

RUSSELL TAYLOR

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

November 19, 2025

Remote Interview



Funding provided by the State of Minnesota's Legacy Amendment, through the vote of Minnesotans on Nov. 4, 2008, and our generous donors and members.

Copyright © 2025 by Minnesota Historical Society

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy and recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Oral History Office, Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Blvd West, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102.

TRANSCRIPT—RUSSELL TAYLOR

Interviewee: Russell Taylor
Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
Interview Date: November 19, 2025
Location: Zoom
Length: 02:09:46

Kim Heikkila: This is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Wednesday, November 19, 2025, and I'm here on Zoom with Russell Taylor. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Russell about his involvement at Oxford over the span of many years and some years ago. So, thank you so much, Russell, for taking the time to tune in with me here on Zoom, because you're up in Bemidji, correct?

Russell Taylor: Yes.

KH: So I appreciate your willingness to get the technology set up so we could talk about Oxford tonight. I'm going to start by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself, starting with when and where you were born.

RT: I was born in St. Paul in 1951. So, I'm 74 years old now.

KH: And where did you grow up?

RT: I grew up in St. Paul.

KH: In the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul?

RT: Yeah, in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul.

KH: And I think when we talked on the phone a while ago, you were telling me about—I'm going to stop that question. I'm going to ask you this one. Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in when you were a kid. What was it like?

RT: I grew up in; it was still the Rondo neighborhood. It was on down off of what

was Rondo down around Western Avenue. I went to McKinley Grade School from kindergarten up until third grade. And then my family moved west. The neighborhood started growing west. So we went west across Dale Street, off of Dale and Aurora.

[00:02:00]

RT: I mean, we moved around a lot. So this is the second place I remember, off Dale and Aurora, I ended up going to Maxfield School, which was on Victoria and St. Anthony. Maxfield School is still there. It's still a grade school, still in the same location, everything. So I went to grade school there during fourth and fifth grade.

One of the things that disappointed me about that was we had to move again because going into sixth grade, or during my last year in fifth grade there, we voted for police officers, for the sergeant, lieutenant and captain. I got elected as a sergeant on the police force, which was for school crossings and things like that.

But my disappointment was that we moved again. So going into sixth grade, I was in another school district called J.J. Hill School, where I went. But at that time, we moved a little further west, and I was on Iglehart Avenue, probably maybe a quarter block away from Lexington. I could walk out of my front door and see Central High School. If I walked straight across the street, there was a wooded area that we used to call "the woods". So, I went through the woods and that's when I discovered Oxford Playground. Because in the neighborhoods I lived in previously, Oxford was like a little distance away from me and for a kid just walking around or riding a bike, it was a little ways.

[00:04:00]

RT: But this time I'd moved past the places I grew up, like around Hallie Q. Brown and Ober Boys Club, to Oxford was my nearest playground. So that was my first experience of going over to Oxford, just going through the woods and there was this giant playground over there. And so, I learned how to skate when I was growing up around

McKinley. So that was one of the things I did because I was kind of a shy kid and I didn't play basketball or football at that time. I got introduced to that stuff while I was at Oxford, but I already knew how to ice skate.

KH: I know you skated quite a bit. I'm going to ask you about that. Actually, because you've been talking about the neighborhood and where your family moved, I'm going to share my screen here so you can see your screen and you can see me okay, right?

RT: Okay.

KH: So I'm going to share my screen because I want to show you a map of Rondo that I have. So can you see that okay?

RT: Yeah.

KH: So this is where you end up down here. I mean, here's Oxford and I think this map, oh gosh, I can't remember what year this is supposed to be, maybe 1960 or so. But you grew up, originally, when you were younger on the eastern side.

RT: Yeah, down by Western and Rondo. Yeah, I see Western right there.

KH: Western here, and then there's McKinley and the Hollow. And did you play at the Hollow as well?

RT: I did, yeah. At one time we lived on Central, right across the street from the Hollow.

KH: And what was the Hollow? How would you describe what the Hollow was at that time?

[00:06:00]

RT: It wasn't much of a playground. It had a very small warming house. It had a baseball field. There was no football field, but it had a baseball field. I tried my hand at that for a moment, but it wasn't too well organized. We didn't live on Central that long before we moved again. I did skate down there. I started off on some two bladed skates,

strap ons, and then I went to figure skates, and I skated on them until we ended up moving down by Central High School. And then I got a pair of hockey skates. I really liked that. But I went from hockey skates to racers during my career.

KH: Okay, so what was it about skating that you liked?

RT: It kind of got me out. I had four other siblings. I liked being outdoors and I knew about how to work a sled and all that, but my biggest kick was just having to be out on a big rink and just skating. It got me out of the house. It was something that I tried to do just about every day I could. A punishment for me would have been having to stay in the house, you know what I mean? Because I had to get outside. And so, it got me outside all winter. As long as the ice was out there and it wasn't melting, I could go out, and I could get my exercise and my fun and skating.

KH: And what did you do in the summer?

RT: Not much, because I hadn't been introduced to football until we had moved a half a block from Central, and then I saw the guys going over there. I was kind of shy, but with my size, I forget who even got me into it, but they were having tryouts, which was basically no football strategy. It was just a lot of exercise and running and I guess seeing what kind of speed and size you had and maybe what the coaches may be able to do with you.

[00:08:00]

RT: And so, I actually made the Midget team as a starter. My love of football grew right then and there, so that's where it started at Oxford playground.

KH: How old are you when you're playing Midgets?

RT: Let me see. I was in seventh grade when I started.

KH: Because you had moved down to that part of the neighborhood when you were going into sixth grade?

RT: Yeah.

KH: So, you must have been, what, about 12 when you moved? Something like that?

RT: Let's see. Yeah, 12, because I was in my last year of grade school. That's also the year I met David Winfield.

KH: How'd you meet him?

RT: Because he lived across the street from Oxford and we went to J.J. Hill School together. He was already an established baseball player, even at 12 years old. And that continued that year that we went to J.J. Hill, and then we both ended up going to Marshall Junior High after sixth grade. But that's when I started knowing David all the way from that time until he went up to the University of Minnesota and left to go play pro in San Diego.

KH: And you were the same age, same grade?

RT: Yeah, we're the same age. It's just a few months. I think David's birthday is in November. So, if he's not 74 yet, he will before this year is out. It's the same graduating class.

KH: And you said you had four siblings, so you're one of five kids?

RT: One of five, yeah.

KH: And where are you in the order of siblings?

[00:10:00]

RT: I'm the oldest. I don't know if I should put this on here, but I'll do it anyway. In the last month and a half, I lost two siblings. One of my sisters passed November 13, which was last Thursday. It hasn't been a week yet. So, I've got to go down for her funeral on Monday. I just had to put my brother away on October 9, so now we're down to three. I've still got two sisters, but I'm the only male left.

KH: Oh, I'm really sorry to hear that. That's really hard. And I'm amazed that you're still able to sit and talk to me tonight.

RT: Well, as I said, I just went through this six weeks ago, so I kind of know the routine now. Just keep myself together.

KH: That's a lot. That's a lot. So, even before you moved down closer to Central, closer to where Oxford was when you were younger and at McKinley, was your family in general, a pretty active family, whether it was sports or just being outside?

RT: Yeah, we were. I mean, once I started skating, they all did. So, by the time my youngest sister was about six, and I was already about 10, they just followed my lead and we all skated. Everybody had a pair of skates. They didn't do it as often as I did, but they knew how and they did it quite a bit. It was a lot of fun.

KH: Am I remembering correctly that you were raised by a single mother?

RT: Yes.

KH: Did she know how to skate? Was she active in that way?

[00:12:00]

RT: She did. She knew how to skate. Yeah, but I remember one time she twisted her ankle really bad, and that was the end of her career. But my mother was a young mother. She was only 17 years older than me, you know what I'm saying? She had five kids in a row, so we're all one year apart.

KH: Oh wow. She was busy, raising five kids that close.

RT: She was a strong woman though. You know what? I don't ever remember, not one day in my life waking up and my dad was in the house. I have no memory of him ever being in the same place I woke up in. So she basically did it by herself.

KH: That's a lot. What did she do for work?

RT: Well, she was on welfare for a long time, and then she had a domestic job

with a family in Highland Park. They were the DeCosters. That's their name. They were the DeCosters from Highland Park. They were really good to her. I remember all the holidays, she brought something home that they had given her, whether it was presents or food or whatever, you know what I mean? She was a real good lady and her husband for her to work for. But as we got older, she went to school to be a beautician. And so, she was a certified beautician.

She had to give that up though, because the chemicals they were using were too hard on her. She couldn't inhale them. It was making her sick. So then she went to work for the Wilder Foundation. I don't know how many years she worked for them, but she worked for a long time for Wilder. I remember when she passed, they planted a tree in her honor somewhere down there by where Wilder is. She died young, she was only 60 when she passed.

[00:14:00]

KH: Yeah, that's young. [Pauses.] So you're moving around a little bit, but you're further east in the Rondo neighborhood until you're about 12. You were born in '51, so that's until about '63ish, when you move closer to Central. So you are growing up then and must have memories of the mess that was the construction of the freeway.

