Interview with Tolbert T. Chism

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Chism: I'll stop. You just ask me the questions.

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

Chism: Yes. At the time when General Davis became a general in the United States Army, he was the only black general there was in the United States Army. They said to us, the black troops, that he was the first black general in the army, and I told them that is the biggest lie that's ever been told. I mean, that's what I told my army buddies and all that were in the same outfit I was in. And so they asked me who or where was other generals in the army that were 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 armies had black generals in them. It looked like they just didn't want that to
get through to the black troops. I found that to be rather amazing.

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

Chism: That's right. That is true. You see, our education as 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.

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 history.

Chism: Yes, definitely. And to tell you the 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 vespers service. That was 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. 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.

It was one thing that he taught that I think is the jewel to me until this day, and that was good manners and being able to put up with the other person's bad manners. 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 caused me to even lose my life. Yeah, it's the truth, and that's true with quite a few blacks that I know.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, now when you talk about "the other fellow's bad manners," you're referring primarily to white people's bad manners?

Chism: Yes.

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

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, five at the most, and it would take the average black student about two years to make one grade.

An example of it is when I first come to the Fargo Agricultural School. I was promoted to the seventh grade, and I was fifteen years old. Now, if I had of gotten the full nine months all along, at fifteen years old I would have been in something about like the, what, tenth grade, or promoted to the tenth grade.

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

Chism:  Early on?  Well, it was nothing that prevented me earlier on, because, you see, that's where 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 tenth. I was about eighteen 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 I did. Of course, at that time you had to have the permission of your parent to even join the army at eighteen years old.

Ortiz:  Mr. Chism, can you tell me about your parents and what they did to earn a living when you were growing up.
Chism: My mother and father, they were regular dirt farmers. They grew corn, cotton, gardens, a few cattle and hogs and chickens and all that, just a regular farm. They had what was known as these what they refer to as the 4-H Club or the home demonstration agents in that day in time, the live-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 lived.

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

Chism: That was six miles from a little place they called Colt, Arkansas, Number 1 Highway. This is on the other side of--Colt is twelve miles north of Forrest City, Arkansas. Now, if you get to Colt, you were still about six miles from my father's farm.

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

Chism: Well, the earliest childhood memories that I had was struggling trying to obtain an education. That was my greatest struggle. 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 taken from the seventh grade through the twelfth. In later years, they even knocked that off and made it that you had to be graduated from the eighth grade. No, you had to be and eighth grade student before you could ready to become a student at the Fargo Agricultural School.

**Ortiz:** Mr. Chism, when you were growing up in Colt, did black families share with each other, like in the neighborhood? If there were hard times for one family, would people--

**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. 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. Well, they had in the harder days canning kitchens that were set up by the home demonstration agent that they canned and preserved their food during the time that it was produced. In other words, they set up quite a few of what they called canning kitchens in that day in time.
Ortiz: So the canning kitchens would be a place where people in the community would get together?

Chism: Yeah, prepare whatever it was that they were canning, and that went from, say, well, green beans, everything, but where the big thing would come on, like somebody would kill a beef or slaughter a beef and take that to the canning kitchen to be canned. The food would be chile and then—in other words, you had everything in the can that you could go to the store and buy this present day in time. You know, cuts of the beef, so to speak.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what other kinds of things would black families share or pitch in?

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 a big fire under it and they would commence cooking. You had the skimmers that you skimmed the skim off of it. And when they got done, you had regular what they call
canned molasses. Some people would put it in barrels, some people would put it in buckets, even. It just all depends on what kind of conveniences that you had. But my father, he had these regular barrels with the [unclear] right in the middle of it. When he would make the molasses, he would take and pour them into that barrel by the gallon and keep a count of it hard.

Ortiz: So he was a famous syrup maker.

Chism: You say I was?

Ortiz: No, he, your--

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

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

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. This uncle of mine,
he was mostly, or partly, I guess mostly Choctaw Indian. His hair was as straight as yours, but yet he was dark.

They say that what had something to do with that--they told us this kind of 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 they would settle down on a certain, well, lot of land and become farmers and all of that. They wouldn't have to participate in the migration. And that was the 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 land was, out to some other rough land and what have you, years after they said that it backfired. You know how, don't you?

Ortiz: Because the land that they later moved on to had minerals?

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 troop 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 that a thought.

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

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.

Ortiz: I see. Mr. Chism, when you were growing up, did elders in your community talk about signs or--

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 signs from, what was that? Her favorite almanac was the Ladies Almanac. It had a lady on the back of it. 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 that kind of a thing, I guess, only from her almanac.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, was that a different almanac than the Mcdonald Almanac [phonetic]?
Chism: Kind of, kind of, but almost on the same principle.

Ortiz: Okay. But this was Ladies Almanac?

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

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 saw to it about myself and my sisters and brothers ahead of me that we were catechized, and that was giving us the basic fundamentals about God himself.

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. There wasn't no way out of that. You were assigned to another class from five to eight years old. That was catechism class. And in that class, you would learn the basic fundamentals about God. It was a question and an answer little book, kind of small. The first question back there then--I don't know what it is now--was, who is God? That was in light writing where it 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.

