

PEGGIE JACKSON HICKS

Narrator

KIM HEIKKILA

Interviewer

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TRANSCRIPT—PEGGIE JACKSON HICKS

Interviewee: Peggie Jackson Hicks
Interviewer: Kim Heikkila
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[START OF INTERVIEW]

Kim Heikkila: So this is an interview for the Oxford Community Center Oral History Project. It is Tuesday, November 4, 2025, and I'm here with Peggie Jackson Hicks. My name is Kim Heikkila. Today I'll be talking to Peggie about her involvement at Oxford Playground after she moved to Minnesota from Mississippi. So, thank you so much, Peggie, for participating in this project and being willing to share your Oxford story.

Peggie Hicks: You're welcome.

KH: So I'm going to ask a question here that you can answer pretty briefly because we'll come back to it. This will be the main focus of the interview, but if you could just say kind of in short order what your connection to Oxford is.

PJH: Well, that's a very interesting question. My connection to Oxford actually began when I first moved here from Webb, Mississippi. I was just looking for a place to meet people and someone told me about Oxford. So I started hanging out at Oxford. Actually, that's where I met my first friend and she had just recently moved here from Blytheville, Arkansas. She came with two little kids. I came with a four-month-old son. So we really connected and became best of friends. She was my best friend. And just recently, September 18th, she passed away.

[00:02:00]

KH: Just this past?

PJH: This year.

KH: And what was her name?

PJH: Vera Carpenter. And it was a place for us to hang out. While our kids played, we also played, just getting to know each other, getting to know other people that were around. So it was a place to connect with others, learn about Minnesota, what Minnesota had to offer.

KH: So that's a good segue in then asking you how it was that you came to Minnesota and when.

PJH: Okay. I moved here in June of 1973. Yeah, because my son was born in January of '73. And what brought me here? I had family connections here. I had cousins that had been living here all of their lives. They brought two of my sisters here, my older sisters, my only sisters. After I graduated from high school and I went on to junior college in Mississippi, I decided, Oh, well, I think I'll move to Minnesota, too. Just looking for a better way of life, I'll say. Mississippi didn't have a whole lot to offer, so I came to Minnesota and have been here ever since.

KH: And this was in 1973?

PJH: Yes, '73.

KH: And you said your cousins had lived here their whole life?

PJH: Yes.

KH: Had you ever visited them before?

PJH: Yes, I had visited here.

KH: So you knew a little bit about it.

PJH: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I believe it was my senior year in high school. I came here and actually ended up finding a summer job at the St. Paul Urban League. So,

yeah, I had been here a couple of times.

[00:04:00]

KH: And having worked here, you had some sort of connection and familiarity with St. Paul before you moved?

PJH: Yes.

KH: So tell me a little bit about your family and what growing up in Mississippi was like.

PJH: Oh my! [Laughs.] There were nine of us in my family. Six boys and three girls. Each girl had a twin brother. So there were three single boys and then the others were a part of the twinship, I'll call it. We grew up on a farm where we picked cotton, chopped cotton, lived on a plantation, worked for this man, his name was Mr. Leo Hill. I remember that very specifically. So it was a hard life. But as I look back on it, I say, Well, it really was a good life because the family, we were very close. Very, very close. We knew what it took to basically sustain ourselves working in the cotton fields. My mother also had a job that she worked for this lady on weekends where she would iron clothes, wash clothes, clean up this lady's house. Like I said, it was what it was. We didn't know anything else.

KH: And what year were you born?

PJH: I was born in 1952.

KH: And so, you moved up here when you were 21?

[00:06:00]

PJH: Yes.[Hicks notes in her review of the interview that she turned 21 the year she moved to Minnesota.]

KH: But until then, I mean, you are growing up in Mississippi during kind of the evolution and peak of the post-World War II Civil Rights Movement, which is very

centered in the South. I'm going to come back to that, but where are you in the nine kids?

PJH: I'm the baby.

KH: And do you have a twin?

PJH: I had a twin. Because all of the boys are now deceased, so it's just the three girls that are left.

KH: And you said you lived on a plantation and picked cotton?

PJH: Yeah, chopped cotton.

KH: So you and your siblings did that while you were young and going to school and would come home?

PJH: Yes, as a matter of fact, I remember starting picking cotton, chopping cotton. Well, actually started out as the water girl, taking water out to the family who were out picking and chopping cotton. At five years old, I remember doing this. As I grew older, I had to pick cotton, too, chop cotton. On an average school year, I remember having to miss at least 28 days out of the school year to help the family either being a water girl or chopping and picking cotton myself.

KH: And so, your dad was—

PJH: My dad was never in the house. I don't know what it's like to have a father in the house.

KH: So it was your mom with nine kids?

[00:08:00]

PJH: My mother was a hard working woman. However, thank God, we had our grandmother, which was my mother's mother, who lived with us until she passed away. So my grandmother really filled a great role in our lives. She would make sure the house was clean, food was ready when we came in from picking and chopping cotton. So she was such a blessing to us.

KH: That's not easy work.

PJH: Pardon?

KH: Chopping cotton has to be not particularly easy work.

PJH: No, it wasn't easy. As a matter of fact, if I recall correctly, for a full day of chopping cotton, it was probably two dollars, if that.

KH: And was it this guy, this Mr. Hill, who was paying all of you for your work?

PJH: Yes, exactly.

KH: And he was white?

PJH: Yes.

KH: And was that about the going rate, do you know?

PJH: Yeah.

KH: So generally that's about what people were earning?

PJH: Right, yeah. That was hard. It was hard work. Yes, it was. I mean, it really wasn't hard work chopping and picking the cotton, but the reason I say hard work was because of the amount of pay that we had for doing that work. But the work itself wasn't hard.

KH: And so, you said you missed 28 days?

PJH: At least 25 to 28 days per year.