RT: Actually, we used to play down there when the guys were gone, the guys who were grading out the—well, actually, I remember when they weren't doing that, and the neighborhood was just one unit. There were no bridges to walk across, just sidewalks, and there were houses all down in there. I remember some of the people in the neighborhood were trying to fight the eminent domain because we felt like they weren't getting enough money for their properties. And so, I remember a lot of homes were moved from that area. They put them on these big trucks and wheels and whatnot, and they moved them out and relocated the homes. But a lot of them were also torn down.

[00:16:00]

RT: So once they tore them all down, it was just a desolate track from Western all the way up as far as our neighborhood went, to Lexington. Then they started gouging it out because the street was level, but then the freeway drops down. So all that had to be graded. So on weekends when the construction guys were all gone, we actually would go down there and play around, in the form of going and having fun down there where they're doing that work at. Then at the same time they were gouging it out, they were building these walkways across. But it was just the steel girders. That's all it was.

So there was a lot of sand underneath there, and we would scale across the girders, and sometimes we'd fall off into the sand, whatever. But that was how high that sand was at that time. You didn't fall too far before you hit it. But, yeah, we played down there where they actually were doing the construction on 94 and then that construction went on for a long time. I don't know how many years it was, but it took a while to get that thing graded out, and then actually start putting the concrete down for the freeway. It was a while.

KH: Is that why your family moved further west? Was it because of the freeway coming through?

RT: No, it wasn't. We just moved around. I believe, looking back on it, it's probably because she had trouble paying rent in a lot of places, and had to move around until she got more stable. And then when she got more stable, we stayed. Like the place we stayed at when I went to Central, we didn't move at all. From the time I was in eighth grade until my senior year, we didn't move. So that offered some stability right there, because we're in the same spot four years in a row.

[00:18:00]

KH: And by that time what was your mom doing? Do you know where that time

period fell in her work life?

RT: That's when she was beginning to be a beautician. That's when that started. And she didn't quit right away. It kind of got to her health after a few years, and then she decided she had to change up and do something different because whatever they were using at that time to fix hair just wasn't good for her. There were some strong chemicals back then. You know, you open a bottle of something, you get a whiff of it, you know whatever it is, it's some strong stuff. Not like today. They've come a long way with that kind of thing.

KH: Had your mom and her family grown up in the Rondo area also?

RT: Yes, my mom did. She did. She had a sister, and we had aunts and uncles. Our family was growing up there.

KH: Okay, so you had a deep root in Rondo?

RT: Yeah, because my mom was born in St. Paul, I think, in 1934. So that goes back a ways.

KH: And what was her name?

RT: Her name was Elizabeth Barbara Taylor. Everybody called her Barbara.

KH: So what, if anything, were you and your friends talking about as the freeway was coming through? Was that something that was a subject of conversation beyond, "Hey, let's go play down there?"

RT: No, we were young. We didn't know all the politics. So I guess the freeway must have come through there around '61 or '62, somewhere in there. So that would only make me like 10 or 11. We didn't understand all the politics of what they were doing, and we didn't know anything about eminent domain and them being able to take the houses. We knew it was just a mess in the neighborhood.

[00:20:00]

KH: Yeah, and again, this is not necessarily about the freeway coming through, but since the freeway construction impacted what was happening at Oxford as well, there is a connection there. But do you remember as a kid, even though you were a kid and you were doing kid things at that time, did you get a sense that the adults around you were upset about what was happening?

RT: I did. I did. Because really, it divided the neighborhood. It totally divided it. You used to be able, just where that freeway is, you were just walking on level ground across to the other side to get from say Rondo over to Central Avenue. I mean there weren't any bridges, there was no division in the neighborhood. It was just one unit. The neighborhood we grew up in depended on it functioning that way because it was a self-contained neighborhood. So for years it was hard to get from one side to the other because of the construction. I mean, they couldn't tear everything down at one time, but you just couldn't walk from one side to the other anymore. It took a long time to put that back together.

But I remember growing up in the neighborhood and there had to be at least four or five grocery stores that had grocery carts in them. There were no convenience stores back in those days. They were run by grocers. We had them at every end of the neighborhood. Selby Avenue was a thriving business district as well as Rondo, I remember that. Because there were times my mom would have me go down to like NSP [Northern States Power] on the bus. I always remember she said, "When you pay this NSP utility bill, bring me back a receipt. I've got to make sure that I got proof that I paid it."

[00:22:00]

RT: So I would take the Rondo Stryker, that's the name of the bus line, downtown. I knew where NSP was. I go in there and pay the bill, catch the Rondo Stryker back, okay? So the neighborhood was self-contained. We had gas stations, dry cleaners, grocery

stores, you name it, clothing stores. We didn't have to leave the neighborhood to get those types of goods. But over time, I don't know what the city council calls it, they gave it a different use. The usage for Selby Avenue turned into low income housing. That's the end of the bargaining we got. The businesses moved over on Grand Avenue. They got rezoned for business.

Because there was no Grand Old Days when I was coming up. And the lie was that in our neighborhood, there was a housing shortage, so you get low income housing. But if you look at Grand Avenue, you see a lot of houses that turned into businesses. So I guess they didn't have a housing shortage because they would turn a beautiful home into a law office or a wedding boutique, you know what I mean? And these were houses. These weren't just businesses they put up. They used the houses as the site of the business.

[00:24:00]

RT: And so, I know I was getting older when that happened and I had also studied up at Housing and Urban Development, or we called it HUD, and I trained to be an appraiser. There was a big fight over the four guys in that neighborhood that got the chance to be appraisers at HUD. Because the program was written by a guy called James Mann, who was a police officer. He was the head of the Black Policeman Association. So he wrote this program up and it allowed us to train at HUD. It was horrible how it started off because they put us in what was the break room. So while we're trying to learn about single family dwelling appraisals, people were coming in there all the time because that's where you had the vending machine. So it was constant interruption in the classes and done on purpose because they had other rooms that didn't have that in there. So we had to fight for ourselves to try to get through the program.

So, the head of the region, I think his name was Mr. Dees [ph], we got him to come up from Chicago to check out the conditions that we were being trained in. He was a

Black guy at that time, which was unusual to have the kind of job that he had. He came up from Chicago, and he straightened that mess up.

So, the three of us toughed it out and graduated from the appraisal class. We actually did a bunch of appraisals. We worked for a place that was in the neighborhood run by Mr. Mann, the cop. It was called the Model Neighborhood Development Corporation. So, anyway, we got to learn a lot more about the community. The reason why he did that was because in the neighborhood, they weren't getting the true value for their homes when they got appraised, when it'd come time to sell them. Everybody was getting an undervalued appraisal. So we were just trying to get the neighborhood a little justice. Unfortunately, that blew up because Mr. Mann had some personal problems with one of his employees. And I don't know. When that happened I was about 22.

[00:26:00]

KH: Okay, that would have been in the '70s?

RT: That was in the '70s, yeah. In fact, they were paying us weekly. I remember it was kind of a lot for a training because it was about 250 dollars a week. I was taking independent study at Metropolitan Junior College in Minneapolis so I can keep my eligibility up to play basketball. So, in the daytime, I'm at HUD until 4:00. Then I've got to race over from HUD to Minneapolis to basketball practice. [Laughs.] And so, it was like having a full time job playing ball and taking independent study at school to keep my eligibility up.

I ended up doing that for two years and I still made Minnesota's all junior college team two years in a row, despite the fact that the only time I spent on campus was practicing. I didn't spend any time in the classrooms. That was all, nowadays they would call it online, but back then it was called independent study. So you just had to get assignments, do them, and turn them in. So, anyway, that was an experience.

KH: Yeah, it sounds like it. [Pauses.] So just one other question before we kind of start focusing really on the Oxford part of this story. When we talked on the phone, and it makes sense given where you lived when you were very young, you've already talked about having skated and kind of played in the Hollow and on the trench that the freeway was going to be in. Tell me about your experience, if any, at Ober Boys Club and/or Hallie.

[00:28:00]

RT: At Ober Boys Club, the big experience I had was summer times, we went to camp. They had a day camp, too, that you'd go to. You go down to Ober Boys Club, you go out there, they take you somewhere out. We thought it was a long way away. It really wasn't, but it seemed like a long bus ride. But it was a day camp, so I did that. Then there was a weekly camp they had, which we thought was a really long ride, too, but it wasn't. It was only out to Shoreview. But there's a lake out there. I can't remember the name of the lake [Snell Lake]; maybe I will before the interview is over. But we would go out there and they had a dock and a swimming area out there and they had huge picnic grounds and cabins for us to stay in.

We did that every year. I think it was like two or three dollars to go. It was something that was affordable. It was really cheap. So did that for several years at Ober Boys Club. I didn't play any ball down there though, but I know they had a baseball diamond down there, and there was a lot of basketball being played, although I hadn't picked up the sport yet. But it was like a Christian club. I remember that much.

KH: Yeah, because wasn't it Union Gospel Mission?

