

SONNY NEYLAND

Interview 217a

February 15, 2011, at 115 Fern St., Diboll, Texas

Patsy Colbert, Interviewer

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ABSTRACT: In this interview with Patsy Colbert, Sonny Neyland reminisces about his years involved with Diboll Youth Baseball. A longtime coach and one time director of the program, Neyland discusses his early years of coaching, the structure of the league, racial integration of the league, league finances, and changes from the 1960's through the 1980's. He mentions fellow coaches J.L. Smith, Monk Warner, Pete Smith, Lester Tidwell, Howard Mullins, and Charles Havard. He also discusses starting the girls softball program in the 1970's since his daughters wanted to play. He particularly mentions Emmett King, one of his first African-American players. Mr. Neyland also remembers his participation in Diboll Day activities when he worked for C.H. Shepherd at the Fiberboard plant.

Patsy Colbert (hereafter PC): Today's date is February 15, 2011. I'm Patsy Colbert and I am in the home of Sonny Neyland today and we are going to do an oral history interview pertaining to the integration of the little league. But, first Sonny if we can just begin and tell me when and where you were born.

Sonny Neyland (hereafter SN): Burke, Texas.

PC: Burke, Texas huh, and when?

SN: 1940, November 20, 1940.

PC: Okay, and what is your family background? Were your...was your family from Burke originally?

SN: Yes.

PC: And who are your parents?

SN: L. B. and Erma Neyland.

PC: Okay, and did you graduate from Diboll High School?

SN: Yes.

PC: And, what year was that?

SN: 1959.

PC: Okay, now did you stay in Diboll after high school graduation?

SN: Yes, I did.

PC: So, you've been here all your life?

SN: All my life.

PC: Okay, now our focus today is mainly on the little league program and this is part of our oral history project pertaining to integration of Diboll public schools as well as community things like Little League.

SN: Yes.

PC: I found in a Free Press article where the little league program was actually organized here in 1952. Were you involved with it at that point?

SN: No, I was not.

PC: Okay, do you have any knowledge of how or when they organized the program?

SN: No, not when they first organized it I don't.

PC: Okay, so when did you become involved with Little League?

SN: I became involved in 1961.

PC: And, how did that come about.

SN: My uncle was coaching a team and him and J. L. Smith (laughter) and J. L. had quit and he asked me to come in and help him and that is when I got started.

PC: Okay, well just for the record J. L. Smith was my father-in-law, so I thought that was interesting. Okay, and in 1961 when you first became involved, where were the fields? Where did y'all play?

SN: The fields at that time were right there where the bank is, where First Bank and Trust is now.

PC: Okay.

SN: It was right in that area.

PC: Now, I know the Millers Park was kind of where the History Center is. Is that the same field or did they have the little league field too?

SN: They had little league fields too, yes.

PC: So, they had both?

SN: Yes.

PC: So, there would have been the Millers Park, where the Millers team played and there were little league fields all in that area?

SN: Yes, right. In fact by that time they may have already torn down that Miller's Park. I'm not sure about that. I believe they had though.

PC: In '61 when you started is what you are saying.

SN: No, they hadn't either. They tore it down shortly after though. But it was in that same area. It was all in that same area.

PC: Now, in '61 when you became involved with Little League, were you employed with the company at this time?

SN: No, I was not.

PC: Okay, so you just had an interest in the sport and helping the kids.

SN: Yes.

PC: Okay. Did you have children involved in the sport?

SN: No, I didn't.

PC: Do you know how the program was funded at that point in the early sixties here?

SN: At that point to the best of my knowledge it was just what we could raise through the concession stand I believe.

PC: Okay.

SN: And, they sold candy and stuff like that every year.

PC: So, they had a concession stand then just like they do now.

SN: Yes.

PC: Who ran the concession stand?

SN: The mothers of the ball team ran the concession stand.

PC: Okay, just volunteers, just like today.

SN: Volunteers, yes.

PC: How many teams were there then?

SN: Four.

PC: Can you name them?

