



Minnesota Unraveled

# Episode 206 - Honoring Rondo: Sports, Resilience, and the Oxford Community Center

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**Frank White, Jr.:**

There are places that are from the Rondo community that are really anchors, are legacy holders. Oxford is one of those places.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

There was a place for everyone to fit in at Oxford.

**Candace Robinson:**

I can remember going to Oxford after school, and when the rec center closed, you could just see the droves of people walking down the street to go home.

**Dr. Valerie Littles Butler:**

Oxford sits in the village that raised me, so I became part of the village and Oxford was just an enhancement to my life.

**Gayle Anderson:**

It's a sacred place to me.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Since the 1950s, the Oxford Community Center has been a place for the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul to gather, play, and learn. It has taken many forms and many names over the years from Oxford Playground to the name it bears today. But the story of how it came to be and what it has meant to Rondo has remained largely untold until now.

The voices you just heard were recorded as part of the ongoing Oxford Oral History Project. Started in 2022, the project is led by a team composed of Rondo community members and an oral historian. The Oxford team set out to record and preserve the history of Oxford and the many people who both helped to shape the center and were shaped by it.

Welcome to Minnesota Unraveled. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez.

To learn more about Oxford and the project, I spoke with several members of the team.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

My name is Lisa Lissimore, and I'm a St. Paul Rondo neighborhood native. I'm a retired Associate Director for the Minnesota State High School League. My connection to Oxford occurred when my family moved from the north side of Rondo to the south side of Rondo is what I'll call it.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

So my name is Frank White. I'm retired. My last position was the Director of Park and Recreation for the city of Richfield. I'm considered a Rondo elder and I have coached in the Rondo community for probably over 30 years.

**Kim Heikkila:**

My name is Kim Heikkila. I am an independent scholar, historian, oral historian, and author. And in terms of the Oxford Oral History project, I guess I would call myself the project convener. I have a PhD in American Studies with a minor in feminist studies from the University of Minnesota.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

I drive by Oxford every day on my way to work at the History Center. And to be honest, I had never really looked twice at it. I thought it was simply an aquatic center. I did know that Oxford is located in the Rondo neighborhood west of downtown St. Paul. It has long been a multicultural, multi-ethnic neighborhood with thriving business and social scenes. By the 1950s, Rondo was known as the heart of the city's African-American community. With Oxford playing an important role.

I wondered how the buildings themselves came to be and what the site might have looked like back then. Luckily, the work my guests are doing on the project can provide some answers.

Debbie Montgomery is a respected community leader. She grew up in Rondo on the corner of St. Anthony and Chatsworth about one block from Oxford Playground. Here's Debbie in her oral history, recorded by my guest Kim Heikkila recounting what Oxford looked like in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

**Debbie Montgomery:**

All of us just grew up here and the only area that we had to play up on this end was the Oxford Playground, and it was just a playground. All we had when I was growing up at Oxford, it was a little warming house, literally a little warming house. And inside the warming house, they had this board game that you played with a checker and you had these little sticks and you tried it. There was a hole. The board game was like this, and then it was divided like a hockey rink would be, and you had a hole at the bottom in the middle and you had to try to get the checker through the hole. That

was all that was inside the warming house. And then there were six swings and a merry-go-round. And then there were, I believe, six quonset huts on Oxford at the time, and I don't remember who lived in them, but it was a lot of the military guys that came back from the service. But there were six quonset huts there. The field was terrible.

If you go up Rondo and Lexington, just that vacant area there, that's where the six quonset huts were. Then next to them, there was a basketball court just with two little baskets on it. It wasn't a full court, it was just two things where you could run back and forth and throw the ball up into the basket. And then there were six swings and a merry-go-round. That was the extent of activity other than the warming house.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

The warming house Debbie mentioned was a railroad box car with a little stove in it. It could fit around 30 people and was used during the cold weather to change into skates.

The quonset huts were semi-circular prefabricated buildings made of corrugated galvanized steel. After World War ii, there were over 600 built in the Twin Cities to house veterans. When the six quonset huts were removed, a concrete building was erected and completed around 1961 near the Oxford Playground. This building had a small office, two bathrooms and a storage room.

Throughout the 1960s, Oxford was growing as a recreational place for the Rondo neighborhood. But why then? Kim's supporting research for the project shows that it had a lot to do with Rondo's response to urban renewal.

### **Kim Heikkila:**

The development of Oxford as from a playground to a site with a warming house, to a site with a building that was all unfolding at the time that I-94 was coming through and destroying Rondo. It was happening at the time that urban renewal was part of the conversation about what was happening in the Rondo community.

It was coming through, it was being developed as part of not just parks and recreation programming and planning, but city planning and these nationwide debates over what constitutes a good life in urban areas – and for whom – and who is excluded from that or who is harmed by those efforts at urban renewal.