The next question--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." It's answers to many other questions that was answered, but those two were the two beginning ones in the basic fundamentals that looked like just kind of hung on to me.

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

**Chism:** Well, when I was inducted into the army, when I volunteered for the army, they only had two faiths, and that was Protestant and Catholic. But now, the Protestant 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.

**Ortiz:** And your family was

**Chism:** Protestant. Of course, Baptist. My mother was a Methodist; my father was a Baptist. But back there 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 the 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. If it had of been the other way around, if he
had of been Methodist and she was a Baptist, well, she would have changed over to a Methodist had they got married. You understand?

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?

Chism: Well, yes, they certainly did, and it was one that was kind of outstanding on my father's side. It 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. He couldn't read, but he could count. 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.

They said that he could take a—he wasn't cutting with a saw. He was cutting with an ax, and he didn't allow nobody to touch that ax, because people had a tendency, if they use your ax, they go hack it down in the ground, get it all gapped up and dull it up and all that. That was his reason for that. They said he that he wasn't no great big man, but he had the muscles, and 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 in
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 some kind of way of paying him. He would take that money, carry it home, and hide it somewhere around the house. Never did put any money in the bank. Dick Mitchell.

He only had, let me see, one sister. Her name was Rosie, which was my father's mother. Well, when he died, Uncle Louis Mitchell knew that he had that money all around the house stuffed in one place, and 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. Always had nice horses and buggies and gold in his mouth from one side to the other one. Always wore neat clothes, dressed well. And that was from Dick Mitchell, of all of that money that he had made, and he didn't give his sister a dime. Greed. Dick Mitchell. They said Dick Mitchell was a mighty man.

**Ortiz:** Mr. Chism, during those days, would whites get really jealous when black people acquired land?

**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 called Jericho, that's about twelve miles north of Forrest City and about twelve miles to the right over into what they call Jericho. The one right there behind Forrest City, Arkansas, right there nearby, that was called Telicho [phonetic].

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 their horse and their buggy, anything that was of any value, because if some white person run into them over in the other county and asked them, well, by name says, "Whose horse is that, nigger?" and they would always say that it belonged to some white fellow that lived in the county where they lived. Wouldn't nobody bother them then. But if he claimed it himself, they'd make him get out of that buggy and take his horse and everything. Never would get it back, either. It was just that loose in the law and all of that. Kind of awful, but that's just the way that it was back there during that time.

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

**Chism:** Not too much. Not too much. They would enforce the law for the whites, but they didn't do too much enforcing the law
for the blacks, because I can remember one time the story was
told there's a fellow that was supposed to have been a deputy
that lived in our community. His name was Clem Simmons
[phonetic].

There was some whites had it 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 [phonetic], 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. And the reason why they did that, a lot of those blacks
that came in there from over in--and the Indians, like we were
talking--from over in Tennessee, they could just come in there
and run them out, take their crops, house, and everything. But
the people that were sponsoring them were the ones that put a
Winchester in every house in the community so that that wouldn't
happen.

And so this fellow, Clem Simmons, was at the head of the
posse, the story goes, and said he held up his hand when they
got to a certain point and said, "Now, I tell you, all of those
houses in the community that we're going to destroy, they have a
Winchester in them, and Forrest Chism is the captain and he really knows how to shoot those guns. I'm afraid that if we go over there interfering with them that all of us aren't going to come back. 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 stay alive, it will 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 to turn around and go back and leave all of those black folks alone and not attempt to run them out of the community.

I mean, these aren't just no wives' tales. These are things that really happened.

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

Chism: Well, that was over in—the community's still there—Jericho.

Orthiz: Jericho, Arkansas.

Chism: 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.

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

**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. That was the county seat, in other words. It was quite a few things that happened that was unfair to the blacks, and they would dispossess quite a few things.

I heard a fellow 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 that he said 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—Wynne is the county seat there—and that's where he bought the instantaneous camera that, you know, you can take a picture right here, and the next thing you know it's done come up. Oh, he took one of mine there just now. You know, right after you take it you can see what you got. You don't have to wait no long time. Well, he said that he went to Forrest City into some of those stores around there and was looking for one like that and really found one, but the people act so funny and strange about it, he just went ahead and let them alone and got in his car or truck, whatever it was, and
went all the way up, around about twelve or thirteen miles, over in Cross County and bought his camera, and he had it with him there today.

It was that way about buying cars, trucks, tractors, or anything else. It seems that Forrest City, they just didn't want to patronize the blacks so far as it was tractors, trucks, or advance in credit and all of that. 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-- [Tape interruption]

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

Chism: Yes. Right about the time, just a little before I went to Jamestown College, Jamestown, North Dakota, I had a brother-in-law that had quite a few cattle, and he was trying to get him half a ton truck. Instead of getting up and hitching up the wagon and going fifteen miles into town, have a truck that he could drive. He tried to get one, you know, set up the credit so he could get it and all, and nobody would arrange any kind of way. So he just went right across the line over in Cross County and told them what he had and all of that and made a down payment on it and 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 and made him pay double something because he didn't buy the truck in St. Francis County.