RT: Yeah, Union Gospel Mission and Ober Boys Club. That was it.

KH: But you said that you liked being outside, so the camp must have been something that you enjoyed?

[00:30:00]

RT: Yeah, that was a lot of fun because we went canoeing. And even though we were there for a weekend, we did have these cabins to stay in. We also went camping overnight someplace. We built lean-tos, that's what they called them back then, and we had sleeping bags and we were totally outdoors. So the lean-to was just in case it might have tried to rain. But anyway, it was a little bit of a shelter. And so, we learned a lot of outdoor stuff. And I used to enjoy going to Ober Boys Club.

But I went to Hallie Q. Brown, and they also had a day camp and that was cheap, too. Really it served as a place to kind of babysit the kids while the parents were working, you know what I mean? Because we get on those buses at like 7:30 in the morning and we wouldn't get back to Hallie until like 4:00 or 4:30. So, if you had a working parent, they could trust that you would be gone and be back by the time they get off work.

And that was a lot of fun, too. They took us to places that were kind of wooded areas, but they had shelters out there. We did outdoor camping and a lot of hiking and stuff like that. And we did canoeing. I know I was on the St. Croix River more than a few times with them. They showed us how to flip a canoe and get back in it. So there was a lot of safety stuff on the water, and it was a lot of fun, too.

But I never could enjoy it more than a year or two because we started moving again, then I'm away from it, you know what I mean? It was a lot of fun though. I was involved in Hallie Q. Brown and Ober Boys Club as a youngster.

KH: And was that when Halle was north of where it is now?

[00:32:00]

RT: Hallie was, I think, on Kent Avenue. I know it's about a block off University, that one down there. A block off of University, and it was east of Dale Street. It was down in that area.

KH: So, during this time, and by this time, I mean kind of your broad childhood, whether when you're on the eastern side of the neighborhood or even as you move west, how would you describe the racial composition of the residents of Rondo?

RT: From my growing up, it had to be at least 85, 90 percent Black. I remember there were white people that lived there, but maybe one or two on a block. We knew them all because it was just such a minority that we knew who they were, you know what I mean? Nobody ever had any trouble with each other. Not that I can remember.

KH: Okay, so by the time you were growing up, Rondo, like you say, was predominantly an African American neighborhood.

RT: Yeah. Well, it was back when they had that redlining. So the redlining, the eastern end was Western. The western end was Lexington. The northern boundary was University, and the southern boundary was Selby. So it was like a big rectangle. If you had to buy a home, you had to buy it in that box because otherwise you wouldn't get financed. The neighborhood was so well kept that if you came through there and you didn't see anybody on the streets, you would swear it was a white neighborhood.

[00:34:00]

RT: Because opposite the fact that Black people tear this up, tear that up. It did look right; it was well kept. I remember having to cut grass, to shovel snow and keep the yard looking clean at all times. The whole neighborhood was mostly working Black people. I know a lot of the guys that were the age of my dad, they worked on a railroad. A lot of them worked at Whirlpool. They worked at 3M, Ford Motor Company. The guys had these pretty decent jobs, and they bought houses and raised the kids, and the neighborhoods were immaculately kept.

If you go through there right now, it doesn't look any different than it did when I was growing up. There are very few apartments in that Rondo neighborhood, so you don't

find a big influx of people coming from out of town, because in that neighborhood, there's nowhere for you to stay. So the migrants coming in from Gary, Indiana and Chicago and all that, they've got to go over into north Minneapolis, or they've got to go on the east side, because the Rondo neighborhood doesn't have the apartments to accommodate big groups of people. They just don't. I mean, to this day, there's still just very few apartments.

KH: Yeah, now that you say that.

RT: Now, there were a lot of beautiful apartments on the eastern end off of Western and Selby. Those are historic buildings now. There's a lot of white people that live there, down there by, what is that? Sea Frost or whatever that is?

KH: W.A. Frost and the Y.

[00:36:00]

RT: Down in there, those apartments are still there from the '20s. You know what I mean? And they still look good. They're kind of a little upscale now. A lot of them, they gutted, but they kept the brick facade outside, so they still look very good. That neighborhood's looked like that since I was growing up. So that was populated by a lot of white people that worked downtown, or whatever, because the bus line was right there and the cars. And it's close to the cathedral. So we were never too thick down in that area right there.

Then I heard over St. Paul's history that the St. Paul Police Department had a deal with gangsters, that you can stay down in this neighborhood down here. Just don't raise hell in St. Paul. And so, I mean, it's the real true gangsters from the '30s and '40s used to come in here, and they used to chill out down there.

KH: Yeah, the Al Capone kind of gangsters.

RT: Yes. So, yeah, those are the guys that were coming up. And those buildings

are still kept the way they were back then. So our neighborhood kind of started maybe on that end up by Selby, maybe a block or so going west before we start populating it. Because those buildings were kind of rich buildings, kind of expensive, you know what I mean? They still are.

KH: Yeah, they still are.

RT: Yeah, there was a little business district down there off Selby and Western. They had little businesses down there, liquor stores and bakeries and what not. And C. Frost, or W. Frost, whatever that is, that's been down there a long time. Then there was a place a little further down the street called the Curling Club. We didn't know what curling was, but the Curling Club was down there for years and all they had was like a big logo out there that said Curling Club on it.

[00:38:00]

RT: But actually, as a kid, we didn't know what went on in that building. It's kind of like a secret building. There wasn't a lot of advertising about what that was because we didn't do curling. We didn't know what curling was.

KH: Yeah, curling is its own weird little sport. I didn't know what that was until I was well into my adulthood.

RT: Yeah. So we didn't know. We just know there were people going in there doing something. I found out because I was watching the Olympics one time and I saw curling on TV. So, oh, okay. They got this disc, and they got brooms in front of it, keep swiping away the ice and all, wherever it was, to keep it smooth. That's what that is. But it sat there for years, and nobody ever bothered the people that went in there, because Black people didn't go in that building. We didn't know what it was.

KH: That's right on the, what, south side of Selby?

RT: Yeah.

KH: Yeah, just on that border of the neighborhoods.

RT: Right there. Yeah, I remember that.

KH: Okay, so let's start getting into Oxford more specifically. Tell me what Oxford was, what it looked like when you moved to that part of the neighborhood.

RT: It bordered Iglehart and, was it Chatsworth all the way up to Concordia, which used to be Rondo. It had a slope to it where the warming house was. There was like a little hill that you had to just walk up a few steps to get there. And it also raised the basketball court. So that made Oxford kind of different because we had this little raised court. So if the ball came off the court, you had to run down a little hill to get it back.

[00:40:00]

RT: And so, Bill Peterson, I remember him, used to keep it immaculate. We always had a great looking baseball diamond. He always did the lines on the football field. He had one of the little machines that walked around and dropped sand. You could just see it was just perfection the way he laid it out. And he also did the rink. He put up a hockey rink. Bill thinks that the hockey team was the first all-Black hockey team in the United States. He's got some information on that. I didn't play hockey, but Dave Winfield, he played hockey. I just never had interest. I liked speed.

There was no Jimmy Lee Center. That was just a part of that wooded area that I was talking about. They razed a lot of those trees to put the Jimmy Lee Center and the Oxford pool up. Because where that stuff is, was a bunch of trees going all the way up almost to Lexington. So I guess at one time there had probably been homes. I don't know if they're ever homes or not because the trees were pretty big. And the wooded area was about a half block long. So, I mean, we used to play there also as well as Oxford, play hide and go seek up in there.

[00:42:00]

RT: In the back of the warming house, there was another kind of a large hill that went up toward Lexington. I remember that hill, too, because we're practicing football. They call this dangerous nowadays, but back then it was just what we did. We'd start playing football. We'd have some guys halfway up that hill. They'd run down that hill, and they'd have to block somebody that was coming up. So there's a big collision there. [Laughs.] And so, we thought that's football, the way we learned it, you know what I mean? High speed collisions on a little hill. Nowadays they'd never do that. Boom. Nowadays they wouldn't do anything like that.

KH: Yeah, I suppose not.

RT: That's what we did. I remember during August, when they were trying to formulate the teams, there were a lot of guys who came from the Hallie area, Hallie Q. Brown, because at that time Oxford didn't have much sports going on, until we started getting more Black people in the neighborhood and that's where our coaches were down there before Bill came. I remember when Bill came, he kind of cleaned the image up. So we had a lot of guys who grew up in the Ober Boys neighborhood and Hallie, looked kind of rough around the edges there. And so, Oxford wanted to have a cleaner image. So, a lot of them didn't want to play at Oxford.

And they were great athletes, too. I mean, they used to just whoop Oxford to death before Oxford started getting some good coaching and some better players down there. But once they established that winning tradition down there with the Black coaches that came before Bill, and Bill himself, that made Oxford the place to play at. That's where the best of the best was. And that went on for years, you know? The only thing we ever played for was championships.

KH: So you said that these guys who are playing at Hallie and at Ober Boys were a little bit rough around the edges. What does that mean? What does that mean to you?