And so Oxford as the space for members of the Rondo community to send their kids and to feel valued and mentored wouldn't have happened without the support of those community members who would appeal to the officials at City Hall or to the Parks and Recreation Department and demand that, Hey, wait a minute, how come all these other rec centers in other parts of the city are getting more resources than Oxford is? So it really emerged out of community as much as it built it.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

The construction of I-94, between 1956 and 1968 destroyed over 700 family homes and an estimated 300 businesses were either demolished or closed. About 60% of the neighborhood's residents were displaced with one in eight African-Americans losing their homes. Frank remembers the destruction of Rondo by I-94 as a catalyst for the community to fight for better facilities at Oxford.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

I think people were hurt, and I don't want to say decimated because I think people have persevered, but I think they learned that they were going to step up and confront things and to help ensure that there was some type of equity that was going to be done going forward after 94 was put in.

A couple of the families, and in fact, I think it was the mayor, Melvin Carter, his grandmother, Billy Carter was one of the people that went to the city and said, no, you need to make a bigger space or something like that. And so I know there was community input into making sure that Oxford was going to be built comparable to any other place in the city.

As we got into, I think the seventies, then there was another building built that's still there and it's since been added onto and is now called the Oxford Community Center. The red brick building that's there today is considered the Jimmy Lee Recreation Center. And then they took out houses on Marshall that were originally there, and now there's a large parking lot that's there and a pool was added and that type of thing. So much bigger today, although I thought the space was pretty big when I was a kid.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

By 1969, Oxford Playground had two indoor gymnasiums and a pool, which today is part of the community center building. I spoke with two of my guests, Frank and Lisa, about what it was like to play at Oxford as kids.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

We lived in what was called the Flats, and these were Brickstone homes that had two units under one roof, and we had plenty of time to play on the block, run up and down the sidewalks and play in the alleys and things like that. So there was no real organized sports that we were subject to.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

When Lisa was 10, her family moved just south of I-94. It was then that she learned about Oxford and started playing flag football and basketball.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

I ended up enrolling in a new school, had to transfer schools, and as part of that transfer, I met a group of new kids, obviously, and this new group of friends that I had

established, they all hung out at Oxford Playground. I was unaware of Oxford Playground because I lived on the other side of town and they were in need of another player to complete their football team. And so I was asked following recesses and all those kinds of things if I would be willing to play. And at the time, I had no idea what football was.

I had no idea where Oxford was. And so I told the young woman that asked me to play, she would have to come home and help explain all of this to my mother. And so she did that and my mother told her that I could go if she promised to make sure that I get back home before dark.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And so when you were playing these sports at Oxford, whether it be the flag football or girls' basketball, were they like pickup games? Were they organized? Did you have teams? Did you have coaches that were helping you play other teams outside of Oxford?

**Lisa Lissimore:**

Believe it or not, it was truly organized sport. So we had our own gym time for which we would practice. We had our own coaches and we also had jerseys that we would wear when we did compete. And we also competed against other park and recs that sponsored girls' teams. And so there was never any pickup game unless we were just in the gym doing what we wanted to do.

We would go over on the West Side and play teams from over there. We'd go on the East Side and play those teams there. And then there were other recreation centers that are here in St. Paul Proper that we used to play wood and others. And yeah, I mean we all were battling for bragging rights and all those kinds of things. So I mean, that was my first taste of competitive sports and it whet my appetite and I always wanted to play, whether it be football, basketball, softball, or run track. So it truly was the start of playing competitive sports. And lo and behold, I would never know, I did not know at the time, that it would evolve or set me on the path that it did to be quite honest with you.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And when you were playing these different sports, really across seasons in the year from basketball to track and field, were you playing with the same group of girls? Did people cycle in and out? What was that dynamic like?

**Lisa Lissimore:**

So many of us went to the same elementary schools, the same junior high school, and then many of us went on to the same high school. And so we were playing together with one another, whether it be at Oxford or middle school as they call it now or high school. And then as new girls moved into the neighborhood and when we recognized that they had skills and wanted to participate in sports, we would just

grab them just as they grabbed me and invite them down to the park as well. But for the most part, we all did play together at Oxford, but there were several of them that chose to go to different middle schools and different high schools.

So therefore we would still compete against each other when our junior high school teams met up or when our high school teams played each other as well. And then in the summertime, as we got older, say for example middle school and especially in high school, we all would play together representing Oxford or Rondo in summer competition as well. And so we all became very, very good friends. Even though we were competitors. And I mean competitors.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Yeah, it sounds like you can be friends and playing at Oxford, but then as soon as you step on the court and you're in different junior highs, oh, it's on, right? I know your skills, I know your weaknesses, and I can imagine what that would've been like on the court.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

Oh, we probably invented trash talking. We didn't have a name for it back then.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa and several other Oxford girls also played together on the St. Paul Central High School girls basketball team. They made history in 1976 when they won the class AA State Basketball championship. It was the first year Minnesota had ever held a girl's state tournament in the sport. So it was a big deal. The game was held at the med center where the North Stars hockey team played.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

They put a wooden floor over the top of the ice, and we ended up playing a championship game before 10,000 people. And I mean, this community was just so excited and the championship game was actually televised, but this community came out in droves to support this team. Our band was there, Dr. Rayford Johnson had the band there, and they were doing their thing. Our cheerleaders were there, and it was an environment that I will never ever forget. And we matched up with a team that had beaten us earlier. And so I was a bit nervous when we were matching up with them. And so we went out and played the game, and as things would have it, we would win.

