

Tolbert Chism: I'll stop it and you just asked me the questions and

Paul Ortiz: Okay. Mr. Chism, you were just going to tell me about an experience you had in the segregated army.

Tolbert Chism: Yes. I had just started. At the time when General Davis became a general in the United States Army, he was the only Black general who was in the United States Army, and they said to us as Black troops that he was the first Black general in the army. And I told him that's biggest lies he's ever been told. And I mean, that's what I told my army buddies and all of that since the same outfit that I was in. And so they asked me who or where was other generals in any army that was Black. And I told them, I was taught in Black history that Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great and all of the great conquerors of the Far East had Black generals in them and looked like they just didn't want that to get through to the Black troops. Yeah, I found that to be rather amazing,

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism. There were people in the army that didn't want you to be talking about that?

Tolbert Chism: That's right. That is true. You see, our education is Black people had been limited to only what the Whites wanted us to know about ourselves, but nothing about our background as to what our origin was and where we had come from. I found that out.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, it sounds like along the way before you got into the army, you had some elders or people teaching you a little bit about it.

Tolbert Chism: Oh yes, yes, definitely. And tell you whole truth about it, all of that comes through the Fargo Agricultural School. You see, we had every Sunday evening, everybody had to go to what was known as vegetable service. They were just about the same as the Sunday Evening sermon. And this is where the head of the school who was Floyd Brown, that was well up on that history about Blacks, their background, their origin and what have you, would talk and tell us about our past and our ancestors.

Tolbert Chism: Yeah, this was very much known among us. Of course, you couldn't talk too much about it because it would cause some kind of disturbance or misunderstanding. And it was one thing that he taught that I think is a jewel to me until this day. And that was good manners, that being able to put up with the other person bad manners. So some people don't want to accept that, but by putting up with the other fellow's bad manners, it has kept me out of a lot of things that could have gotten me into deep trouble or no doubt cause me to even lose my life. Yeah, this is true. And that's true with quite a few Blacks that I've known.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism. Now, when you talked about the other fellow's bad manners, you're referring primarily to White people's bad manners?

Tolbert Chism: Yes.

Paul Ortiz: What are some of those bad manners that you grew up with?

Tolbert Chism: Well, one in particular was it seems that they could always find money to keep their schools open for the White kids, but they could never find money to keep the schools open for the Black kids. The Whites would get their full nine months every year, but the Blacks wouldn't get no more than about three or four or five at the most.

Tolbert Chism: And it would take the average Black student about two years to make one grade. Example of it is when I first come to the Fargo Agricultural School, I was promoted to the seventh grade and I was 15 years old. Now, if I had of gotten full nine months all along at 15 years old, I would've been in something about what, 10th grade, promoted to the 10th grade. Yeah.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what were the primary things that prevented you early on from getting the full nine months education?

Tolbert Chism: Early on? Well, it was nothing that prevented me early on because you see, that's why I made the advancements that I did make because I came here promoted to the seventh grade, I did the seventh grade, the eighth grade, the ninth grade, and was promoted to the 10th. And I was about 18 years old by then, and I decided that I wanted to let the school go for a while and join the United States Army. And that's what it did. Of course, at that time, you had to have the permission of your parents to even join the army at 18 years old.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, can you tell me about your parents and what they did to earn a living when you were growing up?

Tolbert Chism: Well, my mother and father, they were regular dirt farmers. They grew corn, cotton, gardens, few cattle and hogs and chickens and all that. Just a regular farm. And they had what was known as these, what they referred to the Forage Club, the home demonstration agents in that day and time, they lived at home program. In other words, everything that you ate, consumed, you tried to grow it and produce it out there on that farm where you live.

Paul Ortiz: And Mr. Chism, where did your family live when you were growing up?

Tolbert Chism: That was six miles from a little place they call Colt, Arkansas. Number one highway. This is on the other side of, now it's about 12 miles, Colt is 12 miles north of Forrest City, Arkansas. And then as you get to Colt, you were still about six miles from my father's farm.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what are your earliest childhood memories about growing up in Colt, Arkansas?

Tolbert Chism: Well, the earliest childhood memories that I had was struggling trying to obtain an education. That was my greatest struggle. And I was just really glad when the time come that the little school that I was attending, I was promoted to the seventh grade. I'd already done the sixth grade and promoted to the seventh grade. And at this time, Fargo was taking from the seventh grade through the 12th. In later years, they even knocked that off and made it that you had to be graduated from the eighth grade. Oh, no, no, you had to be an eighth grade student before you could register to become a student at Fargo Agricultural School.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, when you were growing up in Colt, did Black families share with each other in the neighborhood? If there was hard times for one family, would people—?