KH: And that's because the season would overlap with school?

PJH: Exactly.

KH: And was that common for other kids at your school, I assume?

PJH: Yes, those that lived on the farm, and yeah, I guess those that were considered poor. Yeah.

KH: So tell me a little bit about Webb. How big is the town?

PJH: Very small town, at the time. I don't know what the population is now. But,

at the time when we lived there, I would say the population was probably 650 people. So, it is a very small town. Driving through Webb, if you batted your eyes, you would miss it. There was no stoplight. There was a gas station on both sides of the highway. But you're driving through, if you bat your eyes, you really miss it. Yeah, really small town.

[00:10:00]

KH: And did the school that you went to then just serve the kids from Webb, or did it serve from other communities?

PJH: No, other communities as well. West District Elementary School. I went to West District High School as well. So, yeah, there were students from many other areas.

KH: And was Webb primarily a farming community itself?

PJH: Yes.

KH: Was it primarily African American?

PJH: Well, no, there were some whites there, too. Yeah, there were some whites there, but we were the ones that did work. Well, I never saw any white student picking cotton or chopping cotton.

KH: And part of the reason I'm asking these questions is you said that you and other kids who were working on farms or were considered poor were the ones who were missing school 25 to 28 days, but there must have been enough students who didn't work that they would continue school.

PJH: Oh, yeah, definitely.

KH: So it wasn't like they were closing school early because everybody went.

PJH: No, no, no. They didn't close schools. We just got an absent for not being there on those days that we had to stay home to pick cotton or chop cotton. We had a schedule, in our home, Okay, well, you got to stay home these days, and so on.

[00:12:00]

KH: And did that hurt your academics?

PJH: It didn't, for some strange reason it did not. I had good grades. I was a B student all through high school. Elementary school as well.

KH: Even with missing that much school. So you were just a good student who could manage both of those things.

PJH: Right, yeah. It did not influence our grades, whatsoever.

KH: So, '52, I mean, there's a lot happening around the country, and particularly in the South with the Civil Rights Movement. Was that part of your growing up experience, being aware of the Civil Rights Movement, being part of it?

PJH: Oh, yeah. Definitely. As a matter of fact, I can remember being at home and Mr. Hill actually had sent his son to our house. The owner of the plantation, Mr. Hill, Mr. Leo Hill had sent his son, Leo Hill, Jr., to our house for some reason. I remember my mother answering the door and she said, "Yes, sir?" She was saying, "Yes, sir" to a 20-year-old boy. At the time she was, I would say in her late forties and I remember questioning her. We called our mother "Muh'Deah." I said, "Muh'Deah, why are you saying 'yes, sir' to that little boy? You're old enough to be his mother." And she said, "It's about respect."

[00:14:00]

Basically, what she was saying is that if I didn't give him that respect by saying, "yes, sir", they could kick us out of the place that we were living in because they owned the house that we lived in.

KH: And were you the only family that was working for this Hill family farm?

PJH: No, there were other families.

KH: So it was big?

PJH: Well, I won't say it was big. I do remember that there were, oh, gosh, I

would say maybe 10 families that were also sharecroppers, is what we were called at the time.

KH: Yeah, and that sharecropping system was tough, from what I understand, historically.

PJH: Yeah. I mean we did everything to take care of the farm and got paid such little money. But around Christmas time, I do remember that Mr. Hill would give us a bonus for the good work that we had done. So we always looked forward to the bonus because the bonus pretty much was more than we made throughout the whole year. It might have been \$500, or something like that, but that was a lot of money.

KH: Did you ever have interactions with any of the Hill family?

PJH: No.

KH: So it was mostly your mom?

PJH: Just the mother, and maybe some of the older kids, as a matter of fact. I remember my mother having to send one of my brothers away because he did not like the way Mr. Hill was treating us, so my mother sent him away. Otherwise, he probably would have been in jail because he would stand up to Mr. Hill.

KH: And, in doing so, there's a lot at stake and a lot of risk.

PJH: There was. Yeah, that's why she sent him away.

[00:16:00]

KH: And so, we will get to sports at Oxford here. But I think this is just an interesting part of your story, especially as it will translate into your moving here. Now, I just talked myself out of that question. So you may have already answered this question, but was there a time when you as a young person kind of remember becoming aware of racism and how it affected you and your family?

PJH: Well, I guess I was always aware of it through our experiences with Mr. Leo

Hill. Yeah, I was always aware of it.

KH: So you just said that your mom had to send one of your brothers away because your brother was going to stand up to him, and there was a lot of risk in doing so. Did you, or anybody else in your family, were involved in any civil rights activities in any way?

PJH: No. Yeah, we were out in the country.

KH: But you were aware of it? You were getting the news or hearing about it?

PJH: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

KH: So, tell me, in this context, you've just kind of painted this really nice picture of your young life in Webb. Tell me about how and when you started playing sports.

[00:18:00]

PJH: Oh, gosh, I remember playing sports because there were six brothers in my family and they were all involved in sports. The whole family was involved in sports because we had enough for a basketball team, a baseball team. Whatever we wanted to play, we did. So it actually started at a real young age for me [at] five, six, seven years old, we would get together and play. Basketball and softball are the two that I remember specifically. However, we didn't have the necessary equipment to play those sports. So if we were playing basketball, my brothers would find an old bicycle rim and post it up on the side of the house, and that would be for the rim, for the goal. And then for the basketball, we would get a big pillowcase, fill it up with rags, tie it up, and that's what we used for the basketball. Of course, you couldn't bounce it. [Laughs.] We just used it to put it in the basket.

Yeah. And then for baseball, we would get up in the tree, find a big strong limb or pole, and use that for the bat. And then for the ball, we would take some socks, stuffed the socks, and put some rocks in the sock. That worked well. [Laughs.] So, yeah, we played

sports for as long as I can remember.