We would beat Benilde-St. Margaret's, and we would beat them by the same exact score that they beat us 49 to 47, and it was the coolest thing ever. And then this community on that Sunday when we came home, Mr. Griffin, another community pillar, set it up where we had an escort from the hotel out in Bloomington back to Central High School where there was just, I can't tell you how many people that were out there in front of the schools cheering for us and congratulating us, and we're standing in front of them and holding up the trophy. And so not only does Central

have a history of being the oldest high school in the state, it also has the history of having won the very first class AA state tournament in the state. And then just to brag just a little bit, Central, they've had 11 state tournament appearances and have won four state championships in the division in which they were slated. So a very, very rich history. And all of that can be attributed to those playing opportunities at Oxford because Oxford was that safe place for us to the activities and the education and the sporting opportunities. They were really just an extension of the classroom day, if you will. And that's what we did. We'd go home for just a minute and then come back down to Oxford and continue with the fun things that truly brought us all a great deal of joy

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Growing up, Lisa never thought twice about the fact that she was able to play sports at Oxford in the 1960s and early 1970s before Title IX. Passed in 1972, Title IX is a landmark federal civil rights law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or educational program, including school sports programs that receives federal funding. Looking back, Lisa now sees that Oxford was ahead of its time.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

I didn't learn this until I began doing some public speaking in my role as an Associate Director for the high school league, that women didn't have the same opportunities that I had. So I have always qualified when speaking about my experience in the Rondo community that it has been truly a blessing to be around a community that was so committed to providing opportunities, whether they be athletic, leadership, educational opportunities for both boys and girls. I've never had to play on a boys team. I always played on a girls team, and the girls teams were in many instances coached by women along with men. And so I had great role modeling and many of these folks would end up becoming great friends of mine at this age in my life. And so it was a great place to learn and grow no matter which side of the freeway you lived on.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Like Lisa, Frank White also grew up in the Rondo neighborhood and played at Oxford. Frank's father, Louis "Pud" White II. The second was a well-known African-American baseball player from St. Paul.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

My father and my uncle were great athletes, so people in the Rondo community knew who the White family was, and unbeknownst to me, really. We lived half a block from the Ober Boys Club on Western and St. Anthony. So I really enjoyed my childhood. We didn't have much, but that was okay. If you don't have much, you don't know what you're missing, I guess. Right? So for me, I really enjoyed my childhood. I got to play ball and my buddies, we used to play baseball all day long and down at the corner, and so I enjoyed that.

And so when I did play at Oxford when I was probably about 12, so we played at Ober and one of our rivals was Oxford, and they would always come down to Ober and play. And we didn't really go back to Oxford and play. However, the team that we played against, the coach recruited me and a couple other players to go up and play for his team up at Oxford. So eventually I did go to Oxford and play.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

What was it like when you transferred over to Oxford and was playing with this new community? Can you tell me what that felt like or if you have a favorite memory of playing?

**Frank White, Jr.:**

I think my favorite memories of that was maybe at 12. I thought I was pretty good playing for Ober Boys Club. I remember going out for shortstop, and the shortstop at the time, his buddy played second base, and so they wanted to play together and he said, man, you can throw the ball really hard, you should be a pitcher. And so I did that. I was wild as heck, but I could throw the ball hard. And so I thought I was at least pretty good. And when I went to Oxford, I found out that I was average, I guess, or maybe more importantly, there were guys that were, I thought, much better than me. I mean, I have some vivid memories about some of these guys playing and how good of an athlete they were playing baseball.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Frank came of age during the Vietnam War in the 1960s. He served in the Air Force for several years before he returned to civilian life and enrolled at the University of Minnesota in the fall of 1968. It was then that he found his way back to Oxford when the Director, Bill Peterson, offered him a part-time job.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

It's an interesting story. I never thought I would be in recreation. In fact, I was asked a couple times about going to work with Bill, and I was like, my plan was to be a CPA and my math aptitude is my best. And I sat into a meeting one time after an incident at Oxford, and afterwards Bill asked me, he said, would you like to work? And I was like, not really. I don't want to be in recreation. But a couple of weeks later, I thought about it and I thought maybe if I worked part-time, it would help motivate me a little bit more. So I started working 20 hours a week, and after about a month or six weeks, I was working full-time. And so it really changed my life and my direction of where I thought it was going to go, and I'm happy for that. And maybe if I was a CPA, maybe I would've made more money.