SN: Let's see they had the Yankees, the Indians, the Cubs and the Dodgers. Okay, I coached the Dodgers team which at that time it was the Burke Dodgers. Diboll had three teams and Burke had one.

PC: Oh, really. I know in the '52 article that I was reading they actually formed the little league with Corrigan and Chester in '52 and each town had like two teams. Anyway there was enough to make five teams and that is how they got started. So, in '52 they didn't have enough to just play locally like they do now. Now, by '61 were these all local Diboll and Burke teams?

SN: Yes, Diboll had three teams and Burke had one.

PC: Burke had the one. Did y'all play other towns?

SN: No, we did not.

PC: You just stayed inside here.

SN: Just stayed inside here except in All Stars you know, of course.

PC: Just like today.

SN: Yes, just like today.

PC: Now, so there were four teams then. Do you know when they integrated the little league program?

SN: Exactly what year?

PC: This might help a little bit. I noticed in a Free Press photograph June 1, 1967 you coached the Dodgers and you had Emmett King.

SN: Yes.

PC: Would that have been the first integrated team you coached?

SN: It was in that area because Emmett started playing ball for me when he was ten years old.

PC: Okay.

SN: So, I'm not sure how old he was but, it would be pretty close to that. If he was playing for me it would have been the year before or then.

PC: Can you remember if he was the first black child that you coached?

SN: He came in on the first. He was the first, yes, he was. Yes, he was.

PC: So, that could have been the first integrated team then.

SN: It could have been, yes.

PC: In speaking about integration and race relations can you just tell me what your personal experience was with race relations before integration?

SN: Before integration really I didn't know much about it, really. Like I say being raised mostly in Burke and Diboll, you know we didn't mix and so...

PC: Right, had you had any experience as a child being around the black community in any way?

SN: I had none whatsoever, none whatsoever.

PC: Okay. So, when integration began being talked about what was your first knowledge of integration, can you remember?

SN: No, I can't really remember what my first knowledge of it was just all the marches in Alabama and Mississippi and stuff but here no.

PC: Just things going on in the world but, not anything going on in Diboll.

SN: I don't believe Diboll had many problems with it, I really don't.

PC: Did you have any concerns or feelings about it when you knew the integration of the school was going to take place and later we know the baseball was integrated did you have any concerns or fears about it?

SN: No, I didn't have no fears or concerns about it because like I say, I knew nothing about it. It was a learning process for me too.

PC: When the Little League was integrated you had been coaching for several years if you started in '61, were there meetings pertaining to, "Hey we are going to integrate the Little League program"? Was there a discussion about it or anything like that?

SN: There was a discussion where the coaches discussed it but as far as any town meetings or nothing, no there wasn't. We were just told that it was going to happen and we had to accept it, which I had no problem with it.

PC: Okay. When you say you were told was there any particular powers that be that you are referring too?

SN: No, there was not.

PC: Just the general over all that integration was coming?

SN: Yes, just overall that it was coming.

PC: Now the schools started Freedom of Choice in 1965 and 66, the children could choose and then in '67 the high school was integrated and by fall of '68 was full integration. So, it looks like this 1967 team that you coached with Emmett King being a black student, player on that team, it looks like that might have coincided with Freedom of Choice and integration of the high school.

SN: It probably did. I would think it would probably.

PC: Do you recall if there were any coaches that were against it? Did anybody voice opposition to it?

SN: I had...yes it was one that did that didn't really want it, but other than the other three it was fine with the others.

PC: It was fine, so there were still just these four teams?

SN: Still just these four teams.

PC: So, it just came down to this coaches meeting and ya'll discussing it?

SN: Yes.

PC: Okay, so that is the answer to my next question. There were four coaches involved then at that time.

SN: Yes.

PC: And, there were still just the four teams?

SN: Four teams.

PC: Okay, now once they began integrating the baseball program how did they recruit the black children to come over and play integrated sports?

SN: They just announced it in school and the ones that wanted to come over could come over, which was very few, and they came over and we picked them just like we picked the white boys.

PC: Okay, were the parents involved? Did the parents come?

SN: The parents, some of them came – a few of them.

PC: Was there ever any discussion among the parents, any controversy?