KH: And this was mostly just within your family.? Were you playing with other kids around?

[00:20:00]

PJH: This was just the family that we did this. However, on Sundays, we would get together with other families. After church, we would get together, let's go play baseball with this family. And so, that's what we did.

KH: So nothing through school?

PJH: Not at this time. But, in high school, I was involved in sports through school.

KH: You were a pretty busy kid, right? Going to school, working with the cotton, but still had time to recreate, or play sports.

PJH: Yeah, just running around, walking around with tires from an old car, just walking around the road, just pushing the tires along. That was fun, too.

KH: Did your mom or grandmother ever play sports? Do you know?

PJH: No, but I remember my mother loving to race with us. We'd be running down the road and she would say, "I can beat you running." [Laughs.] She would race with us. So I think she probably was pretty athletic. But my mother died at an early age, too. She died at 53, so I was just 15 when she passed away.

KH: Oh my. Was your grandmother still around at that time?

PJH: Yes.

KH: So you stayed with your grandmother then?

PJH: Well, actually, after my mother passed away, my grandmother moved in with my mother's brother, which was my uncle. When my mother passed, there were only four of us that were still at home. The rest of them were grown and had moved up north.

Minnesota, Chicago, and Detroit. Some of the brothers had moved there. So let's see, where was I going? I forgot.

[00:22:00]

KH: What did you do then after your mom died?

PJH: Oh, after my mother passed away, we called this lady, actually, she was our third cousin. We called her Aunt Bea. Aunt Bea took myself and my sister that was next to me in. We moved in with her, and then the two boys that were at home moved in with my uncle, who was my mother's brother, which is where my grandmother moved into after my mother passed away.

KH: And were you still in the same community?

PJH: Yes.

KH: So you're still going to the same school?

PJH: Yes. We would see each other all the time.

KH: That's a big loss at a young age.

PJH: Yeah, it was. Oh, my goodness. Yeah, it was a very big loss and she passed away on Christmas Eve. In the South, it appeared that families would prepare their Christmas meals, start cooking the desserts two weeks before Christmas. So my mother had done all the desserts and everything. Then on December 23, I can remember like it was yesterday, we were washing at home in the kitchen with this big washing machine. I remember my mother saying she was hungry and she was having a headache, so she was going to stop washing and for us to continue to wash, but she was going to go get herself something to eat. So, she went and fixed her plate. The food was already cooked. She had already cooked the food.

[00:24:00]

PJH: And one of my brothers came running, "Y'all better come here. Come here.

Come on, come on, Muh'Deah says that--", I thought he said a pan was hitting her in the head, but he was saying pain was hitting her in the head. So we ran in there, and my mother was sitting with the plate in her hand, just shaking it like this. So she had a stroke, aneurysm. And so, we took the plate out of her hand, laid her on the bed, and probably about, I'm going to say, three, four hours later was when the doctors came because we were out in the country. So they took her to the hospital. She lived during that night. Then the next day, I was headed to the hospital because my sister had stayed at the hospital with my mother that first night. So I was going to release her. We got to town, up to the city, and I remember this man said to me, he said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to stay with Muh'Deah." He said, "It's too late." So she had passed away.

KH: Oh, I'm sorry. That's tough.

PJH: Yeah. So that was something that was like, what are we going to do? Because she was it for us. She was our breadwinner, my mother. But one thing I remember, and I wonder, because she was a hard working mother just trying to make sure we were taken care of. She said, "You all going to kill me." And after she died, we probably did add to her early death because she was working so hard to try to make sure we had everything that we needed, but that's life.

KH: That was hard.

PJH: Yeah.

KH: So you and your sister moved in with your aunt. Was she working on a farm? What did she do?

[00:26:00]

PJH: She was a schoolteacher. She and my mother were very close, and they had already talked. In general, if anything ever happened to me, I want you to take care of my children or this or that. So we already knew me and my sister knew we were going to go

stay with Aunt Bea. And the two brothers went and stayed with my uncle. She was a fourth grade teacher.

KH: At the school that you had attended?

PJH: Yes.

KH: So no more chopping cotton for you after that?

PJH: No, we didn't chop any more cotton after that because I was 15 and then I graduated from high school and went to junior college. So, no, I didn't chop or pick any more cotton after that.

KH: Okay, so it was also a lifestyle change, not just this emotional loss of your mom, but also a different lifestyle.

PJH: Right, yeah. We almost felt like we were kind of rich. A schoolteacher? And everybody loved her in the community. Everybody loved Aunt Bea. She was a great woman. She really was.

KH: You said you were 15 when your mom died? So you were in high school?

PJH: Yeah.

KH: And so, tell me, you had said earlier that you played sports in high school. Tell me a little bit about that.

PJH: Yeah, so I played basketball in high school. Just basketball.

KH: Not softball?

PJH: I didn't play softball in school. I played softball in junior college, but not in high school. Yeah, we had a good team. Went to the state tournament. We didn't win the championship, but we had a good team.

KH: And what year did you graduate?

PJH: Nineteen seventy.

KH: Okay, so you graduated before Title IX was passed, but you still were playing

competitive basketball in school in Mississippi before Title IX mandated those kinds of opportunities?

[00:28:00]

PJH: Yes.

KH: Did you have a sense that was generally true in Mississippi? Did girls have a lot of opportunities to play sports in high school?

PJH: Yeah, because, I mean, we played against other schools, other teams. And, of course, there was a football team also. We didn't play on the football team. I was a cheerleader, also.

KH: And was it just taken for granted in your community when you were in high school that, of course, girls would play sports or was there any kind of, "Hm, what are these girls doing?"

PJH: No. It was welcomed.

KH: And who was your coach? Do you remember your coach?

PJH: Gosh, what was her name? I'll think of it, but right now, I just can't think of her name.

