

McKenna Johnston

Historical Write Up of Tony and Cheri's Oral History Interview

"We were going to conquer the world." This is a quote from Cheri Atkinson in an oral history conducted about my grandparents' experience living in the 1960's. She continued to discuss how people in the 60's thought that they were going to solve the world's problems: the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, and many more. We know now that that was not necessarily the case, the war lasted a total of twenty years, the Cold War wasn't wrapped up until almost three decades later, and race tensions still run high throughout the United States.

Our oral history interview covered many events throughout the 1960's and they shared their common but different experience views of these world events as they grew from teenagers to adults. One of the biggest and most influential forces in their lives at this time was without a doubt, the Vietnam War. The war lasted from 1955 to 1975, it started when they were eight years old and lasted until they were 28. Cheri discussed how her father and first husband went to Vietnam to fight and she stayed home and felt incredibly guilty that she did not or had no way to step up and support the war effort. Yet as the war raged on, she started to feel less and less guilty and more against the war. She says, "The Vietnam War, I became against it because it just didn't make sense and it went on for so long and the news reports every single day Walter Cronkite or whoever it was would come on and say, "Well today we had a body count of 473." It was a different number every night and it just got to be overwhelming. You stop listening to it because it was just too much." Tony agreed with her and talks about his experience being forced to sign up for the draft, having his number be called and his failure of the

draft physical. "...so I went over and took my contacts out and laid them there and went back and the guy says, "Now tell me what direction the big E on the wall is pointing." And I said, "Which wall?" And he said- he started putting lenses on my face and snapping, clapping, pretty soon, I heard this 'stamp stamp stamp' on my papers and he shoved them at me and said "Next" and I got to where I could see again and they stamped me "Reject" on all of my papers. So I had some concern, like your grandmother said, I kind of felt bad for not being sent to Vietnam." Despite both of them talking about their guilt in not going to war, they both explained how the American nationalism that came from the victory of World War II gave them both a mentality that justified the war in Vietnam and the trust in an American victory that never happened.

We talked about multiple things that happened and shared different stories that happened over the course of my interview but another large topic we discussed at length regarding the Civil Rights Movement and segregation throughout the country. Cheri lived a lot of her life in California and she expressed that segregation was not a big part in California and she never saw it in her own life, she says the first and only time she saw separate bathrooms was in Texas in the 50's when she briefly lived there. Tony, however, grew up in Arkansas where Jim Crow laws and segregation was the norm. He talked a lot about the rules of riding the bus to go into the city and how white people sat at the front and Black people sat at the back and if there was no more room in the front then the Black people had to get off of the bus. He says, "But there was another thing, if you were a Black person in accompaniment of a white person, you could sit with them or stand with them or stay on the bus when they couldn't or when others couldn't. So when we would get on the bus, my grandmother would sit down and

if she saw an elderly Black woman standing, she'd say, "Tony, stand up and put that lady in your chair." and I would stand there, the lady would sit down, and when the bus driver would come around taking tickets, my grandmother would say, "She's with me."

The 1960's was an extremely broad topic and although we condensed an entire decade into a few events, our oral history interview was very important to not only my own family history but as a historical perspective of events that seem so far in the past, but really aren't.