SN: Not that I know of.

PC: So like at school they just passed out a signup sheet?

SN: I would assume that is what they did, just passed out a signup sheet.

PC: Okay, do you ever remember going to the H. G. Temple School, which at that point would have still been an all black school, do you ever remember going there to recruit the children to play?

SN: No, we didn't go to a school and recruit any players, black or white.

PC: Oh okay.

SN: We just had sign up day, pretty well like they do today.

PC: Oh okay.

SN: And they came down and signed up and of course it didn't cost them nothing then. Everything was free.

PC: Right, it was free then. So, who supported it financially back then?

SN: You know, Patsy, I think we just made do with what we had mostly and what little we could raise out of the concession stand and the kids selling candy during the year and stuff like that. But, we didn't have no Booster Club to give any money or anything like that.

PC: Okay, that is what I was going to ask you. They didn't have the Booster Club then. What about the company or Mr. Temple do you know how they supported it?

SN: He may have given something but, I wasn't in the running of the program and so I don't know but, if he did I didn't know nothing about it.

PC: Okay, who was like the president? I know they had a president of the Little League, who was president at that time in this early '67 years that we are speaking of?

SN: It seems to me that it was Milford Ruby, but I believe that is...we had Milford Ruby and then we had Mr. Shepherd for a while, George McClain.

PC: And they weren't coaches they were just over the whole program?

SN: They were just presidents and things like that over it, yes.

PC: So, you don't recall any thing of how the money came in to buy uniforms, or tee shirts or bats and balls or anything like that?

SN: You know, somebody had to be giving them some kind of money and it probably was the company because we had full uniforms then for the kids. Of course, they used them more than one year but...

PC: They turned them in and reused them.

SN: They turned them in and reused them, but somebody had to...I don't believe they raised that much money in the concession stand, you know.

PC: Right.

SN: But, that I have no knowledge of where the money came from. But, I would assume that it would be the company to give it.

PC: They supported it.

SN: I believe it probably was.

PC: Now, how did the players interact with each other the first years of integration? Specifically we can look back and refer to this team in '67 year, your Dodgers team when you had Emmett King, were there any problems with the children interacting with each other, the blacks and whites?

SN: No, there was not because there were very few the first couple of years. So, really I don't recall any on any other team but on my team no, we did not have any.

PC: So, everybody just accepted them as part of the team.

SN: Everybody just accepted them as part of the team.

PC: Here is a photograph that I found from 1966 Free Press article and this is...not sure the name of the team, I guess this is maybe your Dodgers but, there is no black players on there and then in '67 we have a photograph of your Dodgers team and Emmett King is

playing. So, in '67 there is an Earnest Washington on the Cubs and you had Emmett King.

SN: Yes.

PC: So, it looks from these photographs there were just very few boys to play.

SN: It was very few, it was very few.

PC: Can you recall if through the years after this how it increased and the reason for that?

SN: Well I think every year after that it increased a little more every year until we finally had to add more teams and, you know, it...

PC: Do you think that was due to anything as far as the parents becoming comfortable with it after the integration kind of...the first year it kind of settled down?

SN: I think so, but you know really I think the black parents were more concerned with it than the white parents were really, you know, because...yes.

PC: Oh really.

SN: And, I'm going by my conversation with Queen King later on through the years, you know.

PC: Okay, anything particular you care to share?

SN: Well she would just tell me that the kids was really hesitant about coming over because they had never been around whites either just like the white kids had never been around the blacks. She had to push and I would go over to get Emmett. He wouldn't play. He wouldn't want to play so I would go over to his house and get him and tell him, "Come on and play," you know. And years later she thanked me, she came up and thanked me for that. She said, "I believe if you hadn't done that he wouldn't have gone on in sports and done what he done," because he really didn't want to.

PC: That is wonderful. He didn't want to just come on his own.

SN: Come on his own.

PC: Did you just know that he was interested in it?

SN: Yes, I did because I could tell by him out there playing that he was real interested in it and he was real good.

PC: Oh okay.