KH: But it was a woman?

PJH: It was a woman.

KH: And the high school that you went to, was it an integrated school, mostly Black, mostly white?

PJH: No, it was segregated up until, actually, 1970. I graduated from high school in 1970. We were the last class before integration.

KH: Really?

PJH: So, yeah, after we graduated in 1970, in '71 was when they started integration. So we were segregated.

KH: Even though *Brown vs. Board of Education* had passed in 1954, it wasn't the reality. So, your coach, was she an African American woman also?

[00:30:00]

PJH: Yeah, because everybody who went to the school was African American.

KH: And what position did you play?

PJH: I played center at that time. Yeah, I played center.

KH: And what did you like about basketball?

PJH: Oh boy! I guess basketball for me was a natural talent. I don't know. It's almost as if I didn't really have to, I won't say practice, but I guess it seemed like it was just something that was ingrained in me. I loved it and I excelled in it. It was just a part of me.

KH: Did your sisters play?

PJH: One of them did. She wasn't that good though. [Laughs.]

KH: So you got the natural talent in the family?

PJH: Yeah. As a matter of fact, everybody called me the tomboy because everything my brothers did, I tried to do also. Played football, too, after I came here. Played on a flag football team.

KH: Because I think when we were talking on the phone, too, you said that all of your brothers are very good athletes.

PJH: They were great athletes. Yeah, they were. It's too bad they didn't get the right, I guess, support. Well, actually, there was just so much going on at the time that it just appears that if they had the right coach, the right backing a couple of them would have gone on to play professional basketball. Yeah, they were great at football, baseball, and basketball.

KH: So they were playing the three big sports.

PJH: Yeah, and were good at it, too. You hear people talking about them now. Whenever you go to Mississippi, you mention the Jackson boys. Oh boy! They said, “Them Jackson boys, they know they could play some ball.”

[00:32:00]

KH: And so, you as the youngest, you and your twin, you kind of looked to your brothers and thought, “Cool, I want to do what they’re doing.”

PJH: Exactly, exactly, and I did. I got out there with them, too, and competed. It was fun. Lots of fun.

KH: And so, when they called you tomboy, that was kind joke, or were they kind of poking you a little bit?

PJH: I think they were kind of poking at me. You shouldn’t be out there playing football. If they get on top of the house and jump off, I could go up on the top of the house and jump off, too. Get up in the tree and jump out of the tree, you know?

KH: So, it was your brothers calling you a tomboy?

PJH: Well, sisters, too.

KH: And sisters. Were there kids in school who were looking at athletic girls and making that kind of comment?

PJH: No, no, I’ve never heard that.

KH: So you played basketball all through high school?

PJH: Yeah.

KH: And then you said when you went to junior college, did you play basketball and softball?

PJH: Yes.

KH: Okay. And what college did you go to?

PJH: Coahoma, C-o-a-h-o-m-a, Junior College. That was in Clarksdale,

Mississippi.

KH: Okay, and what were you studying there?

PJH: What was my major? I majored in Physical education.

KH: Oh interesting.

[00:34:00]

PJH: And came up here. And, actually, I'll take that back. Well, we'll have to come back to that later.

KH: That's okay. But obviously still very involved in sports. And this is where you started playing softball at that point in your life?

PJH: Junior college, yes.

KH: And so, you were playing other junior colleges from around the state?

PJH: Exactly.

KH: And what position did you play in softball?

PJH: In softball? Outfield.

KH: So you had a good arm.

PJH: Yes.

KH: And did you prefer one sport to the other at that point?

PJH: Basketball.

KH: So still basketball?

PJH: Yeah, it was still basketball. Basketball was my favorite. Although I really enjoyed playing softball, too, because I had a good arm and could really hit the ball really far.

KH: And so, the junior college, was that an integrated school at that point?

PJH: No, actually, it was segregated, too. Yeah, it was segregated.

KH: So you were still playing among and with other African American women at

that point. And so, it just seems like, based on what you're describing here, there was just a very involved and active athletic culture for young African American women and maybe white women, I don't know, in Mississippi when you were living there. Now that I say that, do you have a sense, was it comparable to what white girls were doing? Do you know?

PJH: I don't even know what they were doing, to be honest with you.

KH: Yeah, why would you?

PJH: Because we didn't have much interaction with them. I have no idea.

[00:36:00]

KH: That's an interesting question. I wonder if it would have been similar or if it would have been less?

PJH: I don't know. I really don't know. I've never even thought about it because that was what I knew, the Black culture, before I moved to Minnesota, in terms of interactions.

KH: It's a different world, I'm sure.

PJH: Yeah.

KH: Okay, so you go to junior college for two years?

PJH: Two years.

KH: And so, you graduated in '70, you were in junior college through '72, and then you came to Minnesota in '73 after your son was born.

PJH: Exactly.

KH: And so, I know you said a little bit about it, but when I asked you originally why you came to Minnesota, you said, "Well, I had family here," and that you felt like you would have better opportunities. Say a little bit more about that. What did you think you would be able to do in Minnesota that you couldn't have done had you stayed in

Mississippi?

PJH: Well, I just felt that there were more opportunities to do whatever, many things, because in Mississippi, all we knew was picking and chopping cotton. So I figured there's got to be a better way. Not only that, after having come and visited here and had that summer job at the St. Paul Urban League, I said, Oh, yeah, oh yeah, there's something more than picking cotton. There are other opportunities. I just felt that there was a better world than what we were living in Mississippi.

[00:38:00]

PJH: And I was right. Because I don't know if you remember me telling you about my story where I was down in Oxford one day, I saw this car passing by that had State of Minnesota written on it. And I was like, "Wow, the person driving that car got to be somebody that's very important. State of Minnesota. I'm going to drive one of those cars one day." And I did. I've driven many State of Minnesota cars, and so grateful to God for the opportunity to have been able to work for the state of Minnesota.