Tolbert Chism: Well, yes. They really did pitch in to help one another. You see, at that time it was a lot of things that was done by the community and quite a few things that was just done by the people in the community.

Tolbert Chism: Say for an example, even way back there during that time, they had a certain time that they would meet to even kind of work on the roads, roads through the community, certain bad holes in the road and all of that. And well, they had in the harder days, canning kitchens that were set up at a home demonstration agent that they can and preserve the food during the time that it was produced. Can, in other words, they set up quite a few, what they call canning kitchens in that day and time.

Paul Ortiz: So the canning kitchens would be a place where people in the community would get together?

Tolbert Chism: Prepare whatever it was that they were canning. And that went from say, well, green beans, everything. But when a big thing would come on, somebody would kill a beef or [indistinct 00:11:51] beef and take that to the canning kitchen to be canned. And the food would be chili, and then it had—

Tolbert Chism: In other words, you had everything in the can that you can go to the store and buy this present day and time, the cuts of the beef, so to speak.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what other kinds of things would Black families share? So pitch in?

Tolbert Chism: Well, another pitching in that they had, you see, they grew and they made their own syrup, sorghum molasses, so to speak. I can recall that it was an uncle on my father's side that was my father's uncle, he was a great, as they call molasses maker. And we would go around from one community to the other one, he owned the meal and the cooking pan that they put the juice in and put the big fire on it. And they would come as cooking, you had to skim the skim off of it. And when they got done, you had the regular, what they call canned molasses. Some people would put it in barrels, some people would put it in bucket seeders. Yeah. It just all depends on what kind of convenience that you had. But my father, he had these regular barrels with a bung right in the middle of it. When he would make the molasses, he would take and pull them into that barrel by the gallon and keep a count on the card.

Paul Ortiz: So he was a famous syrup maker?

Tolbert Chism: Say I were?

Paul Ortiz: No, he, your—

Tolbert Chism: Yeah, my uncle, his name was Edward Chism. He was born and reared in Jackson, Tennessee it was, and he had migrated in his younger life over into the State of Arkansas.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, was that also true for your immediate family? Had your family migrated into Colt, your father, your grandfather?

Tolbert Chism: Well, my grandfather and my father's uncle, the one that I was telling you about was the molasses maker, they all migrated about at the same time from, I think that was Bolivar, Tennessee over into the state of Arkansas.

Tolbert Chism: This uncle of mine was, he was mostly partly, I guess mostly Choctaw Indian. His hair was as straight as yours, but yet he was dark. And they figured what had something to do with that, they told us this under the cover, that when they started that great march of the Indians going to move the Indians out of the Delta into Oklahoma, well, the Whites, made certain agreements with certain Indians that if they would settle down on a lot of land and become farmers in all of that they wouldn't have to participate in the migration.

Tolbert Chism: And that was a situation that confronted my father's father and his uncle, which was my great uncle, the molasses maker I was telling you about. Many people aren't aware of that, and many people aren't aware that all of that long death march that they performed on the Indians, moving them out of the Delta where the best of land were out to some other rough land and what have you, years after they said that it backfired. You know, how don't you?

Paul Ortiz: Oh, because the land that they later moved on to had minerals.

Tolbert Chism: Well, kind of in that way. And in another way, it was during the time when we were fighting Japan and Bataan fall, and they had that death march of our United States troops from one place to another. Said that that was a retaliation of what happened to the Indian here in the United States. Many people aren't aware of that. Never did even give other thought.

Paul Ortiz: So it was kind of a revenge in a way.

Tolbert Chism: Yeah, yeah. I mean something greater than ourselves intervened and kind of gave those who were in power kind of payback for what they had done in the past.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, when you were growing up, did elders in your community talk about signs or—?

Tolbert Chism: Well, my mother was always a great sign reader, but her signs mostly come from the various quarters of the moon, four quarters of the moon. Well, she would take those sun signs from, what was that her favorite almanac was the lady's almanac. Had a lady on the back of it and she would buy that. It would come annually, so to speak. I don't know where she picked it up or bought it. She could tell you about the change of the moon and when it was going to rain or if it was cold and when it was going to snow and all of that kind of a thing just only from an almanac. Yeah.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, was that the same as the, was that a different almanac than the McDonald Almanac?

