



INTERVIEW WITH: Andrea Levisy

BREAKING THE COLOUR BARRIER: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE CHATHAM COLOURED ALL-STARS
A collaboration between the University of Windsor and the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame

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Name of interviewee: Andrea Levisy (A.L)

Name of interviewer: Josh Deehan (J.D)

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0:00:02.5

J.D: Hi, Josh Deehan here. I'll be conducting this interview. I'm here with Andrea Levisy, daughter of Andy Harding. It is August 22nd, 2016.

A.L: Okay, and the last name is pronounced Levisy.

J.D: Levisy? Okay.

A.L: Yeah.

0:00:25.1

J.D: So we'll begin. What is the name of the person you knew from the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

A.L: Well, when we were little, my family kind of hung out with Gouy Ladd and naturally my Uncle Boomer.

J.D: Today we'll be talking mostly about your father, Andy Harding. Correct?

A.L: Right.

J.D: Okay.

0:00:58.7

J.D: So, when and where was he born? Where did he grow up?

A.L: He grew up in Chatham, Ontario, and we lived in the east end of Chatham, Ontario.

J.D: Okay, was he born there as well?

A.L: Wait, I didn't hear you.

J.D: Was he born there as well in Chatham?

A.L: Yes, he was.

0:01:21.8

J.D: Okay, can you tell me anything about his family? Who they were? What they did for a living?

A.L: Okay, my grandmother was a stay-at-home mom. And my grandfather, I don't quite know what my grandfather did, but I think one of the things that he did, he used to take the... he used to go and get a horse and a wagon and he would go down by the lake and cut out the ice, so I know that some of it he sold ice. And as far as what he did otherwise, he had to do quite a few things to keep the family, the size the family that he had going. And my grandfather also—he passed away when I was just a little baby.

0:02:22.8

J.D: Okay. So, do you know if sports were important to your father growing up? Did he play any other sport?

A.L: Oh, they were to the whole family, including his sister, Wanda. I'd say everybody was athletically involved when he was growing up.

0:02:43.7

J.D: Oh, that's good. Did your father play any other sports besides baseball?

A.L: Well, he was a track and field champion.

J.D: Oh, really?

A.L: Yes, and, so I know he liked track and I know he liked baseball. [laughs]

0:03:03.6

J.D: Oh, nice. So you said other family members, they played sports as well, so his brother and his sister? Did they watch sports, was that common? Or listen to them on the radio?

A.L: Oh, they loved sports. They loved to watch baseball, [laughs] that was a big thing for them. And they also, hockey.

J.D: Oh, hockey, too? Oh, very nice.

A.L: Yeah.

0:03:29.7

J.D: Okay, so now we'll switch over and ask a few questions about his time with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. Do you know how and when approximately he started playing with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

A.L: Yeah, I do not. [laughs]

J.D: Don't quite remember that? Okay.

A.L: Yeah, like I said, they were pretty well finished by the time I was born.

J.D: Oh, okay.

0:03:56.0

J.D: Do you know what positions he played? Or, was he known for any particular skills or moves, or do you know anything about his playing baseball at all?

A.L: Not really. All's I know is my dad and my uncles, they excelled in everything they did as far as sports wise. [laughs]

J.D: Yeah. [laughs] Okay.

A.L: And my one uncle died when he was a very young man, who was very athletic and very popular at the time.¹

J.D: Is this Wilfred you're talking about?

A.L: No, this would be my dad's uncle.

J.D: Oh, your dad's uncle?

A.L: No. And Wilfred's brother, my dad's brother and Uncle Boomer's brother, I'm sorry.

J.D: Okay, okay.

A.L: And, he had some nose surgery in his middle twenties and he ended up dying in that surgery. But he was extremely athletic too.

J.D: Okay. Yeah, so the whole family then, they were very much engaged in sports?

A.L: They certainly are.

0:05:17.7

J.D: Do you happen to recall any memorable events or stories about his playing?

A.L: No. [laughs]

J.D: No? [laughs] Just that they excelled in everything they did?

A.L: Yeah, you know it's funny, I can kind of remember like, we would go to the park and the stands would be loaded.

J.D: Oh yeah?

A.L: Yeah, and I would be playing around in the dirt and stuff while, you know, grown-ups were always cheering them on. [laughs] But I know that was a big exciting time for everybody.

J.D: Yeah, certainly.

0:05:59.0

¹ Referring to Len Harding, brother of Andy and Wilfred (Boomer).

J.D: So, I'm not sure if you could answer this, but could you tell me anything about the team itself? What they were like? Their style of playing, what they were known for? Do you happen to remember any stories about their style of play or anything?