SN: So, he wouldn't show up and I would go over there and say, "Hey what is the matter, come on man we are going to go play." And he would go. He was a good kid.

PC: Okay, so he got comfortable with it.

SN: Yes, he got comfortable and then I think as the years passed, you know, after the first year you had more. They would tell their friends.

PC: Yes, come on and come play so, it kind of grew.

SN: It kind of grew from there, yes.

PC: Well I could see, just common sense would tell us that they could have had some fears especially at this age. These are nine and ten year old boys that you had so of course if they had not been around the black community or the white community and white kids they would have had fears to come over.

SN: Well neither one, white or black had never been around.

PC: Exactly.

SN: And then you take nine and ten year old kids because then the Little League consisted of nine through twelve, so we didn't go no higher than that then.

PC: Okay, nine through twelve. Did they have tee-ball like they do now?

SN: They had some form of it but it wasn't an organized form of it, no.

PC: So, they didn't keep going to the playoffs to get to Williamsport or anything like that. It wasn't organized like that.

SN: No.

PC: Okay. Now did the parents of the black students come and attend the games?

SN: Very few of them did.

PC: Okay, 'cause there were very few playing, students playing.

SN: Very few playing. Now, you know, Queen and Lindberg they was always there but...

PC: Okay, and if they were there were there ever any problems with the parents as far as race relations?

SN: No, even the players had no problems as far as I know. Now we had some problems outside the fences with the bigger boys showing up, you know, black and white, causing trouble but, we had none on the fields.

PC: On your fields, you mean, like bystanders, high school kids or older boys, bystanders maybe getting into some friction?

SN: Yes, bystanders, but I don't think the parents had any problems at all.

PC: Do you have a personal experience in regards to anything happening in regards to integration that you would like to share whether good or bad?

SN: Patsy I can't think of anything that I would...

PC: Okay. And, how long were you involved with Little League program as a coach?

SN: Total twenty-five years.

PC: Twenty-five years, okay. Now, did you coach your own children through little league and stuff or did you just have an interest in it?

SN: Well I had an interest, see because of course, mine was all girls.

PC: Okay.

SN: And so, later on in the process when my girls got up big enough to play, of course they couldn't play Little League, me and Dewey Wolf started the girls league and then I coached the girls for a few years.

PC: Well I did notice in the Free Press they started the girl's softball later. I can't remember exactly what years but, is that how that got started then?

SN: That is how that got started.

PC: Okay, they did not have girls' softball before that?

SN: No, they did not.

PC: So, you helped get that started here, you and Dewey Wolf?

SN: Me and Dewey Wolf.

PC: Was it controversial or was it well accepted? Did you have any problems getting it going?

SN: Didn't have no...no, and we built that the same way we built the Little League. We had...didn't have very many girls that wanted to play so we had to let the little ones play on up through the big ones, you know. They played together out there until we got enough interest in it that we could split up the age groups.

PC: Do you know what year that was when you started the girl's softball?

SN: Let me see. I can come pretty close to it because my middle daughter, which she was born in '65 and I would think she would have been about 10 or 11 years old when we started. So, around '75 I would think.

PC: Okay, and what was her name?

SN: Kim.

PC: Okay, so it was when she got old enough to play?

SN: Yes, and she wanted to play.

PC: She wanted to play then you helped get the girls softball organized.

SN: Yes.

PC: Now, what field did y'all play on then?

SN: Well we just played in the field.

PC: The same little league field?

SN: No, we just played...

PC: Oh, out in a field. (laughter)

SN: No, out there by the...

PC: Literally!

SN: Yes, literally in a field, yes.

PC: Okay. Now, I noticed in I believe a 1979 Free Press article where they are expanding the Old Orchard Park, the city park complex, and they are proposing to add little league fields and softball fields. The new park was established over there in '68 or somewhere in there. And, they built the new high school field which they later named the Pop Jordan Field.

SN: Right.

PC: But, and that was around '68 when they did that and then in 1978 I found this article where they are proposing to add little league fields over in Old Orchard Park. So, for all that time frame, were ya'll still playing like where the bank is?

SN: Yes.

PC: Really!