Tolbert Chism: Kind of. Kind of. But almost on the same principles.

Paul Ortiz: Okay but there was a ladies' almanac?

Tolbert Chism: Ladies' almanac. It was referred to as the Ladies Birthday Almanac.

Paul Ortiz: Okay.

Tolbert Chism: But there's another thing that I'll tell you too is that my people were always highly religious and Christian-like so to speak. They would always see to it or they thought to it about myself and my sisters and brothers are ahead of me, and we were catechized. And that was giving us the basic fundamentals about God himself.

Tolbert Chism: Now, I remember when I was around about five years old, I had to leave my mother and went into another little class. We went to church every Sunday. Wasn't no way out of that.

Tolbert Chism: You would go, you were assigned to another class from five to eight years old. That was a catechism class. And in that class you would learn the basic fundamentals about God. It was a question and an answer, a little book, kind of small. First question back there then, I don't know what it is now, was "who is God?" And that was in light writing where they asked the question. But in black writing, it would give the answer, "Our Heavenly Father the maker of all things." That's who God is. Next question, and I'm just remembering them off the top of my head, I can't go down through all of them. "Where is God?" This is a kid, five to eight years old, and the answer to that one was "In heaven. And everywhere."

Tolbert Chism: It's answers to many other questions that was answered. But those two were the two beginning ones and the basic fundamentals that looks like just kind of hung on to me.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what denomination was your family?

Tolbert Chism: Well, when I was inducted into the army, when I volunteered into the army, they only had two faiths. And that was Protestant and Catholic. But now Protestant, it identified anything that you were other than a Catholic, if you understand what I'm talking. Whenever you get talking about Baptist,

Methodist, Presbyterian and all of those others, all of those were referred to as Protestant.

Paul Ortiz: And your family was?

Tolbert Chism: Protestant, of course. Baptist. My mother was a Methodist. My father was a Baptist. But back then, during that time, whatever the man was, and the woman married him, young woman married him. Well, she went into the faith that he believed in. She followed him with his faith. Well, my father was a Baptist and my mother was a Methodist, and they courted, and when they got married and started a family, she joined the Baptist church. And if it had have been the other way around, if he had have been Methodist and she was a Baptist, well, she would've changed over to a Methodist had they got married. You understand? Yes.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, when you were growing up you mentioned briefly some of your grandparents. Did stories pass down through your family about your grandparents, about their lifetime?

Tolbert Chism: Well, yes, they certainly did. And it was one that was kind of outstanding on my father's side, but he was my father's mother's father. He was an ex-slave. His name was, well, everybody called him Dick Mitchell. He was a Mitchell. And they said that Dick Mitchell was a mighty man, said that he couldn't count. No, he couldn't read, but he could count. And he cut timber and cleared new ground for various White people and all of that. And dug ditches, that's what he got paid for Dick Mitchell. And they said that he could take a, he wasn't cutting with a saw, he cutting with an ax. And he didn't allow nobody to touch that ax, you know, because people had a tendency if they used your ax they go hack it down in the ground, get it all gapped up and dulled it up, all of that. That that was his reason for that. (laughs) He raised so much sand.

Tolbert Chism: But they said that he would, he wasn't no great big man, but he had the muscles so that he could just take one of his really sharp axes and walk up to a tree with a diameter around about a foot or better and say, no time that tree was falling. Dick Mitchell, he was a mighty man. Stout. Couldn't read or write, but he could count. And they say that he would dig ditches for people and clear new ground for them. And they paid him by the acre or somehow kind of well paying. And he would take that money, carry it home, and hide it somewhere around the house. Man never did put any money in the bank, Dick Mitchell.

Tolbert Chism: Well, he only had, let me see, one sister, her name was Rosie, which was my father's mother. Well, when he died, the uncle Lewis Mitchell knew that he had that money all around the house, stuffed in one place. He went to the house and he got enough money that he could just take and go see a farm out there somewhere. He could sell this farm that he was living on and go buy another farm.

Tolbert Chism: Always had nice horses and buggies and gold in his mouth from one side to the other one. Always wore neat, neat clothes, dressed well, and that was from Dick Mitchell of all of that money that he had made and saved. And he didn't give his sister a dime. Greed. Dick Mitchell. They said Dick Mitchell was a mighty man.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, during those days would Whites get really jealous when Black people acquired land?