KH: And you did for many years?

PJH: Oh, yeah, for almost 40 years.

KH: And you retired from the state?

PJH: Yeah, yeah. So, yeah, I didn't know what the better world would consist of, but I just knew that there was something better than just chopping and picking cotton. I got a little taste of it by working at the St. Paul Urban League and then started working for the state of Minnesota.

KH: And were your cousins and your sisters, who moved here, telling you, "Come, it's better here. You'll have more?"

PJH: Yeah, my sister and the cousins, too. They would come down to Mississippi and visit us during the summer months. Just hearing them talk about St. Paul, Minnesota, I

said, “Okay, well, I want to see St. Paul, Minnesota,” you know? After I experienced it, I said, Yeah, I think I’ll move here. But prior to moving here, as a matter of fact, my son was born in Chicago. I left Mississippi when I was four months pregnant with my son, and I stayed there until he was born and left Chicago when he was four months old. I’ve been here ever since.

[00:40:00]

KH: And what drew you to Chicago?

PJH: I had three brothers in Chicago at the time. This is really kind of strange because I was living with Aunt Bea, she was a schoolteacher, and when she found out that I was pregnant, she told me I couldn’t stay with her anymore. You got to leave, because she had influence in the community. She was a schoolteacher, so she didn’t want people to be looking at her in a bad way. Okay, she got her little cousin staying there, and her cousin got pregnant. So she told me I had to leave.

So I called my brother, who lived in Chicago, and called him crying and told him what Aunt Bea said. He said, “Don’t worry about it. I’m coming to get you.” It felt like he was there to pick me up in 10 hours. So I moved on to Chicago, and that’s where my son was born.

KH: And yeah, I’ve done some work and writing on single pregnancy at that time period. And it was hard.

PJH: It was frowned upon.

KH: Yes, very much so. So why did you decide to leave Chicago?

[00:42:00]

PJH: Oh, because my sisters were here in Minnesota. Yeah, I wanted to be with my sisters. That was just a stopping point, just getting out of Mississippi. I just wanted to get out of Mississippi from Aunt Bea’s house because she said I can’t live there any more.

So the first person who came to my mind was my brother, to call him in Chicago. I knew he would come and get me, so he did. He drove down and picked me up and took me to Chicago and I stayed there for eight months.

KH: And were you working while you were pregnant?

PJH: No, I wasn't working. Just staying with my brother who was taking care of me. Then after I delivered my son, we stayed there for almost four months. Then I said, "Okay, I'm going to go where my sisters are now. They would be a great support system."

KH: And even though you weren't working in Chicago and you didn't stay there that long, did you get a sense that, "Oh, I'm somewhere else than Mississippi. I am in a different part of the country," even if you had chosen to stay in Chicago, that you would have had more opportunities there as well?

PJH: Right, yeah. Yeah, I felt that. Because, I mean, when I left Mississippi, going to Chicago, I didn't know that I was going to be eventually moving to Minnesota. I didn't have that in mind. I just wanted to get away from Mississippi. But after my son was born, my sisters, especially one of my sisters, said, "You can come to Minnesota. You can move in here with me." So that's what we did. We lived with her for a couple of years before I got my own place.

[00:44:00]

KH: And just in terms of race-based limitations in Mississippi and perhaps expanded opportunities in St. Paul or Chicago, did you find that the climate was any different in Chicago or even here in St. Paul with regard to being a single mom or a single pregnant person?

PJH: What do you mean?

KH: Well, you said your Aunt Bea said, you can't stay here because this is going to bring some judgment on the whole family. Did you feel any of that when you were in

Chicago?

PJH: No, I did not. But I didn't really get out in Chicago and explore or do anything, basically.

KH: Yeah, and Chicago's a big city where you can be relatively anonymous, whereas in a small town like Webb, there's not much.

PJH: Yeah.

KH: So, finally, we have gotten you and your son to St. Paul, to Minnesota. So you lived with your sister for a couple years, you said. So it was during that time where you heard about Oxford and you said, "I'm going to go see what's going on." And where was your sister living at that time?

PJH: She was living on Marshall Avenue, right close to Oxford.

KH: And had she been involved at Oxford? Was she the one?

PJH: No. And I don't remember who told me about Oxford. I don't remember. But she lived right real close to Oxford, and we just walked on down to Oxford, not even a block from Oxford. She was right, actually on the corner of Marshall and Chatsworth, I think it was. Real close.

[00:46:00]

KH: How would you describe the Rondo community or the St. Paul community when you and your son arrived here?

PJH: How would I describe it? Well, especially at Oxford, I mean, there was a lot of activity, a lot of people that would be down at Oxford. It just felt like a place to be able to meet people and to get involved and meet friends, which is actually what happened. I was trying to remember, who did I meet first, besides the girlfriend that I met who I mentioned to you who became my best friend? I'm trying to remember, was it Bill Peterson or Frank White or Steve Winfield. One of them. It became a place where I would

hang out there, and it just felt good to be out there in the community and meeting different people, a lot of people that had influence, like Frank White or Bill Peterson. They were just so genuine. I felt like they really cared about students or athletes that hung out there at Oxford. They wanted the best for them just as they would for their own family. They really encouraged.

[00:48:00]

PJH: They saw the best in you, that you fit in, you can become a part of this community, and the community has things to offer you know. It helped hone my skills, my basketball, softball skills. And I was thinking, too, I might be getting off of the subject, but I probably would not have been a referee had it not been for one of them. I think Steve Winfield said, “You should come on and be a referee with us.” So I did. I refereed for probably a good, oh, I would say maybe 10 years.

KH: And that was basketball? High school basketball?

PJH: Yeah, high school basketball.

KH: And do you know roughly what years you would have been refereeing?