[00:44:00]

RT: Well, back then, they had like processed hairdos and they were kind of street oriented, you know what I mean? They could either play ball, or they could be gangsters. Either one, or both. I mean, not real true gangsters, but you know what I mean? They were into stuff. Because there's a lot of stuff that was going on, like say up on Selby Avenue. If you were going to be an athlete, Selby Avenue wasn't really the place to play because the influences are not towards sports. The influences are toward doing other stuff. And that's where a lot of them guys were. If they weren't practicing, you could find them up there.

But at Oxford, it was more kind of a clean cut place to be at. No nonsense, hard work. You're dedicated to the sports and when you get done with that, you don't really go hang out with the guys that hang out on Selby. It's just two different worlds.

KH: You said it was some of the Black coaches who were at Oxford even before Bill got there, that started this kind of transformation of the image of sports in Rondo, at Oxford.

RT: Yeah, I can remember a guy named Mr. Cotton lived right across the street from Oxford, right on Chatsworth. Right exactly across the street. And there was a really big dude named Mr. Carter and a couple other coaches, I have trouble with their names. But Bill came in. I think Bill's dad helped him get in. Bill got a job with the city, so he actually ended up being the director of Oxford.

[00:46:00]

RT: I think over the years he had to build the trust of the guys who came there before he did. Because Bill, when he came, he was a good coach. But he started coaching the Pee Wees. That's the youngest group. He didn't coach the Midgets and Juniors. The guys who were already established down there continued to coach the older players. But it took Bill, I'd say it took him a few years, before he was really known as *the* director, you

know what I mean? He worked up to that, and he worked to get their respect. Right now, he's just like an icon in the neighborhood. If you don't know Bill, you didn't know Oxford, point blank. You don't know Bill, you don't know Oxford because he is the guy. Ever since, like I said, the first two or three years, once he got broke in down there, he was the man.

He established some discipline. It's like if your mom asked you, "How come you're not going down to the playground?" "Well, Bill put me out." And then, at first it was like people wanted to go talk to Bill to see why he put my son out. Well, Bill would tell them straight up, "He's down here fighting and carrying on." So, over time, it was like, "If Bill said you did this, you did it." There's no arguing anymore. There's no going talking to Bill about why'd you do this. It's like, oh, if he said you did it, you did it. So just do your little week off and then go take your butt back down there.

KH: And that was because he had built up that much trust by that time?

RT: Yes, that's what it was. At least in my opinion.

[00:48:00]

KH: And you said, I think just now and when we talked a few weeks ago, Bill had to kind of ease into this and build this relationship, especially with the African American coaches that were already down there. Do you think that was just because he was an outsider? Was it because he was white? Was it because that would have been the case for any new coach slash director coming in?

RT: No, I think it was because he was white. Although he did go to Central, too. Yeah, he did. Bill was a Central graduate. He lived on the other side of Lexington, but he was a grad of Central. But I mean, I just think that his work ethic, I think he just outworked a lot of people. You have to respect that. Because when I saw Bill doing them baseball diamonds in the football fields, I saw him doing it by himself. That was his job. I

don't know who was taking care of that before that, because when I went down there, Bill was down there. So I don't know who did the rink and all that, but I know when Bill got there, Bill was out there. And he's putting in more than 40 hours a week. I already know that.

He just did it. He just continued to work year after year after year. And he was a tremendous baseball coach. And our sponsor for baseball was Attucks Brooks, the American Legion, which was one block from Oxford on Rondo, right there on the corner, they sponsored the baseball team. Bill had them playing in Omaha, and some of his players went to Alaska, and he's coached, I think, three Hall of Famers. And Oxford was winning.

[00:50:00]

RT: We called it Oxford, but the sponsor was Attucks Brooks. That's the uniform name that was on there was Attucks Brooks because they were buying the uniforms. They get a little advertisement there. But it was an American Legion post. I think it's post 606, if I believe right. It's since changed to a little restaurant, but for years it was Attucks Brooks. A lot of professionals came over to the American Legion in St. Paul. I've seen Earl Battey, who played for the Twins. There was an outfielder, his name was Lenny something. He played center field. And several other baseball players would come to the Legion. This is before baseball players had all this notoriety and they had these security details follow them around and you can't get to them. But kids would run up to them, they'd shake your hand, or whatever and you can get close to these ball players.

As well as guys who used to go to University of Minnesota, they would come to Oxford, and they'd work out a little bit. As kids, when they're running around the field, we're jogging around in the back of them, because we knew they were stars at the U. Like Bobby Bell, he was University of Minnesota. He later went and played with Kansas City.

Bobby Bell would come down there with a couple of his partners and we'd be practicing with them. I mean, just doing calisthenics and running around and stuff like that. But it was just a thrill to have them come down to Oxford to work out.

KH: Were they drawn to coming down to Oxford to work out because they knew it had a good program because they came up through it themselves, because they have respect for it?

[00:52:00]

RT: Not that they came up through it, but word gets around when you have a place that has a winning tradition. Because all these guys were able to go to the American Legion and sit down and have a beer, stuff like that. We weren't, because we're too young. But they liked St. Paul. Because if you remember, when St. Paul had a minor league baseball team, that baseball team was on University and Lexington. St. Paul would play the Minneapolis Millers at their stadium when Willie Mays played. So the reputation of the neighborhood is what drew them because St. Paul was like a Black neighborhood. They had everything in the neighborhood you needed, and it was not dangerous at all. And sports figures, they came over here to St. Paul.

Then that baseball stadium was right where the old White Castle used to be, not the new one they got now, but the old one was on the north side of University. It was east of Lexington, right at the dividing line, right there going east. At that time, there was a trolley running through there, too. So when that trolley went out and they buried it, they left all those bricks and tracks. So when the light rail came through, they put the light rail right where the old trolley used to be. They just dug that up. When they dug it up, you could see all the bricks and the metal from the tracks of the old trolley. So they just modernized the light rail with something that had already been there.

That same system was on Marshall Avenue in St. Paul. It used to run across the

Lake Street bridge, the trolley. Cut right through our neighborhood at that time.

[00:54:00]

KH: So, as a kid, what did it mean to you to see these really good athletes come to the neighborhood?

RT: It was uplifting because it kind of shows you that maybe I can do that. Not I can do that, but just maybe, I might have a shot at that if I work hard. And it was an Oxford tradition to work hard. We not only played for Oxford; we played for the neighborhood. When we were coming up, Saturday football was at a place called McMurray Field, and McMurray Field was on Lexington, and it was right before you got to Como Park. You go out Lexington and, on the west side, there used to be about four football fields. So, on Saturdays, we had kids from all over the cities playing on four different fields at the same time. So you always could kind of peek around and see maybe who your next week's competition was going to be.

And with the way it ended up, it was the same guys that we were playing Pee Wee and Midget and Junior football against were the same guys that we played against when we went to high school, because these playgrounds were from around the different areas of the city. So some teams that we would play end up being Johnson High School kids or the Harding kids or the Highland Park kids, depending on what playground they played at and what high school they went to. We're playing the same kids from the time we're 10 until we're 17. So we always know who's going to give us the stiffest competition from where they came from.

[00:56:00]

RT: But, like I said, I think you had four fields, and you had two games on each field. So you had about a dozen teams playing every Saturday, at least. And, like I said, it was just one field side by side to another field, just enough room to stand in between.

There were no bleachers.

KH: Are those fields still there?

RT: McMurray? I don't know. The McMurray field is still there. I don't know if they still play football.

KH: I think I know where you're talking about.

RT: Yeah. Because I went to California for like 15 years, so I don't know what happened.

KH: I think there are some fields there.

RT: They still got it?

KH: I think so.

RT: It's right before you go to the entrance that takes you down where the lake is on the right side, that plant place, the atrium. It's right before that. You see this massive field. Those are all football fields.

KH: I don't know if they play football there. I know I've seen kids playing soccer there.

RT: Probably soccer right now versus football, but that's where we played football.

KH: So you've talked about meeting Dave Winfield and kind of growing up with him together. Who else? Who were the other kids that you were teammates with that you were playing with at Oxford and elsewhere?

RT: I have too many to name, but a bunch of us made All City and we honed our skills at Oxford. You know Clyde Thomas? He was an All City football player, and he was a two time state long jump champion. I think he finished second or third in the high jump. Clyde was only five-nine, and he would put a show on because the fans were looking.

[00:58:00]

RT: He'd walk under the bar and look up, and this is before the Fosbury flop. This is what they call the western roll, where you've got to kick your leg over the top and kind of twist. And so, people couldn't believe that. How can a five-foot nine guy jump six-four, you know what I mean? He had springs.

Then we had with David because he was All City baseball and he was also All City basketball, although he only went out for the team one year. Now I made All City basketball, too, but I played one year junior varsity, two years on varsity. In my second year I made All City. Then I made All City football twice my junior and senior year. We had another guy named Larry Henry. Larry made the All City football team and another guy named Charles Coleman. So the '68 football team put five guys on the All City football team for St. Paul.

KH: At Central?