Tolbert Chism: Oh, yes. They certainly were. Now, to a certain extent, when they first settled in the community where I grew up in that they call Jericho. Jericho. That's about 12 miles north of Forrest City and about 12 miles to the right, over into what they call Jericho. The one right there behind Forrest City, Arkansas, right there nearby, that was called Tellico. But anyway, they said that when they left from there and went up in Cross County, that wasn't in St. Francis County, they had to be kind of careful about the horse and the buggy, anything that was of any value.

Tolbert Chism: Because if some White person run into them over in the other county and ask them, they says, "Whose horse is that, nigger?" That's what they, and they would always say that it belonged to some White fella that lived in the county where they lived. Well nobody bothered them then. But if he claimed it himself, he'd make him get out of that buggy, he'd take his horse and everything, never would get it back either. It was just that loose in the law and all. Kind of awful. But that's just the way that it was back there during that time.

Paul Ortiz: So Mr. Chism, could Black people depend upon law, the sheriff, to enforce the law if they got something stolen from them?

Tolbert Chism: Not too much? Not too much. They would enforce the law for the Whites, but didn't do too much enforcing the law for the Blacks. Because I can remember one time the story was told as the fella that was supposed to have been the deputy that lived in our community. His name was Clem Simmons.

Tolbert Chism: It was some Whites headed in for some of the Blacks that lived up in our community. And in particular, this was an uncle of mine that was named Forrest Chism. And Forrest Chism was about half what they call Choctaw Indian and half Black. But he was really a marksman with a Winchester or any kind of gun. And so they had gathered up a posse and had the sheriff with them going to go and get Forrest Chism about something or whatever it was. But I think everybody had been alerted in the community because everybody had Winchesters, every Black house in the community at one time had a Winchester in it.

Tolbert Chism: And the reason why they did that, a lot of those Blacks that came in there from over in the Indians, like we talking from over in Tennessee, they could just come in there and run them out, take the crop house and everything. But the people that were sponsoring them were the ones that put a Winchester in the every house in the community so that wouldn't happen. And so this fellow Clem Simmons was at the head of the posse, the story goes and then he held up his hands when he got to see him, now I tell you he said all of those houses in the community that we were going to destroy they had Winchester in them. And said that Forrest Chism is the captain and say he really knows how to shoot those guns. And say, I'm afraid that if we go over there interfere with them, that all of us aren't going to come back.

Tolbert Chism: Said, now it's left entirely up to you. Now if you want to go on with it, we'll go on with it, but if you don't want to, and we all still alive, it would be best for us to turn around and go on back and leave those people alone. And they all decided that it would be the best thing, turn around and go back and leave all those Black folks alone, not attempt to run them out of the community. I mean, these aren't just no wives

tales. These are things that really happen.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, which community did that happen in?

Tolbert Chism: Well, that was over in the community is still there, Jericho.

Paul Ortiz: Jericho, Arkansas.

Tolbert Chism: Yeah, well that's what they call the community. But Jericho kind of took in some of Colt, Arkansas, a little of Caldwell and some of Palestine, Arkansas.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, were there other times when Black people or Black communities had to defend themselves like that?

Tolbert Chism: Yes. It was some that I don't even know of those are just those that was told to me what happened. You see St. Francis County at Forrest City, Arkansas, that's where the courthouse was and that was the county's seat, in other words. And it was quite a few things that happened that was unfair to the Blacks and they were dispossessed of quite a few things. And I heard a fella come in and no later than right here today, he went to downtown Forrest City and was trying to buy one of these cameras that take an what is that called? Instantaneous picture, but said the people act so funny and strange with him, said he just figured in his mind, away with you. And instead of buying it in Forrest City, he left from there and went up into Wynne, Arkansas, which was right over in Cross County.

Tolbert Chism: Wynne is the county seat there, and that's where he bought the instantaneous camera that, you know can take a picture right here and next thing you know is going to come off. He took one of mine just now and right off you take it, you can see what you got. You don't have to wait no long time.

Tolbert Chism: Well, he said that he went to Forrest City and to some of those stores around there and were looking for one like that and really found one. But the people act so funny and strange about it, and he just went ahead and let them alone and got in his car or truck, whatever he was, and went all the way up around about 12 or 13 miles over in Cross County and bought his camera and he had it with him the other day.