PJH: Let’s see. I’m trying to think. Let me see. It was after my college years. I’m going to say it was probably like around ’85, ’83, ’84, something in the early 80s, early to mid-80s when I started refereeing.

KH: I know just in talking to Bill and Frank and Steve and others, it sounds like there was a very deliberate and much needed effort at Oxford and maybe at the King Center as well, to train officials of color because there had been so few.

PJH: Right, exactly.

KH: And then women as well.

PJH: For sure, yeah. One of them, like I said, I think it was probably Steve Winfield encouraged me. It wasn’t something that I was really interested in per se, but I

said, Okay, I'll give it a try. It was a good experience. However, just the crowd sometimes could—oh, you'd have to let things go in one ear and out the other, you know?

[00:50:00]

KH: I bet. And we'll come back to earlier Oxford as well, but when you were reffing, where were you doing most of your refereeing?

PJH: Well, in the St. Paul school system.

KH: At that time, well, perhaps even still, did you notice the racial geography of the St. Paul schools? Were there some schools that were more white, some schools that were more African American or other nonwhite? Like, was race a factor, I guess, is what I'm saying, in that reffing?

PJH: I don't think so.

KH: So when you say some of the comments that were just because of parents.

PJH: Oh, yeah, parents, family members. "Oh, ref," which I guess they still do it.

KH: Yes, I'm sure. And how did you deal with that?

PJH: Well, like I said, just let it go in one ear and out the other ear. Just continuing to do your job the best that you could.

KH: And were there other women reffing at that time?

PJH: Yes.

KH: And were you refereeing only girls basketball?

[00:52:00]

PJH: Yeah, it was just girls. As a matter of fact, at the time, I don't remember there being any other Black female referees though. I can't remember. But I do remember refereeing with some Caucasian women referees. I think they got involved, too, as a result of Frank and Stevie.

KH: So they were making efforts to draw women in as well?

PJH: Yeah, because a couple of them I played basketball with on an AAU team.

KH: So that's a good kind of segue back into your playing at Oxford. So you got up here with your son when you were 21 and you get involved at Oxford almost right away. One of the things that I think is so interesting about you and your experiences is not only, as Bill and Frank and Lisa all said, that you have this kind of outsider perspective, having grown up in Mississippi, but also that you weren't a kid. I think so often when we talk about or think about, and many of the people I've interviewed have talked about, it's a rec center, you think about the kids, the little kids, the elementary school age kids, or just until kids get to high school and then they go play for their high school teams. But you played there as a young adult. So tell me a little bit about the opportunities. Obviously, you said you played basketball and softball at Oxford. So there was a pretty robust program for young adults as well, not just minors.

[00:54:00]

PJH: Yeah, it was. Because that's really where I met a lot of the, I guess, adults that I came to know was through playing basketball there. Because there was a schedule, too. I can't remember if there was a certain time, I think there must have been, a certain time where the kids would play basketball and then the adults would play later in the evening.

KH: And who was coaching your adult team? Do you remember?

PJH: I can't even remember who the coach was. I'm not sure if it was Steve Winfield, but I know that he coached me in the AAU team.

KH: Was that the Summit-University?

PJH: Summit-University All Stars. He and Kwame McDonald, the AAU. But I can't remember who. It might have been Stevie, even at the rec level. I don't remember.

KH: And how would you describe the quality of the basketball up here versus

what you were doing in junior college or just in general?

PJH: I thought it was very similar. Competitive. Some good competition. Fun.

KH: And so, the AAU team, the Summit-University All Stars, you were playing then, obviously, other AAU women's leagues.

PJH: Exactly, yes.

KH: Was that mostly in the metro area?

PJH: Yeah, just the metro area. As a matter of fact, in St. Paul, I think we were the only team in St. Paul, the AAU. Then Minneapolis had maybe two teams, two or three teams. So, yeah, we would compete.

KH: And you were also playing softball up here as well?

PJH: Yes.

KH: And was that through Oxford or was there a similar AAU-ish kind of—

[00:56:00]

PJH: Well, it wasn't an AAU. It was basically just softball leagues. Because I remember playing with other teams, playing on other teams. People found out, Oh, there's this girl that can really play some ball. They would call and say, "Can you play with us in this tournament this weekend?" So I played with a lot of different softball teams.

KH: So you were making quite a name for yourself in the local athletic community?

PJH: I guess so. Right, exactly.

KH: And what were you doing at this time, work wise or education wise?

PJH: Work wise, let's see. I might have been still working, because after I had worked at the St. Paul Urban League, once I moved here, I was able to obtain a position there. So I worked there for a while, for maybe two, three years. After that, I started working for the state in 1981.

KH: And did you go back to school?

PJH: Yes. I was at Concordia, '75 through '79.

KH: And what was your degree?

PJH: Elementary education.

KH: Did you ever teach?

PJH: No, I did not. [Laughs.] Because I wanted to be like my gym teacher [Miss Hubbard] in Mississippi, my basketball coach. I wanted to be like her. She didn't really teach any classes. She was in the gym all day teaching exercise classes and different sports activities and that's really what I wanted to be able to do. I wanted to be an elementary education gym teacher. I didn't really want to be a teacher, per se, in a classroom setting. I just wanted to be in the gym.

[00:58:00]

KH: So this was a big part of your identity was being athletic, being involved in sports and physical activity?

PJH: Right, yeah. physical education was my degree. It was physical education, not elementary education.

KH: So you reffed later for the high school girls basketball. Did you coach?

PJH: Yeah, I did. I coached a team at the Martin Luther King Center. I did that for maybe three, four years.

KH: Basketball?

PJH: Basketball.

KH: And was that after you finished your degree or while you were working on it?

PJH: I'm trying to remember. I can't remember. It's so long ago.