SN: Yes, we played there until they moved over there.

PC: Was there any campaign to the city between you coaches to get new fields or was this something the city just decided to do?

SN: That was just something the city decided to do. I guess they saw the need for it because we had done got big enough that it was hard to play on one field, you know.

PC: Okay, did you have any input as a coach? You were still coaching then you know, in all this time, did you have any input with city officials on, you know, what was needed as far as the fields?

SN: No, at that time right there I had dropped out of coaching and I didn't coach when they were actually moving over there but I come back. I dropped out three or four years and I came back.

PC: You came back, okay. I guess they just saw there was a need. The program grew and grew and we know today it's still a big program and well attended.

SN: Well you could imagine today if you were trying to play on one field.

PC: It would be a nightmare wouldn't it?

SN: Yes.

PC: I noticed in 1985 you received a Community Service Award from the Diboll Rotary Club for your association with the Diboll Youth Baseball Program for twenty years. Anything you care to share with me about that award, how you were chosen for that?

SN: I have no idea how they chose me Patsy. Felton Burt and Allen...I can't think of his last name. He had a little food store here in Diboll, had bought out Pavlic's old food store over there. Was it Mossheart?

PC: Seale's, I know it became Seale's Grocery, but that wasn't him?

SN: No.

PC: I am not sure.

SN: But, anyhow they were the ones over that club and they just asked me to come to a meeting down there and...

PC: Okay, the Rotary Club.

SN: Yes, I went and that is when I got the award.

PC: So, it was a surprise then.

SN: Yes, it was a complete surprise.

PC: Now, did you ever serve as director of the little league program?

SN: Yes, I did for two years.

PC: Okay.

SN: What year was that? That would have been one of them year's right there when I got that award.

PC: Okay, you got the award in '85 so somewhere around in there. You were serving as director?

SN: Yes.

PC: How did that come about? If you were a coach, were you just chosen by the coaches to become director or did y'all just take turns or what?

SN: No, we didn't take turns. Felton Burt, again, had come and asked me if I would take it because it was not nobody wanted that job, you know.

PC: Was he involved with Little League Program?

SN: Yes he was.

PC: You mentioned Milford Ruby earlier and I know for a lot of years he was president or maybe this director title. I don't know if it was the same position but just somebody over it.

SN: Yes, same position, yes.

PC: So, it was kind of like your job as director or say when Milford was president to make sure you had enough coaches and umpires and you just kind of over saw it.

SN: Yes and equipment and stuff, yes.

PC: Well today they have the same thing just bigger capacity.

SN: Yes, a lot bigger capacity.

PC: Okay. As director do you remember specific needs or problems with the program that you had to deal with?

SN: No we didn't...except the director had to be there every time as long as the lights were on, you know. That is why they had a hard time getting somebody to do that because...

PC: It was a lot of hours.

SN: ...it was a lot of hours involved in it.

PC: Okay.

SN: Non-paying hours. (laughter)

PC: Yes, volunteer hours, yes. Now, also in 2001 you were honored for your service to the Diboll Youth Baseball Program and your name was added to the Wall of Honor down at the complex. Anything in regards to that you want to share?

SN: No, again that was a surprise until they put it up, you know. Gary Mike Smith spearheaded that because he was playing ball with us at the same time like Emmett King and all them was, you know. He didn't play...he played on a different team.

PC: He was a student then.

SN: Yes.

PC: Okay. So, you volunteered for twenty-five years with baseball.

SN: A total of twenty-five years, yes.

PC: Well I'm sure you had an impact on many a child then.

SN: Yes.

PC: Any particular game or incident or child that you have a fond memory of that you care to share?

SN: Pat, I have a fond memory of every one of them I coached, really. I don't think about them a lot until I see them at times, you know, but when I see them I'll...you

know, I coached Howard, I coached John. In fact John was playing on the team, the first team, when I taken the team over there.

PC: You are talking about the Burke Dodgers?

SN: Yes.

PC: Now were all those boys from Burke that were on your team?

SN: Yes.

PC: Did you just go around recruiting or did they come to you and say hey I want to play on your team?