I remember when I first started the office in the building was a mess. And I was like, holy cow, how can somebody work in here? So we took everything out, we cleaned it and all of that, and eventually we did that with the whole building. So I think we complimented each other as we continued to grow and learn together. Because I think Bill will tell you he didn't know everything in the beginning either. He was still learning and I was learning, and I really appreciated that relationship. And so there

was Bill, and then there was Steve Winfield and then myself. the three of us again we're growing together as men and as staff members and as coaches and big brothers and dads and all of that type of stuff at the same time.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

And you said that you first started out as a coach part-time, and then maybe six months later, you became full-time. Can you tell me what you were coaching for those first six months, and then what led you to decide to go full-time?

**Frank White, Jr.:**

Well, the job was actually really as a staff member. So I wasn't really a coach. But I was a coach because when sports came, when football came up, Bill said, okay, we're going to coach now. But really every day, the everyday job was still working with young people in the building and in different capacities. And I think what I learned at that point in time, that there were a lot of different reasons for being involved in recreation and some of them being similar to when I was a kid, and both my mom and dad were there all the time. As I found out later on, sometimes kids don't have both parents for whatever reasons, and not that makes you a bad kid. It maybe makes things a little bit more challenging. But I really liked the interactions that I had with young people.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

In 1974, Frank took a job at the Martin Luther King Center, but his connection to Oxford and his players continued.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

When I was working at MLK, I decided that I was going to move because every time I went to the grocery store to pick up a few things, I was single at the time, and you don't need that many things, but it would take me an hour to get through the store because all along the way, a parent would stop me and, Hey, Frank, my son needs a job, my daughter needs this, or what can I do this? And I think that I really appreciated that and felt proud of that because I thought people, well, I think even today people saw me as a resource to their family.

I used to get calls from schools and if a kid got in trouble at school, they called me and not the parents. And I would go to the school and we would talk and we would sort it out. And so I felt like I was a big brother to a lot of kids. And I really, in my life, I feel very fortunate, feel very blessed that people saw me in that light. And for sure, I'm not a perfect person. I've made my mistakes and all of that type of stuff. But I feel that my connection through sports, through coaching, through working and recreation, has had an impact on other people's lives as well as mine.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Yeah. And some of the players that you coached over the years at Oxford, would you mind telling me about, I guess their background or did you know them and their family since I imagine they were from the Rondo community?

### **Frank White, Jr.:**

There are a lot of names and over the years, and some of them I'm still friends on Facebook with, they still call me coach and some of 'em don't even live here. And just recently I got a gentleman, a young man now named Royal Gooden, so I knew his family, but he played for us, both Bill and I and on our football team and baseball team, and know his family. And so here he is all of these years later. Again, he probably played for us back in the early seventies, and here we are again 50 years later, and he's still calling me coach, and I know people do that with Bill.

Some of those kids went on to be – Stacy Robinson went on to play in the NFL. And there's been a varying degree of kids going on to college. Some of our baseball kids, I know one family, the daughter is a doctor and the son is an attorney, and mom is a doctor. And so there's so many stories, Chantel, there's so many things that come out of athletics, and it could be the good, the bad, and the ugly, and hopefully we dwell on the good and not some of the other things. But you do learn some things that maybe help you succeed in life because hopefully if you make those mistakes early on or at any point in time in, hopefully you go “not going to do that again.”

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa remembers how impactful it was for her to be coached by women

### **Lisa Lissimore:**

Unique to Oxford, we had a lot of female coaches, and it wasn't until later that I realized that those coaches were not much older than I was, but many of them were in college and they ended up being great role models for us because if you think about that, if they're in college, I'm in high school or middle school again, I see what I would call a vision of possibility there. Many of them went to Concordia, and so some of their work experience was down at Oxford, and part of that was coaching us.

And so these individuals, as I mentioned, ended up becoming good friends. And there was Cordelia Mazique who ended up coaching us in football and in basketball, and she was a referee as well. So she ended up working for St. Paul Park and Recs downtown in their administrative offices.

And so, I knew at a very young age that there were opportunities to work in sports and that there were different types of jobs other than coaching and/or officiating. I knew that you could be an administrator for parks and recs or if you wanted to, you could work at a recreation center. So that was one of the beauties of Oxford is that Bill Peterson, who was the Director at the time that I was attending, he saw the importance or knew the importance of us having female role models

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Long before Lisa's Central High basketball team won state, her time at Oxford inspired her to set the goal of earning a college scholarship to play ball.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

I wasn't real sure if my family would be able to afford a college tuition on top of everything else, so I thought, okay, here's my ticket right here. I'm going to set a goal to get an athletic scholarship to go to college. And there was so much beauty and joy in all of that because I developed a mindset that I would not do things that would jeopardize my playing eligibility, whether it be junior high school or high school because I had this goal to get an athletic scholarship. And if I was not in the gym showcasing my skills where there would be no college coaches coming to see me play and nor would I receive an offer to come and play at a college. So it really was a good thing to set a goal like that early in life and then continue to work at it and oftentimes you hear people talk about the types of skill sets that people learn through sports, goal setting is one of those skills. And it's true is exactly what happened for me is that it really taught me about goal setting and then working hard to achieve that goal.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa's collegiate basketball and educational career took her to the University of Minnesota and Grandview College in Des Moines. During that time, she often returned to Oxford to work over the summer and connect with the kids. She witnessed Oxford change in many ways.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