RT: At Central. That's only because that's all that the rules committee allowed from one school was five, because we could have put 10 people on that thing. But they allow five so they can get players from other teams also on the team. Those are just the guys I played with. There were other guys that came before us that did the same thing. They were All City football, basketball, track, all coming from the same neighborhood. And all of them practiced, cut their teeth at Oxford.

KH: So Oxford was like a feeder to these high schools.

[01:00:00]

RT: Yeah. As far as competition goes, like playing basketball, Oxford had a reputation of drawing players from all over the city. If you wanted to play in the summertime and you wanted to get better, you've got to play with the best, so you need to go to Oxford. So it was always competitive, not only with the people in the neighborhood,

but people who came from other neighborhoods to practice down there, to take this skill back to where they play. So competition was always tough.

KH: Did you all from Oxford go to other places to practice or were people just coming your way?

RT: People just mostly came our way. We didn't have to go anywhere but Oxford because we knew they're coming down there. As Oxford started, after Jimmy Lee, Bill was still down there running Jimmy Lee Center and the pool, but they built a new Martin Luther King Center. Martin Luther King had their own basketball league, and there was starting to be competition between Oxford and Martin Luther King. So, Oxford Playground, we would have a tournament kind of like more in the wintertime, and we drew a lot of college players who had gotten done with their season would come and they would get in the Oxford League. Bill Peterson was running that.

Then during the summertime, everybody started going down to the King Center because they had a great indoor gym because it was a newer facility. That's why. And so, the King Center League, I think that morphed into the Howard Pulley League, which has got the best players now. They used to start going from the King Center to playing at the Salvation Army on West and 7th. That's where the competition was. It was no longer at Oxford in the summertime. Oxford still was open and still doing sports, but the bigger names were going to King Center and Salvation Army.

[01:02:00]

KH: I want to talk a little bit more specifically about the sports that you were involved in, starting with skating. I mean, we've already talked about it a little bit. You also had some really good results in your speed skating competition, am I correct?

RT: Yeah.

KH: Tell me about that.

RT: Okay. So I got this brand new pair of hockey skates for Christmas one year. Let's see, I had to be in ninth grade. I got a brand new pair of hockey skates, and I was skating on them and breaking them in and everything. So then I found out that Bill said that they were going to be having a skating tournament down at Oxford and the announcement was about a month from when it actually was going to happen. The winners of all the playgrounds were going to go out and determine who the champions were going to be at Como Park and skate on the lake. So now I want to win this thing. So I went up to this skating shop. There's this old white guy on Selby. He had a little skating shop he'd run. I'm going in, I told him, I want to get my hockey skates sharpened. And he said, "Well, they're already pretty sharp. They're new. What do you need them sharper for?"

I'm like, "I'm going to be in this skating competition, and I want them to be the best. I want to win." So, he goes, "I got something you need to try out." He showed me these racer skates with these long blades on them, right? Because nobody was skating on these long blades at Oxford. They're either figure skates or hockey skates. I didn't see any racers. So the racers didn't look as good as my hockey skates. But he said, "I'll sharpen them up for you. I'll polish them up, they'll look just like new, but I need to trade you for yours."

[01:04:00]

RT: So, I'm like, "I don't know. I just got these for Christmas," and this is only like in January or something. And so, I made the trade. [Laughs.] I go back up there a few days later. Just like he said, they're polished up, they have new strings in them, the blades are sharp. He said, "They're a little bit different because they're longer. So you've got to practice a little bit." And so, I started practicing in them and had to get used to the blade because it had me stumbling. My stroke was off a little bit because the blade was longer,

but then I got the hang of it.

And you can fly in races compared to hockey, there's no competition because it has a longer blade, and that means a lot versus the shorter hockey blade. They're built for stopping, starting, and cutting. These things are built straight up for speed. Bill had made an oval track, because the racetrack was going to be oval. So he plowed it some kind of way where there was snow in the middle and then there was a track going around it. So, it's sort of like an oval. That way you could practice making those turns at the end of it because it's different. You have to do a kind of a crossover step when you're making a turn in racing skates. So I started practicing down there and I got really good. When the time for the races at Oxford, I easily came in first. It wasn't even close.

[01:06:00]

RT: When I went to Como, I was in a division that I think was 14 and 15s. No, 13 and 14s. I was 13, this guy, 14 years old, two of them beat me. But it was my first time ever skating on a lake. It was like skating on glass. The distance was longer than Oxford and I remember getting off to not the greatest start because I almost caught him in the end. But anyway, it was good for third place. So there was Debbie Montgomery, who was the police officer, she won first place in the women's. And for my age group, I finished third place.

Bill still has that because he sent me an article that had my name on it that I finished in third place. I didn't know that thing even existed. It had Debbie Montgomery's name on it, too.

KH: Were you the only kid at Oxford then who had the speed skates?

RT: I was at that time, yeah. I got some offers to join these white skating clubs. But, the thing is, my mom didn't have the money to get me around because it was like today's gymnastics. They take these gymnasts all over the place to compete. That's how

speed skating was. You know what I mean? You had to have money for your uniforms to join the club. It was just a cost where I started playing basketball because all you need is a pair of sneakers and a ball and you're good to go. But yeah, it would have been a great opportunity, I think, because I really could have taken that long way if I had somebody to sponsor me back then. But that was the only one, so nobody was doing that during that time.

[01:08:00]

KH: I think I mentioned this to you when we talked on the phone. Through this project and talking to Debbie Montgomery as well, I am learning a lot about how popular speed skating was at that time. I had no idea. I had no idea that it was a popular sport, that there were that many races that were happening in Rondo or at Oxford. I just hadn't a clue about speed skating.

RT: Well, I could have used more of it. But, like I said, I couldn't get in one of the clubs because of the cost because like I said, in the wintertime, they go all over skating. I mean, there's all the lakes and parks and recreation we got in Minnesota, there's some skating event going on everywhere. It gets competitive because speed skating is not about being a ballerina, it's about speed. You know what I mean? Fastest guy wins, or girl or whatever. And there's different distances. Some are sprinters, some are long distance skaters. I was more of a sprinter. So, once or twice around that oval, full blast, I loved it. But I couldn't continue that, so that's why I started playing basketball so late, because I didn't start until my sophomore year at Central.

Now, the guys I played with, they said, "If you had started playing when we started playing basketball, we probably would have won a couple state championships," because me and David both made All City. But me and David were the latest people to start the sport on the basketball team. We put four guys on the All City basketball team. I

played two years on a varsity and David only played one.

[01:10:00]

RT: But the guys we played with, they had started playing in fifth grade. Me and David didn't start playing until 10th and 11th grade, so that's five or six years. If we had that five or six years, I don't know, Central might not have gotten beat for a couple years.

KH: Well, and that speaks to your athleticism that you had that late start and still were that competitive and that talented.

RT: Yeah, because we were seniors. I think we finished 21-2. With five more years' experience, there wouldn't have been any competition for us.

KH: What position did you play in basketball?

RT: I played forward, and David was the center. Then we had a guy named Artie Carroll playing guard. Artie was All City. Dave was All City. I was All City. And Phil Webb, he just passed last year, and Phil Webb was All City in basketball and football.

KH: I would like to ask you, or have you talk a little bit about something you mentioned on the phone a few weeks ago, too, was about the discrepancy that you faced between football, coaching at Oxford and coaching at Central and what you all did.

RT: It is a world of difference. I feel like the best coaching that we got was at Oxford playground. It wasn't in high school. Our high school football coach had no clue. We didn't think he had a clue about coaching, seriously. His techniques were off, his play designs. He would do stuff like we had a left handed quarterback and so we should have been running an offense that favored his left, him being left handed.

[01:12:00]

RT: Instead of him rolling out to his left and planting his feet and throwing, our plays were like, he's rolling to his right. So, basically, you're going the wrong way. We still averaged almost 30 points a game. But here's what happened early. When we first got

to Central as 10th graders leaving Oxford, we got up there. We're 10th graders, we're playing against the varsity and we're beating them up. We're beating them guys up. So, by the time the two-week training period was over, the coach said that there were about half a dozen of us that could play on the varsity, but we wouldn't get much playing time. So we decided we're going to play junior varsity because we want to play. We don't want to sit on a bench.

And so, of course, we went undefeated for junior varsity, beat everybody up in the city. Then the next year we got the same head coach, his name was Bill Martin and, like I said, he wasn't that good. The problem with him was he wanted to play favorites versus play guys who you could win with. He would have had to sit down some of his favorite players because they just didn't have the talent that we had. So he would want to put us on the bench for playing guys that should be sitting on the bench. You want to win in football, you don't want to just go show up. And so, okay, we put up with that mess as juniors.

We get to be seniors. He's getting worse, okay? And so, we're practicing one day and I don't know, he said something snarky to one of our players, Philip Webb, the one that just passed that was an All City guy. We were getting pissed off at this coach, like we're going to play another year with this guy?

[01:14:00]

RT: This is the same coach who didn't run audibles that we learned how to do when we were on the playground. Now we're three years older. We're playing in high school, and he acts like we don't have the intelligence to change the play at the line of scrimmage. He just didn't know football. He didn't know our mentality. And so, Philip walked off the field. And then after that, Larry Henry walked off the field. Larry got over to Philip and Philip said, "What have I done?" And so, they looked up, and the rest of us

walked off the field. S, now you've got the defending champion St. Paul Central favored to win another title as seniors, walked off the field. So now we have a problem.