SN: Well I taken over...the first year I taken over at Burke. I mean, the first year I coached it was Burke. The next year they integrated them with Diboll and so we had Diboll boys and Burke boys on there.

PC: Right so today, it's just a matter of if you run into boys you coached it's just fond memories, yes.

SN: Oh yes, see like Emmett he still calls me every once in a while.

PC: Oh wow, well that is wonderful. He turned out to be a great sports player all around.

SN: Yes he did.

PC: That is great! Now anything else pertaining to little league that I have failed to ask you that you want to put on the record or anything that you want to share before we move on?

SN: No, I can't except the only thing I would say is that I think we had a whole lot better program back then than they have now.

PC: Well there's a lot of kids down there, I know that.

SN: Yes.

PC: I wanted to ask you about your Diboll Day activities as well because you were here in Diboll during the integration years, before integration, during integration and still have lived in Diboll all these years. We are trying to determine when Diboll Day activities were integrated. Do you recall anything about segregated queen's races? They had separate Diboll Day queens. They had the black queens and the white queens before integration. Do you remember anything about Diboll Day before integration?

SN: You know I don't, I don't.

PC: We do know from Free Press articles that they had them.

SN: They had them, I know they did.

PC: They had one parade and then, you know, the black community celebrated at Walter Allen Park and the white community celebrated at Old Orchard Park. I was just wondering if you had any memory.

SN: My first dealings with Diboll Day would have been in 1970, you know, when I went to work for Mr. Shepherd. And, you know, he was big and he came and got me because he knew that I had worked with kids to kind of run the Diboll Day for the Fiberboard Division.

PC: Oh okay. So, in 1970 you were working at the Fiberboard for Mr. Shepherd?

SN: Yes.

PC: Well he was a big Diboll Day fan and promoter.

SN: That come first, that come first!

PC: Yes exactly, before work huh?

SN: Yes. (laughter)

PC: Anything about Diboll Day and Mr. Shepherd you want to share, a certain memory or a certain Diboll Day event or a fun memory?

SN: No but the only thing I'll say about that integration part that he was big on...he was wanting to get every race into this Diboll Day queen. He pushed for that hard.

PC: Oh he did?

SN: Yes he did.

PC: Like making sure that there was a girl representative of each race, is that what you're saying?

SN: Yes, well yes especially the black and white. He wanted the black race. Of course we didn't have too many Spanish people here then, you know.

PC: Right.

SN: Not until 1969 and 70 that we didn't have any and we didn't have any that wanted to do anything like that, you know.

PC: So, he really wanted to get everybody involved.

SN: He wanted to get everybody involved.

PC: Okay. Is there anything you remember about how he went about doing that? Did he just encourage them to participate or anything particular?

SN: Yes, he did. He encouraged the parents to let the kids do this, the ones that were working in that plant. I don't know nothing about the other plants.

PC: So, he would encourage his employees.

SN: Yes, his employees to, "Okay let's let your daughter be a candidate for this." Of course they had to vote on it.

PC: Right.

SN: But, if Mr. Shepherd wanted it he was going to get it, you know. (laughter)

PC: So really he just wanted his employees and men at the Fiberboard he just encouraged them to let their children participate.

SN: Yes, and I think every plant did pretty well the same thing.

PC: Well, we were just trying to determine, you know, if Diboll Day events were completely integrated around the same time the schools were integrated. Full integration was 1968.

SN: Well I think they were fully integrated in 1970.

PC: Yes, they were. Oh, you mean Diboll Day events?

SN: Yes, I believe they were because either '70 or '72 Debra Washington was our queen candidate at the Fiberboard Plant and I believe she was one of the first.

PC: Yes, she was the first black queen after integration, integrated Diboll Day activities. So, that could have been the year or two after if '68 was school integration. I don't have the exact date but she was maybe '72 or '74 somewhere in there.

SN: Yes.

PC: I knew that you were involved with Diboll Day for a lot of years. Are there any other years that you were involved? How long were you involved with Diboll Day activities?

SN: Diboll Day well, from 1970 to 1988 I believe.