Things just got better with Oxford, there was some renovation that took place, and so there were other meeting spaces on the upper levels of it. They did a great job of maintaining that building, and it still is. The old Oxford is very well maintained. Well, obviously as a college athlete, you have to work out over the summer. So Oxford was the place where we would work out as well. And the other beautiful thing about, or great thing about Oxford is not only did it provide us with opportunities to play it also as we began to get older, 16 years old or what have you, it also provided us with employment. And so a lot of my summers were spent at Oxford in a working capacity, whether it be teaching basketball or doing any other type of administrative things that needed to be done there. And so yes, I would return to Oxford for those things, working out employment opportunities.

And then later on when I graduated from college, and again, still having a desire to shoot around and do all those kinds of things, I would go down to Oxford for those reasons as well. And what I noticed, or I should say, what we noticed when we did do these kinds of things is that there were not girls hanging around the gym in the same way that we did. And so when we noticed that and we began to ask questions of the directors that worked at Oxford, community members, parents of girls, and trying to find out, why aren't you guys in the gym like we were, and it was during that time, I'm going to say the eighties, when rec centers began to get a bit of a bad reputation because there were some things happening, gangs began to surface and things like that. And so people were afraid to send their kids, especially girls down to the rec center.

And so then we decided that, okay, let's help them figure out some things. And so one of the ways in which we were able to get girls back into the gym is that most of the people that we were talking to and who had daughters that could play, they knew all of us. They knew our parents, and so they knew that we were good people and we decided to do a basketball clinic. Many of the basketball clinics and camps during that time, and again, we're talking about the eighties, they were overnight camps and also they cost hundreds of dollars. They were during the day, so you've got issues with transportation, issues with kids having other responsibilities. Many of them grew up as I did, needing some type of summer employment. So those were a couple of the challenges that we saw with the camps or why there was a lack of girls participating in basketball camps and clinics.

Well, we decided then that we would have an evening camp and we would do it for young kids. And so we ran this basketball clinic, it was called the Shooting Stars Basketball Clinic for 20 years, and then we passed it along to Crystal Flint, who is a former Gopher, and she managed the camp for quite a few years and then changed the name of the camp to Triple Threat. We did it for two weeks. We did so at Oxford, at Central, at the Martin Luther King Center. We even took it over to Minneapolis for a couple of years. We didn't get paid. We were obviously volunteering our service and paying back the community for all of the work that they poured into us is the way in which we looked at it.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Lisa's basketball clinic wasn't just about learning how to play the game, it also taught girls about employment opportunities in sports.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

As young people, all we see are coaches and referees, but there's administrative staffs, there's front office staffs at the professional level. And so we would cut out a portion of that week – one night of the week – to bring in people that were working in the world of sports. So we had directors from the University of Minnesota, we had representatives from the Timberwolves. At some point in time, I believe the Lynx were playing, and we would bring in players so that kids could really see what a professional basketball player looked like, so they could see that, oh, they're not that tall. They're not all tall. There are short ones, there are tall ones. And these folks would share their journey with them. And then we obviously would have officials coming in because we always, we need officials to play the game. And then we would also have coaches both at the collegiate level, high school level, and even junior high school level and park and rec level because we need officials and coaches at those levels as well.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Yeah. As I've been listening to you sort of recount your experiences at Oxford and what it's been like to leave and then come back, and by leaving, I mean go to college and then return, is that there's this sort of cross-generational investment in Oxford, right, that I'm seeing here?

### **Lisa Lissimore:**

Oh, absolutely. There's no question about it. Many of the coaches, when I became an adult and I would return to Oxford, many of the coaches were sons of some of the previous coaches who were there, the Goodlow family. You say Oxford, you say Goodlow, you say Oxford, you say Carter family. I mean they were all there. There's no question about it. Yes, yes.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Hearing Frank and Lisa share their Oxford experiences, I understood why they would want to document the story of Oxford. What I didn't know was how the idea for the project came about and what goes into doing a project like this.

According to Lisa, it all started back in 2022 when she and her cousin and fellow Oxford basketball player, Linda Roberts, took part in a different oral history project celebrating 50 years since the passage of Title IX. Here's Lisa.

### **Lisa Lissimore:**

We worked with Kim on that project as one of several women who were interviewed with the hopes of telling our basketball playing, or sports athletic journey, if you will. Linda and I did the interview together with Kim, and it was a hoot. And anytime that you talk to us about our basketball careers, it's always going to start at Oxford, and it just continues just as it has today. This is all part of the story.

And so Kim became intrigued with this Oxford because again, she's, I think around our age, and she made a comment once that she wished she could have grown up in a place like Oxford because of the storytelling that we did, not only about our experience, but the people that gave of themselves to us. And so that's where some of this started, I believe. And then when Kim began to talk to me about it, or Linda and me about it, we said, well, my goodness, you have to bring in Bill Peterson and you have to bring in Frank White because Frank is a historian, and Bill was the start of all of this, and that's how we reached this place.