A.L: It seems like they were a fun bunch. You know they enjoyed the sport. They enjoyed entertaining. And like I said unfortunately I wasn't around much at that time.

J.D: Yeah.

0:06:34.3

J.D: Okay, do you remember what were people's reactions to their playing? So like you said, there was always people at the games, the park was packed. You mentioned that already. Did your father talk about fans or spectators or anything like that or maybe the general atmosphere of the games?

A.L: No, he didn't. [laughs]

J.D: No? [laughs]

0:07:01.5

J.D: Did he talk about what he enjoyed about playing baseball with the team? Or, why he did it all?

A.L: He just loved the sport. My dad was a fun-loving person.

J.D: He just did it for the love of the game then? Just enjoyed playing?

A.L: Yeah. And then like I said they all were... seemed like they were born with an athletic ability.

J.D: Okay.

0:07:25.6

J.D: Did he happen to talk about challenges or difficulties at all, while playing?

A.L: No, he didn't.

J.D: Okay.

A.L: Not to me anyway.

0:07:39.0

J.D: Did he talk about travelling with the team, either for exhibition games or league play? Did he ever talk about travelling to other towns or what it was like? The reception they had?

A.L: No. It's too bad you didn't start this a little bit earlier, you know like in years. I said when there were more people that you know would know what was going on.

J.D: We have interviewed some people that were around a little bit more during that time. We've got some stuff.

0:08:11.9

J.D: So, now we'll talk about sports and life after the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. So, would you like to share anything about his life after he played with the All-Stars. How he made a living, anything about his family afterwards?

A.L: Yes, I said my dad, he was a policeman, he became Chatham's first black policeman.

J.D: Oh, really? Oh, wow.

A.L: Yeah, and he was a well-liked member of the community. I know that, that everywhere we went, they seemed to know my dad. And they would strike up a conversation with him and my dad really, really loved life.

J.D: Oh, that's good. Well, that was quite a feat then that he was the first black police officer in Chatham.

A.L: Yeah. Yes, we had a lot of firsts I think in our family. I said I'm very proud of my family.

J.D: Quite a family of trailblazers, eh?

A.L: Yeah, yeah. And they also were people that loved people. They were willing to do things for each other you know like, in the community and that. And I mean if somebody needed a helping hand or somebody needed something, maybe not money-wise, but help-wise, I know they were there.

J.D: Oh, that's good. Yeah, that seems to be the consensus. Everyone has a lot to say about the Harding family, about Boomer and everyone.

A.L: Yes, I said I was very blessed to be growing up in that family.

J.D: Certainly, certainly.

0:10:01.5

J.D: Did he continue to play any sports of any kind throughout his life? With other teams? If so, what sports did he play or with what other teams?

A.L: No, I think after the baseball, he kind of just stuck to his job and doing other activities. They loved playing cards, all of the family did. Uncle Boomer didn't though, you know he wasn't the card player but, my dad's sisters and him, that was one of their favourite things to do, was play cards.

J.D: Okay.

0:10:45.9

J.D: Did he encourage others in his family to get involved in sports?

A.L: Well, I was very athletic when I was young.

J.D: Okay.

A.L: And I was actually junior track and field champion.

J.D: Oh, nice.

A.L: And my dad loved to come and watch me do that and I also played on the first string of volleyball and basketball in high school.

J.D: Oh, very nice. So he always backed you up with your athletic activities then?

A.L: Yeah.

0:11:25.0

J.D: How do you think sports affected his life?

A.L: Well, it did help us with developing friends and I know for a community-wise, they were active in the community. So, there were a lot of... just trying to think of how to put this... we had a fine, like we grew up, I grew up on the east end of Chatham, which was where all the coloureds lived and it was like a family community, [laughs] and most of the ball players came from that area of Chatham too. And, it was like, I'd say they looked out for each other, and if we were bad or anything like that, it was okay to tell each other's parents, you know to tell them that we weren't behaving quite well and then my

parents would address that it wasn't like today's world a lot of times, like "mind your own business." [laughs] Yeah, and I think for that way that we did grow up as a very tight community.

J.D: Oh, that's good, so you would say that sports sort of contributed to like, it was sort of a community building activity?

A.L: Yes, it was. And then I can remember when we lived with my grandmother until my grandmother passed away, in the east end. And then we were going to move to the suburbs. And the lady next door to us had sent a petition around to not let us move there.

J.D: Oh, wow.

A.L: And, it didn't get very far because one of the neighbours had said that if he's good enough for the police force, then he's good enough to live here.

J.D: Yeah, certainly.

A.L: So, that was one of the things I think that helped with my dad's job and that.

J.D: Okay.

