you know. He didn't mind doing that. I say, Woody, make me some sauce. He would make me a whole gallon of it, but he wouldn't give me that recipe.

That was like this black guy. We called him Humpty Dumpty. He had this store and he had this big old barbeque pit. We had people from Arkansas, Louisiana, everywhere come to Humpty to make their barbeque. I'm talking about this is rich white people. This is back there in the 50s and 60s. White people ain't going to have you doing nothing for them, I mean coming from two states over. That's how good he was. And I said, Humpty, you got to give me the recipe on how you fix up those ribs to make them taste so good. You know that man couldn't give it to me?

You're going to have to just make up your own recipe.

Yeah. Yeah. I've done that a couple of times. My brother before he died, he come up with a couple of things with spaghetti sauce and all that sort of thing. Oh, yeah. I've come up with some pretty good little pieces.

Okay. But not as good as --

The family loves it. So that's what I go with. If I get company -- oh, I got some of them, even Paul, I used to make that hot water cornbread, see. When I had my house I was off on Saturday,

Sunday. That's when I could be with the kids all the time. And Saturday when we came off the golf course we would go by my house. And I had a freezer in the garage and I had tons of fish in it. We'd have a fish fry and I'd have butter beans or whatever and make that hot water cornbread. They all talk about it. Paul used to -- I got to take some home to my wife; she want to know how you make it.

Did you share your recipe?

I would tell them. But, no, it was real simple. Back then I would roll it up and I would put it in my deep fryer.

Like hush puppies.

Great big old hush puppies. But it would be fried and it would be real good. But when I learned about my self-rising cornmeal, oh, girl. Now, if you want to make you some hot water cornbread, get you some self-rising cornmeal. That way you don't have to use the plain cornmeal and trying to make it right. Get that self-rising cornmeal, oh, girl, ooh. All you have to do is add the water to it. Everything else is already in there. Yeah. Yep. I don't know if you like hot water cornbread.

I try to eat as little as possible.

Oh, okay.

Because I gain weight in about two seconds.

Oh, okay.

Did you ever get to play golf with Woodrow Wilson?

I don't know. I can't remember if I played with Woody or not, see, because I was way better than all of them. Usually if we had an outing, they would have their little group together, you know, and those guys couldn't play that good. So very rarely would any of them play with me.

So who were some of your golf buddies that played equally to you?

Oh, well, we had Louis Redding. They got him into the Hall of Fame, Las Vegas Hall of Fame. He was the number-one golfer of Valley View when I got here. Yeah. Yeah, he played better than me. That was about it, just Louis, because back during those days it would either be Louis or me. And Louis turned pro. So it was Louis, then me, then George Simmons. But things have changed now because I don't get out. I don't play anymore. We got guys out there that are playing every day and some that have retired from their jobs and they play every day.

So when you retire do you expect to go back on to the golf course?

I try to get me in a few rounds every now and then now.

But when you retire?

When I retire that's all I plan on doing is playing golf and fishing.

That's wonderful.

And if I can't do that, then something wrong.

Okay. That's wonderful. Well, I like that, playing golf and fishing. That's wonderful.

Yeah. I can't think of nothing else I want to do.

Good. That's great. Thank you so much.

Okay. And thank you for taking the time.

And I will be mailing it or sometimes I have an interview in a certain area when I get ready to send them out. If that's the case, I'll let you know I'm coming and I'll just drop it off.

Okay. And we're going to get together and we're going to do one on this gaming if you ever want to sit down and do one on gaming.

Oh, that would be fantastic.

Yeah, we'll sit down and do something on gaming. We'll come up with something. If you want to make a book out of it, we'll make a book.

Well, what we could do is just have the one book and have both.

Oh, yeah?

Uh-huh, in the one book.

Okay. We'll get together again and we'll sit down and talk about it.

Because a black person in gaming here and especially that goes to your level, that's still kind of unusual.

Okay. We'll sit down and we'll talk about that in a little bit. It's not --

So are Mondays good days for you?

Yeah. I'm off on Monday and Tuesday, which is Sunday night and Monday night. Now, Tuesday, I go in Tuesday night, which will be Wednesday morning.

So Monday is your best day?

Yeah, Monday is fine for me.

Why don't we talk about gaming -- when would you be free again on a Monday?

Right now I'm free every Monday. You can't come the 27th because that's my birthday. I might have --

Oh, that's fantastic. That's a Monday. So you have your birthday off.

Oh, yeah.

So now, is the 20th, next Monday, is that good?

Yeah. Right now, yeah. I don't have anything planned. If I have to make a doctor's appointment or something, I'll call you.

So let's say about 9:30.

That's fine.

We're going to talk about gaming. And you can give some thought. I would love to talk about your first jobs, how you progressed, how you got that first job, and I would like to talk about some of the things that you've witnessed in gaming.

Oh.

So if you can give that some thought.

Oh, yeah.

Okay, good.

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