### **Chantel Rodríguez:**

Kim told me a similar story about how the Oxford Project got started. She was hooked by the stories Lisa and Linda had shared with her, but she also knew this was not her story to tell.

### **Kim Heikkila:**

I live not far from Oxford / Jimmy Lee, and I just thought, huh, I wonder. It seems like there's a story there. And knowing that it was part of the Rondo community, it was an idea I couldn't let go of. And I thought, well, I got to just see about this. And so I contacted Lisa and Linda and I asked them and they agreed, and I said, but I won't do this without your support and your involvement because it is not my story to tell I'm white. I'm not part of the Rondo community. I was an outsider to the whole process. And I said, I won't do this unless you're on board and unless you want to

participate in it to whatever degree you wish. And they both said, “Nope. That’s great. Let’s go ahead.”

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Kim brings to the project decades of oral history experience in the classroom and in the field. She launched Spotlight Oral History in 2016 and has been doing projects for a variety of historical and community organizations ever since. As of December, 2025, Kim has conducted 16 out of 20 scheduled interviews for the Oxford Project. It has involved a lot of research funding applications and relationship building to reach this point.

**Kim Heikkila:**

I want to remind people that history and Historian is in the title of oral history, and that means that to do a good oral history interview or a good put together, a good oral history project, you have to be grounded in good solid historical research that takes place long before you sit down across the table from somebody, and it takes so much longer than you think it would. I’ve worked on projects where people do think, wow, we got 10 interviews three months? Fine. We can knock those out. Well, yeah, if you only sit down for 20 hours of interview, you can do 20 hours of interviews in three months, but you can’t do all the rest of it in three months, particularly. So the interview, again, is really the shortest, smallest piece of labor, so to speak. That goes into an oral history project. Once the interview is done, that recording is sent to be transcribed, and then really critically, the draft of that transcript is sent to all the narrators so they have a chance to review it. And the purpose of that review is so they can correct any mistake in recall, misspelled names, kind of that factual stuff. They can add clarifying comments if they need to, but most importantly, in my mind, it is a chance for them to understand and see in print what is going to be made available to the public.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

A lot of folks who listen to this podcast are probably new to the idea of oral history. So for someone who’s totally new to it, how would you define what oral history is?

**Kim Heikkila:**

The way I define oral history is that it is a rigorous research method that collects, preserves and disseminates firsthand accounts of historical events oftentimes from those whose perspectives are not typically reflected in the dominant narrative. Not always. Sometimes people or oral history projects focus on very well-documented people, but oftentimes I think it’s been used as a method of adding to the historical record those experiences and those people who have been excluded from it. I would also say that it’s a method and a practice of learning about the past by interviewing people who lived, shaped, and were shaped by that past. And I think an important thing to think about when we think about oral history is that oral historians and the people they interview the narrators are co-creating new primary historical sources.

So it's not just about consulting existing primary sources. We're really co-creating that new historical source so that future researchers, writers, journalists, podcasters, whatever, can use those interviews as a source for their own work.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

How would you explain to them that difference between oral history and an interview that is not an oral history?

**Kim Heikkila:**

I think the distinction between an oral history interview and other kinds of interviews is that it is archived and preserved because we are creating that historical record, those primary sources that other people can use, hopefully will use in the future. And I don't think that's true necessarily of interviews journalists might do or maybe even some podcast interviews, I don't think there's that attention or necessity to preserve that raw material. And then I think, and hopefully this is true of most if not all interviews, but I will say it is definitely true of oral history interviews, is that they're undertaken with such great care and ethical concern regarding the narrators or their interviewee's comfort, their authority, their expertise, and their control over how that narrative unfolds, how it is edited, how it is preserved.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Oral histories are like a piece of someone's life preserved, whether it be online or at a physical place, or both. The ones for the project will live at the Minnesota Historical Society in the Oral History collection. But what does it mean for a piece of someone's life story to live in an archive who owns it? Kim explained to me that it isn't always straightforward.

**Kim Heikkila:**

I think the field as a whole, in terms of oral history, has gone some distance towards recognizing that the person that we're interviewing, it's their life. It is their story. It's not just somebody who's going to sit down with us for two hours and walk away and we never hear from them again, and thank you they've donated, but that because it is them giving of themselves, they have rights to copyright. There might be some projects, some institutions that don't recognize that in the same way that we have here started at the Minnesota Historical Society and other places, but that we as co-creators of this interview, retain copyright. And then we're kind of giving license to a place like the Historical Society or other historical organizations to use it, but we can use it as well because we created it.

There's also a move in the field with regard to that kind of honoring and acknowledging the authority and expertise of the narrators to compensate them for their time, which has not been a practice of longstanding in which, especially if we are thinking about oral history as a way of giving voice to, or helping to give voice to people who have been excluded from dominant historical narratives, it's not right to extract those stories and their expertise and then just put them to use for the

purposes of a museum or historical society or an individual author for that matter too.