Tolbert Chism: And it was that way you went about buying cars, trucks, tractors, anything else? It seems that for Forrest City they just didn't want to patronize the Black. So far it was tractors, trucks, advancing credit and all of that too. No, that's right. Just before I went to Jamestown College, Jamestown, North Dakota, it was a brother-in-law of mine. He had quite a few cattle he sold—

Paul Ortiz: Oh, I'll get it. [indistinct 00:38:56]

Tolbert Chism: Maybe we can go ahead and do it right on here today. The information consent statement. All right.



Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, you were talking about how Black people had a hard time getting credit.

Tolbert Chism: Oh yeah. Right about time when I was going, before I went to Jamestown College, Jamestown School, I had a brother-in-law that had quite a few cattle and all of that, and he was trying to get him half a ton truck. Getting up and hitching up the wagon, going 15 miles into town and have a truck that you could drive. He tried to get one, set up the credit so he could get it and all. Nobody would in any kind of way.

Tolbert Chism: So he just went right across the line, over across county and told them what he had and all of that and made a down payment on it. Got the truck just like that. But then he had to turn and go to St. Francis County to get his license and all of that. You see the fact that he didn't live in Cross County and here they kind of got after him, made him pay double something because he didn't buy the truck in St. Francis County.

Paul Ortiz: He's caught in a double bind.

Tolbert Chism: They wouldn't let him make any kind of arrangement to buy it over there in St. Francis County but when he went in the other county and made the arrangement, the people agreed with him and all because the land that he had and the cattle and stock that he had, they would advance him on a truck and he'd pay so much a month for it or so much every fall when it gathered his crop. And then the people there in St. Francis County, the courthouse made him pay double something for the license or the title or something just because he didn't buy it in St. Francis County.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, was there a difference then between St. Francis County and Cross County it sounds like?

Tolbert Chism: Yes, there was. You see the county seat of St. Francis County was in Forrest City, but the county seat of Cross County was in Wynne, Arkansas. Two counties.

Paul Ortiz: Two counties. And why were things, it seems that things were a little better for Black people in Cross County perhaps. Why was that?

Tolbert Chism: Well, the reason why it seemed that those people kind of looked deep into the situation, say, well, if I try to hold the other fellow back for some unconcerned reason or some concerned reason, well, I'm just holding my own self back. And so I might as well just go ahead and work with him and give him the opportunities of the advantages that I can't afford him and I'll be helping myself too. You understand? I'll be getting the business. You see, like, that was the attitude that people took in Cross County.

Paul Ortiz: Hey, it was good, y'all.

Tolbert Chism: See you, bye y'all.

Tolbert Chism: No, I'm not getting any—I always wear the long sleeve shirts and all of that, there's hot sun on you. I don't like that hot sun shining on my arm. I've always worked out in the hot sun and I always found out that it's always better to be well covered out there working, because down in the South Sea, out here in the Navy, and you go out there and get sun blisters, you get sunstroke, you find yourself paying for it.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, I was wondering, this question about the differences in race relations in Cross County and St. Francis County was there, why weren't Whites in St. Francis County thinking the same way as Cross County? Is that accidental, do you think?

Tolbert Chism: Well, I never was able to really get to the roots of that, just why it was like that. Now it could have been, you see some people aren't aware of it, but you see in certain areas like that, the Jews are in there too. You understand what I'm saying? Some areas, the Jews have the business thing all sewed up and the Gentiles can't get into it. And then there's some areas the Gentiles got it all sewed up and the Jews can't get into it. I mean, many people ain't aware those fine drawn lines like that.

Paul Ortiz: Okay,

Tolbert Chism: Now I'll tell you an example. The Laniers, the Lindsay brothers were all Jews, and then several of them are downtown Forrest City. But then the people that controlled mostly the banks and all of that, they were Gentile people. And so you just had to go along with the Gentile, so to speak. And I'm led to believe, of course, I never did do any research into it that it was just the other way around up in Cross County. That no doubt the Jews had to control the town, the money end of it, and all the banks and what have you. And the Gentiles were kind of closed out of it. It just all depends on who had the economic control of the county administration, so to speak.

Paul Ortiz: Mr. Chism, were Black people involved in politics in Colt when you were growing up?

Tolbert Chism: No, they weren't. And the reason why, they just weren't well enough educated to be, they weren't. Matter of fact, you probably aren't aware of it, but the reason why my father and my mother and several others in my family didn't—