**Ortiz:** He was caught in a double bind.

**Chism:** Yes. 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 of 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 he 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.

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

**Chism:** Yes, it was. You see, your county seat of St. Francis County was in Forrest City, but the county seat of Cross County was in Wynne, Arkansas, two counties.
Ortiz: Two counties.

Chism: Yes.

Ortiz: It seems that things were a little better for black people in Cross County, perhaps.

Chism: Yes.

Ortiz: Why was that?

Chism: Well, the reason why, it seemed that those people kind of looked deep into the situation and said, "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 or the advantages that I can afford him, and I'll be helping myself, too. I'll be getting the business." It seemed like that was the attitude that the people took in Cross County.

Ortiz: Hey, Mr. John.

John: Mosquitoes biting you all?
Ortiz: Not so far.

Chism: No, I'm not getting any. I always wear these long-sleeve shirts and all of that. For the hot sun, too. I don't like that hot sun shining on my arms. I've always worked out in the hot sun and I always found out that it's always best to be well covered when you're out there working or something. See, down in the South Sea, if you're in the navy and you go out there and get sun blistered or sunstroke or something, you find yourself paying for it.

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

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 in certain areas like that, the Jews are in there, too. You understand what I'm saying? In 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 aren't aware of those fine-drawn lines like that.
Ortiz: Okay.

Chism: Now, I'll tell you an example. The Laniers [phonetic], the Lindsey [phonetic] brothers, were all Jews, and then several of them downtown Forrest City. But then the people that control mostly the banks and all of that, they were Gentile people, and so you just had to go along with the Gentiles, 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 the control of the town--you know, 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.

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

Chism: No, they weren't, and the reason why, they just weren't well enough educated to be. They weren't. As a 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--
Chism: . . . didn't vote was that there was a poll tax that you had to pay, and, hey, what am I going to do, let my children go without shoes or something that they need, this money is so hard to get to, I mean so hard to have and all, am I going to not pay my poll tax and support my family with the money that I have coming in? You see, back during that time, money was hard.

Now, let me see. In 1941 is when I enlisted in the United States Army. The year just before that, I had attended the Fargo Agricultural School and was promoted from the ninth to the tenth grade. [Tape interruption.]

Ortiz: I'll put it on pause. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Mr. Chism, after you--I guess I should ask when you were born.

Chism: February 14, 1923, Valentine's Day, if you please, as you just heard.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what was the first year you attended here at school?

Chism: The first year I attended the Fargo Agricultural School was around about 1937. The latter part of 1937 is when I started at Fargo Agricultural School, and I attended here until
1941, and that's when, in the year 1941, I failed to return and went and got permission from my parent and volunteered for the United States Army.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, when you came here, did you work your way through the school?

Chism: Well, yes. The way it was, I worked part of it and my parents paid part of it. Part of it, at that time my parents paid $7.00 a month, and the other $7.00, it was $14.00 a month, and the other $7.00, the half a day that I worked paid for that.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, what are your fondest memories of going to school here in Fargo, your best memories?

Chism: The fondest memories I had of Fargo is when I actually graduated from the twelfth grade here at Fargo Agricultural School.

Ortiz: Mr. Chism, when we started, you began telling me about an experience you had in the army about wanting to make people in the army know that there were other black generals other than General Benjamin Davis. Now, what was the outcome of that story? What happened?
Chism: What was the outcome of that story? I'll tell you, General Patton, "Old Blood and Guts," is a fellow I love the graveyard dirt he sleeps in today. He told them--of course, they didn't tell me, but my company commander told me. He was kind of on my side about it, too--that Patton said that he just wished [General John J.] "Black Jack" [Pershing] wasn't retired and was still in the army, he would show them all something.

You see, "Black Jack" was the general that commanded the Buffalo soldiers. They called him something, I don't know. They had a nickname. They called him "Black Jack" because he always liked to command black soldiers. That's how he got the name "Black Jack" from. And he said that if all of the whites was--no, he said that if the blacks were educated as well as the whites were, that he would always rather have blacks fighting for him than whites. He said it looked like they really had the instinct for fighting. He had something to do with the Buffalo soldiers many years ago and all of that out in the Northwest.

Ortiz: So you didn't end up getting--

Chism: No. After he kind of talked them all out of it and told them what he knew about it and all and said the words that he did say on my behalf, they just dropped it all.

Ortiz: What outfit were you with, Mr. Chism?
Chism: Well, I was in what they call the Infantry School Service Battalion, Fort Benning, Georgia.

Ortiz: And General Patton kind of interceded?

Rivers: Yeah. He was over the Second Armored Division out at, what was that, Sand Hill, Sand Hill, Fort Benning, Georgia.

Ortiz: And so you were involved in kind of that early armor training.

Chism: Yeah. As a matter of fact, he tried to go through the channels to get me to be his aide. I don't know why, but he did try to go through all the red tape and get this colored fellow as an aide. Now, I don't know why he wanted me to be his aide and all of that.

[End of Interview]

(transcribed by TechniType Transcripts)