We took the problem to the St. Paul Urban League because it made news. We're in the newspaper for that. The mayor got involved at that time. The Urban League got involved. Okay, well, what do you guys want? Okay, we want a Black coach because this guy can't relate to us at all. We're not asking for a head coach, we're not trying to throw him out. We just need someone we can relate to. You know what I mean? And so, that was the demand. So, it wasn't like, "Kick this guy to the curb." It was like, "Get a real coach in here. Maybe they can work together, and we'll have a better outcome."

A couple days before the season started, we got a Black coach from Alabama State in Montgomery. His name was Joe Bell. Joe Bell had a brother up here that was into African American Studies at McAllister College at that time. This was in 1968. That was our last year of playing because we graduated in '69 and football only goes for one season, so we started in '68. That was our last football season. We graduated '69.

[01:16:00]

RT: So, anyway, we got Joe Bell and just what we needed. He's a really fiery coach. I wish we would have had him a lot earlier than we did. We ended up winning another city championship. One of the other beefs that we had was players make All City for Central. The coach wins championships, but the problem is nobody goes anywhere. He doesn't help you with recruiting letters because we got guys up there who have no dad in the house. We got moms, single family moms. And we've got great athletes. They don't know how to process these award letters that we're getting and what not and what to make of them, you know what I mean? And he's not helping out.

So you're feeling you're getting used. We kind of sacrificed for people coming behind us. Because one of the questions I had was, how do you put five people on a St.

Paul All City team from one school, and you don't get one interview from University of Minnesota? Not one. At that time, they were not a football dynasty. They're getting their butt kicked in the Big Ten at this time. So you could use somebody who made All City somewhere, but it didn't happen. So part of the beef was we need someone who's going to also take an interest in what we do after Central, because there's other places we can play.

[01:18:00]

RT: And so, myself and a guy named Clyde Thomas, we went down south with Joe Bell and Joe Bell was from Alabama. So he took us down to Alabama and we ended up going to Tuskegee. Okay, and so we get to Tuskegee. As freshman, I started as a freshman for seven games. Clyde led the league in average yards per carry because he was a back. Tuskegee at that time won a championship. The problem why we didn't stay down there was because our coach at that time, let me see if I can think of his name. I know his first name was Leroy. If you look up Alabama football for '69, you'll see. LeRoy Smith, that's his name, Leroy Smith.

Leroy Smith left after our freshman year, and he went to Kentucky State. There's no transfer portal like there is now. If you transfer schools, you could lose a year of eligibility. So us being from Minnesota, the problem we were having was they gave us part time jobs on campus, but they basically took our money because of an outstate fee that they had. If we were from Alabama, you can keep your little funds you make. So we're down there. We didn't have anywhere to keep any money to go to school. And so, everything went kaput and we both came back to Minnesota.

But had we had somebody to help us process some of these other offers, it wouldn't have come down to the very last minute of trying to get into a school. Because when Joe came, he scrambled for us, even took us down there himself. We did get in, but we would have had a lot better choices. Because I mean, I was getting letters from like

Washington State, Idaho, Notre Dame. I was getting some big time offers because I had made All City twice.

[01:20:00]

KH: But you didn't know what to do with them.

RT: I didn't know what to do with them. Neither did my mom. That was supposed to be your coach, "Let me see them letters, let me see what we can do. I'll contact the school, and we'll get an interview going on and we'll see what we can do." None of that. None of that. For me it was for two years because like I said, I made it twice to the All City team and I had a bunch of letters after two years' time. I must have had about 40 of them and I didn't know what to do with them.

KH: And just to make this very explicit, do you think this was a race issue from this coach at Central who was not mentoring?

RT: Yeah, I do. I don't make no bones about it, that I think he had that in him. Just the way he coached and how freely he was to go sit people down and then play guys who were much less talented.

KH: But white? So less talented white guys?

RT: Yeah, you know what I mean? He kept that position that he had because the talent kept going to Central. It wasn't his coaching; it was the players that he was getting from his feeder system from Oxford.

KH: Right, because Oxford is right across the street. So, of course, they're going to go to Central.

RT: You were kind of designed to win. You go up to Central and then the tables turn because then this guy, he can't see what he has. So, he wins championships, but you don't go anywhere. You might as well not win. You don't get an offer.

[01:22:00]

KH: So when you were at Oxford and you said we got way better coaching at Oxford than at Central. Who was coaching at Oxford? Was it Bill? I mean he must have had his hands in lots of things. So was he coaching or were there others?

RT: Bill never coached me, because I was older. Bill was the Pee Wee coach. So he had the younger kids, so he prepped those kids to go to the next step to Midgets. Then we had another coach that coaches Midgets. Then after your two years in the Midgets, you go to Juniors and there's another coach. So Bill started you off. And before Bill got there, there was somebody else. But it was the same process. You don't coach everybody. You coach the ones that you're assigned.

KH: And so, who do you think was your best coach at Oxford, anywhere along the way?

RT: I'd say a coach called Mr. Carter. Yeah, he was the Midget coach, Mr. Carter. Yeah, but see, I got hurt and didn't play ninth grade. But a coach that I think was even better than Mr. Carter was a guy named Dave Goodlow. Dave coached the Juniors for one year before he went and coached in Minneapolis. So, now Dave's brother, his name was Jeffrey Goodlow. He's a lawyer right now. He graduated from Macalester and Dave didn't let him go to Central in St. Paul because he felt like the coaching was bad and he wanted his brother to go to Minneapolis Central and play for this guy named Earl Bowman.

[01:24:00]

RT: Now Earl Bowman was a legend in Minneapolis. He later went on to be the athletic director at Macalester College. Because Jeffrey, his brother, was a really good quarterback. But he's like, he'll be a waste of talent going to Central because this guy doesn't know how to coach. But Earl Bowman is winning championships at Minneapolis Central, which was a tougher conference. All around, because our conference, our top three probably could compete. But over in Minneapolis, it's like one through six is tough.

There's no patsies in the league, no guaranteed wins, because it's Washburn, Roosevelt, Minneapolis Central, Northside. It was loaded. Over in St. Paul, it basically was Central, Johnson, Harding. After that, it's a toss-up at the bottom, but those three are going to compete for the title.

KH: And I don't know if I've asked you along the way, what position or positions did you play in football?

RT: I played tight end in football, which I felt like I was playing out of position. There's another guy who should have been playing tight end and I should have been having his spot because I was faster, bigger, had better hands, but he couldn't see that. He wanted me to play tight end over on the right side of the line, with this left-handed quarterback. I don't know how I made All City. [Laughs.] I should have got a ton more catches, but that's the way he coached.

KH: So this was the kind of crummy coach at Central who was making these decisions?

RT: Yeah, he was.

KH: So you all kind of staged this walkout, boycott of the football coaching program at Central in 1968. There's a lot of stuff going on in the country and locally in 1968. How much do you think that these kinds of national events in the Civil Rights Movement and all the chaos of 1968 affected your life here in St. Paul and Rondo at Central?

[01:26:00]

RT: Well, sports wise, like I said, this boycott happened in '68, right? About a month or so before that, the '68 Olympics with Tommie Smith putting his fist up, I think that kind of was one of the reasons why the coaches didn't want to take a chance. Like why we didn't get interviews at the U, because they didn't know how they were going to

handle us if something like that happened, you know what I mean? So I think we got kind of blackballed a little bit by not even getting an interview. But what they didn't know was that after Tommie Smith put that fist up, they took that medal and kicked him out. You know what I mean? That protest cost him a lot, okay? And this cost us a lot.

Now, the one that it didn't cost was Dave Winfield, because David didn't play football. David was a baseball player. Bill had connections to baseball coaches at the U. And so, he got David in as far as my knowledge goes and David didn't even get a full scholarship his first year. Now, this is the best baseball player in the state of Minnesota, and he did not get a full scholarship when he went to the U. It took him a couple years to get that.

[01:28:00]

RT: Before his career was over, he took them all the way to the championship game against USC. What happened was David was a pitcher and an outfielder, but he had pitched so much in the playoffs to get to the championship that they took him out late in the game. USC then scored like three runs. When David left the game, they couldn't hold it, and they lost the national championship. And so, after that, when the draft came, San Diego took David. David never played one minute of Minor League Baseball. He went straight from the U campus to San Diego's outfield, just like that. Not a day in the Minor.

KH: That's amazing.

RT: But, like I said, they didn't recognize who he was because he was going to Central and Central had these little hot headed athletes. It's a good thing that David didn't play football. I don't think he would have gone to the U because they were like, we can't have no Tommie Smith type thing going on here, because that was happening. Coaches were kind of skeptical across the country about getting some bad actors. We weren't bad actors; we're just sticking up for our rights. That's all it was. They weren't going for that

back in '68.

KH: And so, were you and your teammates kind of inspired by Tommie Smith? Did you see this happening and go, "Hm?"