PC: Okay, okay. Was it a lot of fun?

SN: It was a lot of fun.

PC: Now, one year your daughter ran.

SN: Yes.

PC: Celsa, I can't remember the exact year.

SN: I can't either.

PC: I know I helped with y'all then and we had a lot of fun.

SN: And I'm glad I just had the one daughter to run. (laughter)

PC: It was enough huh.

SN: It was enough. (laughter)

PC: Now tell me about your employment with Temple Industries. You said in 1970 you worked for Mr. Shepherd, is that when you began working at the plant?

SN: Yes, well I started working there in 1969, yes.

PC: Okay, did you retire from there?

SN: I quit from there.

PC: Okay, how long did you work for the company?

SN: Eleven years.

PC: Eleven years, okay. And, then you had your own business at one point.

SN: Yes.

PC: I may have asked you this before but, I can't remember. Did you have any children in school during the integration years?

SN: I don't think I did.

PC: That would have been '65 through '68.

SN: No, not in '65 because my oldest daughter was born in '61 so...

PC: Okay she wouldn't have been in school then.

SN: No, she wouldn't have been in school at that time, no, shortly after but not at that time.

PC: Shortly after, but not during all that integration process where they were making all these decisions to where as a parent you would have voiced any concerns?

SN: No.

PC: Okay, I failed to ask you earlier who some of the other coaches were during the time especially these early years of the little league program.

SN: The early years, well let's see, Monk Warner, Pete Smith, Lester Tidwell, Howard Mullins, Charles Havard, just to name a few there in the early years of it.

PC: Now, in the early years you were the coach of the Dodgers and say another say, Howard Mullins he was the coach of a particular team. Did you keep the same team year after year regardless of what boys were on there?

SN: Yes, you kept the same team every year.

PC: Okay, I noticed in the Free Press articles you...for several years there you were the coach of the Dodgers. Where now it seems like, you know, fathers that are coaches they move with their children.

SN: They move, yes.

PC: So, I was just curious if you had a son playing on your team or maybe you didn't, but you kept the same team. I just wondered how that worked back then?

SN: See we kept...like I said, at that time the age group was nine through twelve so if we got a nine year old boy we had him for four years.

PC: Oh okay.

SN: We kept the same team every year. The boys stayed on the same team every year and you would pick up as the twelve year olds went off you would pick up.

PC: To fill your team.

SN: To fill your team.

PC: Oh okay, so it's totally different than today?

SN: Totally different and totally better.

PC: Okay, now I understand. Because I wondered how you continued to be the Dodgers coach, you know, for four years and you had the same group of boys for several years there. So, Little League was ages nine through twelve and you as a coach, you would have had your same team and your same team name and then as twelve year olds got too old others would come on and you would pick them up but, you kept your same team.

SN: Yes, you kept the same team.

PC: Wow that is so interesting.

SN: Yes, kept the same team.

PC: That is very different.

SN: Which to me that is a better way of doing it than the way they do it today.

PC: Well your boys get used to playing with each other.

SN: Yes, playing with each other.

PC: Just like high school they play for four years or whatever.

SN: Yes, just like high school. And changing teams every year to me it's not good but I guess to them it is, but I'm not involved in it anyway.

PC: So, it's not like you had a coaches meeting and you pick your kids every year, you just had the same team.

SN: You had the same team and we would have like we called it a try out day on one Saturday and if I had to pick up three boys well they would get out there and play a little bit and the coaches would pick in turn a kid until you filled up your players.

PC: Oh okay.

SN: When you filled up your team you were full you didn't pick no more.

PC: Now, what if there were more kids than there were spots? Did you ever have that problem?

SN: No.

PC: Like today they make a spot for every kid regardless of what it takes, right?

SN: Well we did that too but, we would fill up our teams first and then if it was any left over, because you going to always have some drop out and all that kind of stuff. If they didn't everybody that wanted to play got to play.

PC: Now where did y'all get your umpires from?

SN: Just volunteers.

PC: Okay, dads.

SN: Dad's, we had Travis Groom for many years that would come down there and do it, but mostly just dads.