So I think there is great, great, should be great care and attention towards that shared authority and acknowledging the power differences that still exist. When an organization is gathering people's stories, there are still power differences that exist, and I think oral history done well has to acknowledge that and do its best to make it as equitable as possible.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

In conducting the oral histories, Kim identified a central figure in the story of Oxford. Bill Peterson.

**Kim Heikkila:**

I don't think I have ever once directly asked a narrator, what did you think about Bill Peterson? But every single one of them attributes the success, the care, the nurturing and mentoring that Oxford provided to Bill Peterson, every one of 'em. They cannot speak highly enough of Bill or Billy Peterson, including the woman I interviewed this morning, Reverend Conover. To a person, they talk about how much Bill mattered to the Rondo community. And Bill is a white guy who came into Rondo and was at the time living in Rondo and built this place that became so central to the predominantly African-American Rondo community. And I cannot overstate how important he has been to everybody I've interviewed and the work he did at Oxford. From people recalling that he was out there by himself clearing snow off the ice rink in the winter or laying down the lines on the baseball field and being an excellent coach, particularly with baseball, but also to just demonstrating that care and respect and love.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Here's Bill Peterson in his oral history interview with Kim, where he explains how he ended up at Oxford in 1960

**Bill Peterson:**

When I just got out of the Marine Corps, just came home. The first phone call I got was from John Pettiford, and he said I-94 came through and we no longer have Rondo, and we have a freeway through there.

I got there in 1960, the phone call from John Pettiford said, explain to me how that playground got there. And then he said, I had become the president of the Oxford Booster Club, which is a group of parents that raised funds for these teams to have equipment and to get into leagues and so on. He said, this summer we had baseball, talking about 1959. This fall we had football. And he said, that we would like to have a hockey team in '60, would you coach it? And of course, his background, or my background with him, he knew I was a hockey player, and there was nobody else that he knew of that knew anything about hockey. So I thought for about 15 seconds,

and I said, because I had never coached anything before, I said, sure. So there I was in the late fall just about the change of the season and going into 1960 was when I first coached an all Black hockey team at Oxford.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Bill would end up coaching a variety of sports, including basketball, baseball, and football, to name a few. But hockey was the most important to him. Kim told me Bill informally managed the Oxford Playground before becoming one of, if not the first official directors of Oxford.

**Kim Heikkila:**

Billy was really the one who helped build the culture there, build the sports program there, hire – or hire or recruit – whether they were volunteered or paid people to coach and mentor these kids. He saw it go from a rockfield to a place with a little warming house, to a place with building that had an indoor gym that I think the ground was broken for that building in 1969. So for the span of the sixties, he was Oxford. He was Oxford, and he stayed there for many years.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Bill. His marine experience informed how he approached his work at Oxford,

**Bill Peterson:**

Once a Marine, always a Marine. It's been such an influence on me. It's in that journey because the discipline that I was under in the Marine Corps continued to be the discipline that I used at Oxford, and that's why a lot of teams have told me that they would come to Oxford because my teams were very disciplined, contrary to what they heard about coming into the neighborhood.

In reflecting back now, I loved what I was doing. I loved the way I was doing it. I loved the fact that nobody bothered me doing it. And so what I missed from the city not providing me things, I found more comfortable and more successful doing it my way, assuming it was my way, because nobody directed me on how to do anything or nobody criticized me for doing anything or told me I couldn't do this or that.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

Bill is probably best known for coaching the Winfield brothers, Dave and Steve, in baseball during the 1960s. In early 1970s, Dave Winfield would go on to be a legendary Hall of Fame baseball player. As part of the project, Steve did an oral history interview with Kim. Here's what he had to say about Bill.

**Steve Winfield:**

I could remember because we were pretty, pretty hot shots in baseball, which we probably were, but Bill kept us in our place. It was the guy fresh out of the Marines, and I was going to say, any kid that grew up in the neighborhood, remembered Bill, because Bill had his hair coming out of his chest, out of his shirt.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

After learning from Kim, that Bill was so important to Oxford. I was curious to hear more about how Bill recounted his Oxford story.

**Kim Heikkila:**

Billy was the first person I interviewed for the project. It was two years ago, so I interviewed him early on in the project, so I hadn't heard all these other people talk about him with such adulation and admiration, but I knew, I knew from all the preparatory work we had done that he was central to the story. He was the story in many ways.