RT: No, we saw it, but at the time, we were just tired of our coach, how we weren't getting opportunities to play after high school. It was like, "Where's so and so going?" "Oh, he got a job doing this, so he went to school over here." He's not even playing ball anymore, as great as he was, you know what I mean? Because the opportunity wasn't there.

[01:30:00]

RT: After you've been out for a year or so, they forget who you were, the colleges. They're looking at the next recruits, not the ones that have been out of school and you don't even know where they went for a year. So it was kind of heartbreaking. But after we left, things changed. Guys started getting opportunities. There was a guy, his last name was Robinson, and he ended up going to the Giants and getting two Super Bowl rings. He'd come out of Central.

KH: Stacy Robinson.

RT: Yeah, Stacy. And the thing about Stacy is, I don't think Stacy would have started on our football team.

KH: Wow.

RT: He'd have been on the bench. There are guys who were better than Stacy. He would not have started on the '68 team. He'd have been sitting there. He'd have played some, but I just don't see who he would have bumped out.

KH: But you all paved the way for him for playing time.

RT: Exactly. That's what we were looking at. Okay, it's going to cost us. But we took a chance, but we did get the coach to get that whole ball of work started when we got

Joe Bell. And, actually, Martin only lasted about another year or so, and then he was gone. Then they got a permanent Black coach because Joe Bell went somewhere else. But they did get another Black coach.

And guys started going to some nice schools, and started taking their talent elsewhere. I don't think Stacy would have got that opportunity if he had the same coach we did. In fact, I know he wouldn't have. He would have been great. But where are you going? When a team has an interest in you and they send you that letter, there's people to contact on that letter.

[1:30:00]

RT: All you've got to do is give that coach a call. Because what the coaches want to know is what kind of character this guy has. Is he a decent student? Is he respectful? How's his work ethic? Is he not just talented, but does he work as well as being talented?

KH: And you all who came out of Oxford would have been perfectly situated on those qualities, because you just said Oxford was about hard work, Oxford was about character, Oxford was about playing ball, playing sports the right way. And so, you would have been a gold mine for these coaches.

RT: That's right. Yeah, we would have. But he never arranged one interview with any of these people that we had on these letters we were getting. Some of them wouldn't have had to be the greatest school. Some of them had Bemidji. They've got a great program up here, even though it's a small school, it's a small division. So does North Dakota, South Dakota, out there in Idaho. I mean, everybody doesn't have to go to Washington State or USC or somewhere. There's other great places to play and get an education, you know what I mean? There's a lot of places that will give you that, just what you need, so when you get done playing football, you move on to what else life has for you.

KH: So is that how you looked at college and these kinds of missed opportunities to play, because your high school coach wasn't helping you? Did you see a connection for yourself between playing football and getting a college education as well?

[01:34:00]

RT: I did. Yeah, I did. They were totally connected. That's one of my major regrets is that I didn't graduate from college. I mean, I did all right. I got a really good job as a shop manager at Nardini Fire Equipment in Minnesota and that was like the third largest fire equipment company in the state. I did a lot of fire training around the state. I ran the shop. We had clients like Northwest Airlines, 3M, Coke Refinery, Old Dutch. I mean, we had some huge contracts. I loved that job, but I didn't get a chance to retire because the ownership changed from the owner to his son, and his son and I did not get along. So, that job, the best job I ever had, faded out. I could have worked there 40 years. I just loved it. It wasn't even work. I just loved doing it.

KH: And how long were you there?

RT: I was there seven years. I was looking to be there 30. So then I bounced around. I went to Northwest Airlines, and I worked in Northwest, I think, five years. And then they lost a billion dollars on that pilot deal. Then they were doing the seniority when they merged with Delta, so I didn't make the seniority cut. So Delta took over and then there were a lot of guys who actually quit Northwest because Delta was not union and Northwest was, and guys didn't want to work for Delta. So a lot of guys just left with the time they had. That was a mess. So, anyway, I'm a survivor. I'm doing quite well.

[01:36:00]

KH: I interrupted you. Go ahead.

RT: I married a girl from Leonard, Minnesota, which is about, I don't know, 20, 25 miles from Bemidji. I met her at Target Center down in Minneapolis and we both

worked in guest services. She tells everybody she trained me. [Laughter.] And all it was you have to have somebody experienced to show you how to work one of the entry wells where the seating is and all that. It's like, oh, yeah, you hung around with me for two events, because after two events, you're on your own. So I ended up down at Target nine years. And my main job at Target, or the one I love the most, was working the visitor tunnel for the NBA. That was a blast.

I mean, I'm just a few feet off the court. I'm responsible for player safety, so I met a lot of players and I met a lot of NBA officials. I didn't know the security for the NBA; those guys have police backgrounds or military police backgrounds. They have law enforcement backgrounds. Put it like that. I didn't know that at all, because they always show up with the suits on and everything, and they're kind of out of sight, but they're there. They're all law enforcement. And so, they travel with the team, state to state or wherever they're going to play ball at. They have their own security teams. And I got to know quite a few of these guys. It was a lot of fun.

KH: That would be fun. Did you ever coach or officiate yourself?

[01:38:00]

RT: No, I didn't. I did a little lightweight coaching in Oakland when I went out there, because I was still playing.

KH: You were in California for 15 years?

RT: Yeah, 15. I went out there in '78. I came back to Minnesota in '93. But just not really organized, just kids would come out there and I'd show them a few fundamentals, and stuff like that, to get them going there. There was a lot of talent I saw out there. But no, formally, I didn't coach.

KH: What were you doing for work in California?

RT: I was driving a truck out there. Then the company I was working for didn't

want me driving anymore. They wanted me to be the supervisor, which I took the job, but I prefer to be riding around. Because back then being a supervisor, you had to be in contact with them on CB radios. And it's not like nowadays. It's all CB and you didn't have GPS. Everything was done on a big map. You had to pencil in where you're going to go and fold them up so you could hold it in your hand and look at it, back then. It's different now. A lot different.

But yeah, I've had some good jobs. I can't complain. I live with my wife. We've got a three bedroom house in Bemidji.

KH: How long have you been up there?

[01:40:00]

RT: I moved up here in 2020, during COVID. That's when they shut down the Target Center. They shut it down. I remember that day. It was Friday the 13th, March of 2020, they told everybody. We did a *Disney On Ice* show in the morning. We're supposed to do a split, do the other one in the evening at 5:00. But they told us, "Okay, after the first show, you guys are going to go home and we're going to wait until the governor speaks this afternoon and we'll let you know what the status is." So the governor comes on and says, "No gatherings of over 250 people." That automatically shuts down Target. And so, they didn't open it back up until October of '21, a year and a half later. So I came up here.

The day after, Debbie came down to the Cities and picked me up. I didn't make a decision to stay in Bemidji until September. I was just paying rent and going down there, checking out my apartment once a month. And so, that started getting old because we weren't getting any closer to opening Target back up. So I finally gave up my apartment and just moved out to Bemidji. And then after about a year, I think it was June '22, I was getting restless. So I went to work at this store called Lueken's, which it's a high-end store. It's kind of like a Byerly's store. It's got all kinds of stuff up in there. So I went to

work for Lueken's, and I've been working for them for the last three years. I love it. I only work part time, four days a week, six hours a day. So, Monday, Tuesday, off on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, off Saturday, Sunday. It works for me. I'm up here now. I ain't going nowhere.

[01:42:00]

RT: Me and Debbie, we have one year of marriage because we got married in August. So this past August was a year, so a year and three months, something like that. And she's got 13 grandkids.

KH: Thirteen?

RT: Yeah. Well, because she had four daughters, and all their daughters had three kids.

KH: You've got family around. Are a lot of them up in that area?

RT: Yeah, I think the four oldest, a couple of them went to Florida, a couple live in St. Cloud, but the other nine, they're still here. There's only one more that needs to graduate. Because she moved back home so she could watch these grandkids all graduate from high school and get started. Being down in the Cities, a couple of them had already graduated. And she was like, "I don't want to keep missing things." And so, she moved back home. She moved back in 2017. Because the house was built and so it was ready to go in December 2017. So then I started coming up here when I would get some time off from my Target schedule.

I wasn't even driving then because I didn't need to. I was on a bus line that was close to Target. I could be there in 15 minutes. But then I came to Bemidji, I had to buy a car because you can't get anywhere if you're not driving because they don't have a bus system. And so, I had to get all that in order. [cell phone rings] So a whole life change coming up here.

KH: Yeah, I bet. I've never been to Bemidji.

RT: Oh, you've got to come up.

[01:44:00]

KH: It's a long drive. I've never been there.

RT: It's four and a half hours from the Cities.

KH: Yeah. That's a long drive.

RT: There's nothing up here. Well, Lake Bemidji, there's a lot of activity down there by the waterfront and all that, but it's like they dropped our house down in the middle of the woods. We've got about, I'd say, 150, 200 pine trees on the property.

KH: And you started this interview by talking about being a little kid and liking to be outside, in nature.