0:14:06.9

J.D: So, touching on this again, do you know if sports were important in the black community when he was alive? And can you say anything about that, so you sort of already touched upon it, you said that it was like a, it brought the community closer together right?

A.L: Yes, I can't say that for when I was growing up, you know like as far as sports go. I know like, my Uncle Boomer he was more like into refereeing, he refereed hockey and he ump'ed baseball. But, that's the only thing I can really remember about sports continuing as they were getting older. Like they did golf, my dad golfed, and he was a pretty good golfer, and my Uncle Boomer he still kept active, like as far as his umping and refereeing. And one of his later sports that he really got into was actually darts, he was excellent at darts.

J.D: Oh, wow. That's good.

0:15:33.4

J.D: Did your father talk about any barriers or difficulties in participating in sports within the wider community? And did that maybe change over time?

A.L: Well, it did change over time. I know there was like prejudice naturally in southern Ontario at that time, but it wasn't really harped on, or I didn't really experience too much. And I, you know like, I've heard stories about, from some of the things that happened like to them growing up as far as prejudice in the area but, I luckily didn't experience too much.

J.D: Okay. So maybe there was some initially and then by the time you were participating there was....

A.L: Right. I know that they did a lot for us, they did have a lot of respect in the city itself. You know like, for what they did and what they accomplished. So that helped us a whole lot. [laughs]

J.D: Oh, good. They were sort of trailblazer in that arena then? They sort of lead the way for the next generation?

A.L: Yes, and I said, you know, it's strange I don't know if I should say this or not, but like living in the States, and I'm going into my fiftieth year here, and I said, the attitude is totally different from the Canadian blacks and the American blacks. I mean, I find that sometimes there's just as much prejudice sometimes with the blacks against whites.

J.D: Oh, really?

A.L: And I didn't experience that as much in Canada as I do here.

J.D: Okay, that interesting.

A.L: Yeah, so... I still think there is a little bit there but not as much as like here. I mean, the attitude towards the blacks that were born in and raised, you know for generations in Canada have a different outlook than the ones here.

J.D: Yeah, sort of a different environment.

A.L: Yes.

0:18:18.8

J.D: Okay, so, overall, what do you think was the impact or legacy of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

A.L: Well, I know it was a wonderful group, I know they had lots of fun, and they were all super athletes, probably born in the wrong time.

0:18:45.8

J.D: Have any members of your family been involved in the public commemoration of the All-Stars, for example the 50th anniversary celebration in 1984 or the Blue Jays recognition of them at a game in 2002?

A.L: Well, I went to the game.

J.D: Oh, you went to the game?

A.L: Yes, and all my family, like my kids, and we went to the game.

J.D: Oh, very nice.

A.L: Yeah, and I don't remember the 19... what was that, the '84.

J.D: Oh, yeah, the 50th anniversary celebrations, of the championship victory in 1984.

A.L: No, I didn't go to that.

J.D: You didn't go to that one, but you went to the Blue Jays game, eh?

A.L: I went to the Blue Jays game.

J.D: So, what was that like?

A.L: It was exciting. It was nice to see all of their faces on the billboard, you know, up on the screen and things like that. It did give you a sensations of being proud that you, your family was part of that.

J.D: Yeah, Well that's good.

0:19:57.7

J.D: So is this a story that you think more people should know about, and if so why?

A.L: It's always nice to know that the spirit, some of the people that influenced our feelings towards life, so when that when it influenced our excitement for different things, I mean I feel like I'm very lucky. I think I have a quite a bit of my father in me as far as enjoying different things in life. And you know, I think the one thing is, they didn't have much, but you would never know. I know one time when my dad was told that he was not going to live, you know, very long, and he said some of the most wonderful things that came out of somebody's mouth. And he said, "You know if it's my time, it's my time and all's I can say is I have been blessed. I've done things that I never dreamt that would happen in my life," and then he named a few things and the thing about it, none of these were money

or anything like that, it was just the joy of living. And little things, that he remembered and appreciated and my dad ended up living 11 more years.

J.D: Oh, really? Wow.

A.L: And he just had the attitude, he lived the day for the day, and he enjoyed every minute of it.

J.D: Just make the best of his situation, eh?

A.L: Yes, he did. He did and I always admire him for that.

J.D: Oh, very nice. That's good to hear.

0:22:09.6

J.D: Do you have anything else you would like to say about your father or about the Chatham Coloured All-Stars or baseball in Chatham, in the black community?

A.L: Well, I wish I would have known, I wish I would have been a little bit older to enjoy all this, but I wasn't, but I know that they all seemed to have fun when they got together.

J.D: Well, that's good. Okay then, so that concludes the interview.