PC: Were they paid then?

SN: No. (laughter)

PC: Just volunteer.

SN: Everything was volunteer.

PC: They are paid now right?

SN: Yes, they are paid now.

PC: So, what major changes in the Little League program do you see today as compared to when you were coaching?

SN: Mothers (laughter) is the main thing.

PC: The main thing. What about discipline?

SN: Yes, when I was coaching way back there when them boys was on the field they was ours as long as we had them on the field. Momma's didn't...out of all the time I coached down there before I dropped out a few years and then went back I had one problem, two problems out of two mommas. Never had a problem out of a dad but then, in the eighties I went back and coached some more and had all kind of problems out of mommas and that is why I said, "No, I'm not going to do this."

PC: Didn't want to have to deal with the mom's.

SN: I didn't have no problem with the kids, had problems with the momma's.

PC: I'm sure from the sixties to the eighties you could see a lot of difference in the discipline situation.

SN: All the difference in the world.

PC: Probably if you had a problem with a kid in the sixties you knew you could depend on that parent to straighten, help you straighten it out.

SN: They would straighten him out, yes. You didn't have no problems. You just didn't have no problems with them. And, now you don't have nothing but problems with them.

PC: Yes, I can see that. So everybody kept their same team and same coaches. Can you remember a time when it started to grow and there were more than these four teams, you mentioned the Yankees, the Cubs, the Indians and the Dodgers, can you remember the time frame when it grew and you had to get more teams?

SN: I can't remember what years it was no, I can't. But, I know we would add a team. I think when we added we added two teams, yes. We played like that for a good while and then after that we had to go to like eight teams. It's hard to play with an uneven amount of teams, you know what I mean.

PC: Yes, to make it come out right. Now, in your early years, the sixty one years, did y'all just play in Diboll amongst these four teams?

SN: Yes.

PC: Did they have All-Stars then?

SN: Yes.

PC: How did that work back then?

SN: It is basically the same way it works now. But, we were Little League then, see we weren't Dixie League.

PC: Okay, it was different. It was specific to Little League.

SN: Little League

PC: And now they have Dixie League.

SN: Now, they have Dixie League which is...

PC: A little bit different?

SN: It's a joke. (laughter) But, yes we were in the Little League organization then and which, you know, the boys we never did have a team good enough, but when you have to struggle to pick up four teams you are not going to Williamsport, you know what I mean.

PC: Yes, right. Now, did you as a coach have to buy equipment yourself for your team?

SN: No, they did furnish equipment.

PC: Was that ever an issue having funds for equipment?

SN: No, it never was.

PC: You mentioned the concession stand and really not sure about the funding and how all that was...but the children didn't pay anything.

SN: No, they didn't pay anything and...but we taken care of our equipment back then because we knew that...

PC: That you had to.

SN: We had to. Now, if a coach had a little boy on his team that his parents just couldn't buy him a glove or something we may go buy him a glove but, we didn't have to do that.

PC: Now, did the kids turn their shirts in at the end of the season?

SN: Yes.

PC: You reused them?

SN: Yes, we reused them.

PC: Now, they don't do that everybody buys their own.

SN: We had full uniforms back then, you know, regular baseball uniforms and they would...so we couldn't have too many boys on the team because we wouldn't have uniforms. We didn't have no spare uniforms. I think we had fifteen is what we could have on a team and when we got up to fifteen boys you had to stop.

PC: Had to stop yes. Now, do you ever remember another specific black player other than Emmett King that you coached? Anybody come to mind?

SN: No, I don't.

PC: You mentioned years later that it really meant a lot to him and to his mother and I just wondered if there was any others.

SN: There were several but they don't come to my mind right now. When I see them I think of them.

PC: All right. Is there anything else you want to add that I haven't asked you about? Whether it's Little League, Diboll, anything particular?

SN: No.

PC: Okay, well Sonny that is all my questions I have. I really thank you for spending time with me today and thank you for doing the interview with me.

SN: Well I hope it helped you and I hope you got some useful information out of it.

PC: I'm sure we did. Thank you again!

END OF INTERVIEW