KH: Oh, yeah. No worries there. So, then, getting back to shortly after you arrived

here in Minnesota, in St. Paul, you see the State of Minnesota car drive by. How did you end up working for the state?

PJH: Wow, okay. I'm trying to remember because my first job with the state was in the governor's office.

KH: And who was governor at the time?

[01:00:00]

PJH: Rudy Perpich. Rudy Perpich was the governor at that time. I'm guessing through the St. Paul Urban League because they would get information on job openings, and at the time I was doing administrative secretary work at the St. Paul Urban League. After getting information about this opening at the governor's office, I applied and got the job. And from there, the rest is history because I moved from position up the ladder, and that's where I retired from.

KH: And when we were talking on the phone, you said, and you alluded to it here, too, that you ended up driving all over the state of Minnesota in the state of Minnesota car.

PJH: Yes, yes, yes. I mean, there's some beautiful places around the state of Minnesota. Wow. I just remember sometimes as I'm driving along saying, "Wow, look at this beautiful place. I never would have known it existed had I not had this job traveling around the state." Oh, yeah, it was beautiful. The people were really nice, too. I was going to monitor their programs to make sure that they were in compliance with the federal and state rules and regulations, because as a state agency, we received federal dollars. We also received local, state dollars that we had to allocate out to the local agencies that were running employment and training programs.

So part of my job was to ensure they were running them according to the rules and regulations. And, like I said, the directors of these programs, very nice people. We had a good rapport. I was there to help them, not to harm them, let them know, okay, we need to

do this to bring your program into compliance. They were very open and receptive.

[01:02:00]

KH: And that leads me to a more general question. You said that part of the motivation for you to leave Mississippi and come to Minnesota was that you just felt like you would have better opportunities. You have already said that, yes, that, in fact, was the case. This being an example. How did you find, for lack of a better word, the racial climate in Minnesota relative to Mississippi?

PJH: Oh my goodness! Well, first of all, it was a culture shock. It was a culture shock for me because I just remember when I enrolled at Concordia College in 1975, I had been accustomed to going to school with all Blacks, just the Black population. So I get to Concordia College, it's like, wow! [Laughs.] But the population at Concordia was about 800 at the time, and of the 800, there were probably 80 of us Blacks. So, culturally, yeah, it was a shock because I had not had that experience before.

[01:04:00]

PJH: But after enrolling there and getting involved in the activities that were available, I found out that Concordia College was just like one big happy family. I really did. The people, the students, and the faculty really embraced me and us. I really didn't feel that there was any discrimination or anything of that sort. It was a great experience for me, a very good experience.

KH: And that's right close to where you were living, right? It was down the street from Oxford.

PJH: Exactly, yeah. So, I was pleasantly surprised. Because I didn't know what to expect. I just knew that it was different from what I had experienced previously and it worked out perfectly. It was great. It was great. As a matter of fact, my second year at

Concordia, several students approached me and asked if I would run for the homecoming queen at the college. And I'm like, "Are you kidding me? Me running to be the homecoming queen? You've got 720 whites and 80 Blacks. Is there a chance that I will win?" And when the counting was over, guess who won?

KH: You did.

PJH: I did.

KH: You were the homecoming queen.

PJH: I was the first Black homecoming queen at Concordia College.

KH: Wow.

PJH: Yeah. This was in, let me see. I started '75, so it must have been '76, '77, somewhere around there.

KH: And the students who asked you to run, were they white or were they Black?

PJH: Some of each.

KH: So you made some history there.

PJH: I said, "Sure," after I thought about it. Yeah, I'll give it a try. But I really didn't expect to win. I really didn't.

[01:06:00]

KH: Interesting. And so, did that pleasant surprise at the race relations up here, did that continue throughout? I mean, do you still find this to be a relatively welcoming, white dominant state?

PJH: Yeah, I do. For the most part.

KH: What about the other parts? [Laughs.] And I say that because there's been scholarship and attention to the fact that so much attention during the Civil Rights Movement was focused on racism in the South as if it didn't exist in the North. But, of course, there's all kinds of people and experiences and books and scholarship that says, it

wasn't all happy roses up here racially either.

PJH: Yeah. Well, I don't know. For some reason I feel like I'm the type of person that can basically get along with just about anybody. I really do. I guess I'm just a kind, lovable type of person that loves everybody. And sometimes, I guess I'm blinded to situations and things that are going on around me because I'm so focused on being me, which is that loving, kind person. So a lot of times I don't see it. Some people say, "Oh, you're naïve."

KH: But maybe you're better off. Which is not an excuse for whatever is happening there, but just in how you live your life.

PJH: Yeah, yeah.

KH: So when you were involved in basketball and softball at Oxford and then coaching at the King Center, what was the racial demographics of Oxford at that time? Was it pretty integrated? Was it mostly African American?

[01:08:00]

PJH: I think it was mostly African Americans. Yeah, I think it was mostly African Americans at the time. However, I can say the softball teams were integrated. Mostly white. It was mostly segregated though. Yeah. Because even some of the teams that wanted me to participate with them during tournament time were mostly whites. There might have been two or three Blacks that they brought in to help them compete for the crown.

KH: And were they bringing you in because they had a hole on their roster for some reason, or because they just really wanted to field a competitive team?

PJH: Oh, they wanted to have a competitive team and they had heard about my athletic abilities. And so, yeah, I said, Sure, yes, I'll play.

KH: And so, you helped them.

PJH: Yeah, yeah.

KH: And these teams, were they teams that you could have played on regularly or were they further out from where you lived?

PJH: Let's see. No, they weren't far. They were within the St. Paul, Minneapolis area. For whatever reason, there are times when they may have had something else going on for that weekend, and they may have needed an extra player. In some instances, I know that was the case.

KH: I had a question. I can't remember what that one was, so I'll ask this one instead. I already asked you what you loved about basketball. What about softball? What did you like or enjoy about softball?