He has said many times, both in the interview and otherwise, that there's not a day that goes by that Oxford doesn't come up in his life, whether it's that he sees somebody he coached 50 years ago at Oxford or somebody he coached with, or somebody like he and Frank really went to great lengths to start training officials of color out of Oxford. So he's very clear about how important Oxford has been to him, but he's so generous and so humble that he would, I don't know that he would ever say reverse that and talk about how important he was to Oxford. Everybody else does. Everybody knows it. But Bill – Billy – is a very modest and humble person, and I think he would be very moved, and I hope he will somehow hear and understand what everybody has said about him in these interviews.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

When Frank and Lisa played and worked at Oxford over the period of 50 years, they had no idea they were participating in something that would have such a big impact on Rondo.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

We had no idea together the impact that we were going to have or what we were doing, so to speak. We were learning along the way, and thank goodness for each of us and Steve Winfield and a lot of other coaches, it wasn't just us that put in time and put in a belief to help young people. And I hope that, again, some of those individuals went on to help others. And that's what I would always say to young people, or I would say, look, I'm going to do this, but at some point in time, it's going to be your turn to help somebody else. That's life. That's life, right? I mean, we're all put in positions to do different things for people. And so I really appreciate my transition, the beginning of changing my thoughts of what I wanted to do to my relationship and starting to work at Oxford. I believe that if I didn't take that job at Oxford, my life would've been very different, and I've really enjoyed life.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

I was just a little kid, 10 years old, just down at a recreation center playing and having fun, running, jumping, shooting, all those kinds of things, and not knowing that this is a unique experience. This place is a community hub. This is where community gathers. This is where community comes together to support one another. This is where I ultimately have been coached, mentored, and developed friendships with

people that really truthfully cared about me, and not just me, but the kids, the boys and girls in this community. And they provided us all with different opportunities despite your gender, your race, or your abilities, because there was a place for everyone to fit in at Oxford.

So Oxford was just a great safe place for us to come together and gather as a community and really pour into young people and to make our community quite honestly stronger and to make it even more inclusive. It was just a great place that offered all those kinds of things. And providing young people with a sense of really belonging somewhere. And that I think is most important today. And I just know how proud I felt going down to Oxford, representing Oxford during the competitions that we participated in. It was a big, big sense of pride with respect to that.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

For Lisa, the project has taught her more about her community's history and demonstrated the importance of preserving these stories in an oral history format.

**Lisa Lissimore:**

One of the greatest things that has come from this experience is I now have a better understanding of the history and legacy of this center, recreation center, and its impact on this Rondo community. These centers are here for a reason, and I think that preserving this history, looking at all of the outstanding people that they have helped produce, shape, lead, I just think that there's more to this that could help us today. And this history is very, very important because it shows tremendous leadership by people that had a vision and follow through with that vision and pass that vision on. And again, there's another saying that the places you've been and the people you've been around help shape who you are. Well, maybe it's within these Park and Recs. We know that that's true because you have testimonies of all these different people that are a part of this project, and I think we just sometimes have to review our history, and if that history is not documented, then we have a place to do that. So I think in oral history and hearing it in the voices of people that have been there done, that makes a real difference as opposed to, yeah, we could have written a book, but I don't know if it would have been as authentic as someone sharing the story through an oral history project. I think that Oxford is one of those stories, and I hope that if we went around the country to do something like this, that we would find many Oxford-type stories.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

The devastation of Rondo caused by the construction of I-94 has been at the forefront of Rondo's history and with good reason, it split the neighborhood in half and resulted in the estimated loss of \$250 million in intergenerational wealth. The Oxford Oral History Project, alongside other Rondo driven initiatives, are spotlighting histories of joy and resilience in the community.

The Oxford Oral Histories show a Rondo community invested in creating an inclusive, safe space for everyone to play, learn, and belong. It is as much a story about

resiliency in the face of urban renewal as it is about self-determination and the cross-generational efforts to nurture and lift up the community. The Oxford Oral History Project is ongoing and looking for people to share their stories. Here's Frank.

**Frank White, Jr.:**

I would hope that if somebody had a connection to Oxford, they would come forward and tell their story. While Bill and Lisa and Steve Winfield and Debbie Montgomery and a number of others have their story, it's only through our eyes. I think there's a lot of other stories, just like other stories of St. Paul. We need all of those stories. We need to know the impact, maybe of what Oxford history was, and they're a part of history.

**Chantel Rodríguez:**

The Minnesota Historical Societies oral history collection can be found at [collections.mhs.org](http://collections.mhs.org). Special thanks to Kim Heikkila, Sara Wood and Anna f Fryberg Ortel for their help on this episode.

You've been listening to Minnesota Unraveled, pulling on the threads of Minnesota history. I'm your host, Dr. Chantel Rodríguez. You can find more information on this episode, including transcripts, bibliographic resources, and MNopedia articles at our website, [mnhs.org/unraveled](http://mnhs.org/unraveled).

Minnesota Unraveled is produced by the Minnesota Historical Society in partnership with Rose Productions. Our research team is Ari Fields, Alex Magnolia, Hayden Nelson, and me, Chantel Rodríguez. Our production team is Brett Baldwin and Megan Buttner with recording sound design and editing by Chris Heagle and Zack Rose. Our theme music is Careless Wandering by Arthur Benson.

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Thank you for listening. Until next time, stay curious and remember, the tapestries of history are all around you. Just waiting to be unraveled.