RT: I live in the forest. We get deer going through the back all the time. An occasional bear goes back there. We've got a camera on there. I've seen an old bear out there sleeping one day, and there's coyotes running around here. All kinds of stuff we've got out the window to see.

KH: That's nice.

RT: I have to watch my little Yorkies when they're outside. When we first moved here, they hadn't completed it, because we live on a big oval that's about a mile and a quarter. All the houses are anywhere from seven to about 15 years old. When we got here, the track wasn't quite finished yet. There were still a lot of open lots to be built on. So, at that time, there were some predator birds flying around here. So we had these little dogs, a Chihuahua and a Pomeranian, and had to go outside with them because we didn't want any birds to come get them. In the neighborhood, it's like a neighborhood Facebook page. If they see anything out of the ordinary, like, we've seen a coyote in the daytime, he might be rabid, because they're usually out hiding and what not. You can't see them. They come

out at night. Or we've seen an eagle or a hawk, so watch your furry friends.

[01:46:00]

RT: But the more they built it up, the less predator birds we see, because I haven't seen one now in a couple years. But they used to be here often flying around. Because on one side, we've got Bemidji airport, and the other side, this strip of land is public. I forget what they call it. But anyway, it's where they go hunting and stuff. It's a reserve. That's what it is. It's a big reserve. They get to hunt in the fall. It's right on the other side of where we live. But when I was working at Northwest, I remember they had planes coming up to Bemidji. And they were props. So I never want to fly with a prop plane.

But now, since they merged with Delta, jets come up here. They're like 50 passenger jets. They come up here twice a day. Because there's a lot of business types in Bemidji that work in the Cities. Business guys, they get out of here in the morning, because it only takes an hour flight. You get on a plane here, an hour later, you're in Minneapolis and then they have one coming back in the evening. It's an hour to get back. Then they have some pretty large planes, like I don't know, I want to say it's 747, but I don't know if they're absolute now or not. But they've got some planes up here that hold 150 people to come in and out. So they've got some big boys coming out of that airport. So it's easy to get here. Everybody doesn't know you don't have to drive. You can fly right in. Boom, you're here.

[01:48:00]

KH: That's interesting. I didn't know. Just looking at the time here. I don't want to keep you all night. I have two last questions for you about Oxford. One is, can you paint a picture for me of what Oxford looked like in the winter when you were kind of new to that part of the neighborhood and were skating down there. What did it look like to you?

RT: Well, the clothes were a lot different than they are now. There's a rainbow of

scarves and hats and jackets weren't all the fashion. People had coats on sometimes. I tried to have a jacket, but it was very colorful. The sun is shining bright. You got this snowbank that kind of lines the ice around there because it gets pushed up with a truck. So you're pushing this snow up against the sides, and there's an area shoveled out where you're coming out of the warming house because you've got a wood plank to walk down. So it's kind of framed in white. If you go too close to the edge and you fall, you're falling in the snowbank. But it's really colorful.

I remember the girls having white figure skates and the boys who had figure skates, theirs were black. I was the only one with the racers out there. Me and my sister, she got some racers, too, just because I did. And then it was just beautiful. People have different types of scarves on, and it's relaxed even though it's cold. The sun is shining bright. You know how it's bright on a winter day, and the snow is sparkling? Clear skies.

[01:50:00]

RT: We're just out there having fun. And before it gets crowded, we play our little games, skating back and forth, playing tag. But once it gets full of people, it becomes more casual, and you're just kind of gliding around and greeting your neighbors and what not. It's a lot of fun. I just loved it. Like I said, If you've ever seen an old Norman Rockwell picture, you know what I mean? I've seen one. So, that's where I got it from. I say, that's what we looked like, only the characters on there are colorful. You know what I mean? But it looks just like that. I'll never forget those days.

I wish I had a painting that looked like that because that's just a reminder of what I really loved to do back when I was coming up.

KH: A final question for you. Is there anything else that you want to say about Oxford or about Rondo or about your sports career that we haven't talked about?

RT: Well, Oxford with Bill Peterson and Coach Carter and Coach Cotton down

there, they built up my confidence because I was kind of a shy kid. If it weren't for them, I don't know how I would have even started off playing sports. They're looking at me, at my size and stuff, and like, "Oh, we can do something with him." But they didn't scare me off. They just kind of pulled me in and started coaching me up. Like, "You can do this. Have you ever played before?" You give all the questions. And "No, sir, I never played before." And okay, now they've got a little protege. They got something to work with.

[01:52:00]

RT: Because you haven't been coached wrong, because you haven't been coached at all. So this is the kind of guy we want. We teach them to play this and do this our way. They taught us how to be champions down there and to be champions, you have to work. The coaches we had, they had good outside jobs. I mean, they're coming to Oxford after they get off of work, and even if you don't go anywhere in your life, you see that this coach has a job and he owns his house. You know what I mean? And so, the least I can do is that. But they just gave me the confidence that I could do something and that I didn't have to have a life of hanging around up on Selby Avenue because I knew a lot of guys and a lot of nonsense goes on up there.

I know that from the fact that I used to work at the pool hall. I used to clean it up in the mornings on my way to school. When I was at Marshall Junior High, I worked for a guy named Pepe. I'll be honest with you; his nickname was Pepe the Pimp. I used to go there every Friday after school to collect my weekly paycheck, or it was cash back then, for cleaning the pool hall. I know if I caught Peppy when he had a couple girls around him, he's going to show off and give me more money. But other than that, I tried to stay off of Selby Avenue, but I knew how it worked. I knew the characters. But anyway, that was that.

But, yeah, Oxford just really changed my life, Bill Peterson and the rest of the

coaches. Everybody knows Bill as Billy Pete or Coach Pete. He's not getting around like he used to because he's, what, 83 now? But the really important stuff in the neighborhood and people that he's met, if they pass, he comes.

[01:54:00]

RT: When I went into Central's Hall of Fame two years ago, he showed up. His wife brought him there because we had it at Ideal Hall out there by Elmhurst Cemetery off Dale Street. And there's Bill. It was a great feeling to have Bill show up at my induction. I should have been there 50 years ago, but I never did the paperwork because I moved away to California. I didn't think about Central's Hall of Fame. Then I get back home and they're bugging me for years about, "Man, why don't you do the paperwork so we can get you inducted?" Then it was my wife that said, "You need to do this. Sign that paperwork. I'll help you with the resume part about it and send that in." So, I did it, and I got inducted and Bill Peterson was there.

Another guy I went in the Hall of Fame with was Melvin Carter. Melvin Carter's, it wasn't his dad, it was his granddad, I went to school with him in Central. So, yeah, Mayor Carter, Jr., well, he's out of there for mayor now as soon as he finishes his term, but he was inducted the same evening I was. I didn't know he was an athlete, but he was a track star. So, yeah, I went in there. It was quite the honor because we both showed up at Central for this football game. It was the day before our induction, and he was running late. So, they told me, "If he doesn't show up in five minutes, I'm going to let you do the coin toss at center field."

[01:56:00]

RT: I was just hoping he was late. [Laughter.] Because we had a nice crowd up there that day. But he showed up right in the nick of time, so he got to do the coin toss. I actually met him there and then I saw him the next day when we both got inducted, so it

was quite nice.

KH: Well, now, this is just dawning on me now. You keep talking about a coach who was a Mr. Carter, was that the same Carter family or a different Carter family?

RT: No, that was different. Coach Carter was a different guy. His assistant coach was a guy named Tiny. Tiny must have weighed about 300, but his nickname was Tiny. [Laughs.] So Coach Carter and Tiny, they coached the Midgets. I remember them guys. What was the other part of that question?

KH: That was it. Just is there anything else you wanted to talk about or anything else you wanted to add or any closing thoughts about the impact Oxford has made on your life?

RT: No. I mean, I still carry it with me and I really love growing up in St. Paul. I don't think I'd have the same experience if I would have been in Minneapolis. We have a more tight knit community. Like I said, it's very few apartments, so most people live in homes and that makes the neighborhood a lot different also. You know what I mean? It's better kept. There was everything we needed in that community until it began to change. It's still pretty tight right now. It's more mixed right now, but it's still kept the same way. [01:58:00]

RT: I don't see any animosity with the neighbors. My mom died in '95. My sister bought the house, the one that just passed, so she had it for 30 years. She had neighbors across the street that were Black. Now they're white. Her next door neighbor's white. The neighborhood is just mixed up. But it's still, you don't really see the drama on the news like you do on the east side of St Paul or the north side of Minneapolis. The Rondo neighborhood is still a nice place to live. Still. And I love that about it because now I'll be going down there to check on my niece because she's going to be in the same house that her mom passed in.

So I want to let her know that we should keep this as the centerpiece, because this is where we come to do the holidays and things like that. You know what I mean? We'll keep that tradition. I told her, "You've got cousins that know how to barbecue and stuff, so you don't have to worry about that. You take care of the minor stuff, and we'll be down there to see you often." So I just love St. Paul. So, anyway, that's about it for me.

KH: Well, Russell, thank you so much for doing this.

RT: You are welcome.

KH: I'm so appreciative. I'm going to shut the recorder off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]