[01:10:00]

PJH: Oh gosh! I enjoyed the sport itself and just being able to compete. Very competitive. I knew I could play the game.

KH: Was it fast pitch or slow pitch?

PJH: It was slow pitch. When I played at Concordia, it was fast pitch. But through community recreation, the teams, it was slow pitch. Yeah, I just love competing.

KH: So that is an interesting question. What do you think kids, young people, any people, get or learn from competition? Because there were intramural sports, or especially if we're thinking about girls and women in sports, pre-Title IX in some communities, it was very noncompetitive. Like, well, you can learn some skills, you can have some fun, but what is it about competition that you find appealing?

[01:12:00]

PJH: Well, I do know that through my participation in sports, it has helped to develop in me discipline, teamwork, which is so critical to every area of our lives. Leadership skills. My pastor says all the time, he says, "To be a leader, you have to be a

good follower, first of all. Because if you think you're leading a group and you look around and nobody's following you, you're just taking a walk." [Laughs.]

KH: That's good.

PJH: Yeah, yeah. And with teamwork, everybody's participation is so critical and important. You've got to do your part; I have to do my part. And nobody's part is more valuable than the next person. Everybody has to play their part in order to win. To be a good team, you need the participation of everybody.

KH: And so did those things that you learned through sports translate into your work life?

PJH: Yeah. Oh, definitely.

KH: Do you think there's anything particularly valuable for girls and women to experience competition or play sports?

[01:14:00]

PJH: Say that again.

KH: Is there anything particularly useful or important for girls and women to experience competition or to play sports?

PJH: Well, I think it would benefit them because of the reasons that I just expressed, because, first of all, participating in sports and especially winning gives you that sense of accomplishment. It also makes you know that if you keep practicing, eventually you're going to get better at those skills that you're trying to attain. Yeah, I think it's very important. I mean, yes. It's beneficial for girls or women to participate in sports.

For me, well, sports have always been a part of me. It was a part of my environment growing up. And, to me, participating in sports was just a part of the puzzle to make me who I am today. I just can't imagine my life without having had the

opportunity to participate in sports because it enhanced my life so greatly, the participation in the sports.

[01:16:00]

PJH: As well as the people that were involved, especially some of the coaches and some of the influencers, like Bill Peterson, Frank White, Steve Winfield. My life wouldn't be the same without them encouraging me to participate in different activities and refereeing. It just opened up so many doors for me, I feel.

KH: You've talked about Bill and Frank and Steve and about some of the friends that you made at Oxford. Are there any other people that you want to mention that were important to you when you were at Oxford?

PJH: Let's see. Bill, Frank, Steve Winfield. Well, Lisa, she wasn't at Oxford, but we played sports together. Roger Neal. Gayle [Anderson]. It's just so amazing how people can impact your life in so many different ways. Each one of them have poured into my life and have made me a better person. Made me who I am today. And I'm forever grateful.

[01:18:00]

KH: One thing that strikes me as I work on this project is I grew up playing sports, also, through Parks and Rec, in Crystal. I grew up in Crystal. I played anything from T-ball to softball and other sports. I did other sports as well through high school. But I cannot say that anybody I played with when I was a kid playing through Parks and Rec in Crystal, or even some of the people I played other sports with as a young adult in my twenties, that they are still part of my life. So part of what I'm trying to figure out in this project, as a historian, is there something that made Oxford unique compared to other communities, whether it was in Mississippi or other communities here in the St. Paul area. What do you think? Do you have any thoughts about that? Was there something unique about Oxford?

PJH: Well, yes, there was something unique. And for me, the uniqueness is the people that were involved. As I stated earlier, they really had a genuine interest in the person. They wanted to see that person succeed. Each one of them are just genuinely good people who want to see the best for you, and they poured that into you. You knew they loved you just by their actions, and it just encouraged me. I don't know.

[01:20:00]

PJH: I'll put it this way, too. Having the Steve Winfield, the Bill Peterson, the Frank White, even Debbie Montgomery in your life, you felt that what they were sharing with you was the truth. And having them become a part of my life made me know that I could be successful, because they were always rooting for me. They were always encouraging me. I'm sure I'm not the only person that feels this way about them. With them on your side, I just felt like there was no way I could fail.

KH: That's amazing.

PJH: I mean, they were great influencers.

KH: Here's a question I was going to ask a bit ago. When you got up here to St. Paul in 1973, the highway had already been opened and had been operating.

PJH: Right, I didn't know anything about the Rondo neighborhood.

KH: Okay, so nobody was talking about that when you got up here. It wasn't a part of the consciousness?

PJH: No.

KH: It was just, this is what it was.

PJH: St. Paul. Right, this is it.

KH: Because that's one of the other questions I'm trying to figure out is, is there something about the Rondo community and its history in St. Paul, including being divided and some would say kind of decimated by the freeway, is that part of what made Oxford

such an important—and attracted people who cared so deeply for the young people that they were coaching and that they were mentoring?

[01:22:00]

PJH: I can't speak to that because I just know when I came, this is what I experienced with them. They wanted you to succeed. They cared deeply. And yeah, just great role models, each one of them.

KH: Yeah, that's pretty amazing. I'm just going to take a quick look and see if I'm forgetting anything in particular that I'm sure to ask about. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about or that you think is important about Oxford or your experiences there that we have not talked about?

PJH: I don't think so. I know I've said a lot.

KH: It's been great.

PJH: I can't think of anything else.

KH: Well, again, I'm so grateful that you were willing to sit down and talk through some of this history, just to get another voice in the chorus that is speaking to the power and influence of Oxford, as well as to get someone who had a slightly different experience and a different take on it, that's been really valuable as well. So thank you. I appreciate it so much.

PJH: Well, I'm glad I was able to participate.

[END OF INTERVIEW]