

Mattie Henson

- Discrimination
- Integration
- Olathe Schools
- Downtown Olathe
- Growing up in Olathe

Mattie Henson

What's your name and how long have you lived in Olathe?

My name is Mattie Henson. I've lived in Olathe since, well, I was born here in 1952. Been here ever since so...54 years!

Ok, could you tell us about growing up in Olathe?

Oh wow, growin' up in Olathe...Olathe...back in a...the 50's...60's...it was really rough. A...back then it was still kind a prejudice little bit here in town and like back in the "days" we went to the...we had what...not that many grade schools, Central School. And...I went there first grade through six grade and a...it was a...it was kind hard. It was kids there that...I mean...like there were very few blacks back then was livin' in Olathe and a...they a...didn't even want us to touch 'um. They thought if we touched 'um that they was goin' to turn black. You know...and...they didn't want us sittin' by them or anything like that, but it was very hard. There was this one school that we had that was like in the north of town called Lincoln Elementary School. And a...that is where all the blacks went, but when I started school huh! *(She gives a chuckle)* the school was ready to be tore down. So...it was hard...it was hard.

We were told that your family was one of the first families to integrate in to a White neighborhood.

Right.

Do you remember anything from that experience?

Oh yes I do... 'cause I was like 15 and I said all the blacks lived in the north end of town and we was the first black family to move into a white neighborhood. And...I mean there were so many white families that was so jealous because the house that we moved in had an in-ground pool. And which we still do and they didn't think blacks should have anything that nice. So we had people stole from us, went by callin' racial names, a...TP'ed our house, but hey we was brave...we took it! You know...and we're still there. *(She gives a smile)* So a...but...it's gettin' better. You know...so...

What was your family like?

Oh my god! My family is one of the best families in this whole town of Olathe. *(She laughs hard)* My family is very comical. A...I'm from a family of ten. I have five brothers and four sisters. My mom worked as a house wife in...she was the first lady...black lady to get hired at Delco Battery. She worked there until she retired in '93, I believe. My father worked at the

courthouse. He worked at the Olathe Post Office. He was the guy puttin' up the flag and we sold fireplace wood. So...we did...good. *(She smiles)*

As a kid what did you do for fun?

Huh? What did I do for fun? As I said, I have four sisters and five brothers "think about it". We had to play with one another. We could not go to somebody else's house and play. Say like if we went to the store or whatever we had to have our brothers and sisters go with us because that was back when it was still kind of hard just in case someone tried a mess with us. You know...so we ain't take no mess off of nobody. *(She laughs hard)*

Did you and your brothers and sisters play any games?

Flag football, stick ball and a...we had a little pony...we rode our pony. We also lived out in the country on a farm. So...when we moved to town we had like three big gardens because we canned everything....everything. So...

You said you went to Central Elementary?

Mmmhmm

Tell us what Central Elementary was like.

Oh my god! Central School...what was it like? You went to kindergarten through six grade and it was just a flat hmmm...It was small 'cause back then it there wasn't that many people in Olathe. You know...so...we had like what...two first graders class, two second graders, two third graders, one fourth grader...two fourth graders, I think all the classes had two like...and...

And that covered all of Olathe?

Yea, *(she laughs)* well no 'cause...now that was Central. Then they had Stuck School...Countryside...I think there was like three grade schools. Three grade schools, one junior high, and Olathe North, which was just Olathe High. So...

What junior high did you go to?

A...back then it was called Mill..., no it wasn't Millbrook, it was called Olathe Junior High. So now it's the...a....Vo tech School. It's Millcreek.

What about Olathe High, how was it different?

I tell you what...it's so big now. It was not this big. I mean when I graduated I think we had maybe a hundred and eighty students. That was in twelfth grade. So back then it was very, very small.

As you got older and became a teenager, what kind of things did you do for fun?

PARTY! *(She laughs)* I know you are going to edit this out. *(She laughs)* Let's see, we went to the show, drove up and down the Santa Fe. *(She laughs)* Yea, cruised the Fe. There really wasn't too much back then still not to do.

What theater did you go to?

It was called Olathe Trail. It was on Park Street. I think Steven Attig is in the spot where it was at.

Could you describe the town when you were younger what it looked like?

Oh my god...dirt/brick road...like the Wizard of Oz...follow the yellow brick road. Ah...it was brick roads and dirt/gravel. So it was small. We had like two grocery stores or three. It was real small...very small.

What kind of stores, like did this store something and this store sold something?

Ok, we has a store called Olathe Kmarts...no...Olathe...what was it? Not Olathe....OK Bargains. And it was like a Walmarts or Kmarts store. And a...we had a...Modal Days, it was a ladies dress store, we had Ernie Millers Department Store and we had Velvet Freeze that was the ice cream store. A...the Red School House Market, which used to be on K-7. That was another grocery store. So then we had Callys Lumber Yard...we had...oh gosh! We had little bitty stores...just more like a more say like *Little House on the Prairie* or little stores or stores like that.

What was your favorite part about growing up here?

I was ready to get out of high school! *(She laughs)* I was ready to be on my own. You know, I was tired of...having parents telling you what to do.

Were you a rebel?

I was a good teenager. I did not...my family did not get in trouble, because my parents were very strict. You know so...we huh...we were got whoopin's we had go out in back and go to the tree and get our own switch to get our whoopin's , but...no...our family was...we was good...we was good kids.

What was your least favorite part growing up?

The least...I hated that we were separated from the whites before we moved out on Elm...Elm Street. I hated that, because I think we were all made from the same...you know...God made us

all equal and I didn't think we should be separated. There is not a prejudice part in my bone...in my family...My family as I say I have five brothers I have five white sister-in-laws, but I don't look at anybody as a color because we are all equal. You know...so...

Do you think Olathe has come a long way in discrimination?

Yes, I have, I think it has come a long...I could say almost one hundred percent. You know...and a...it is as I say. You know...it has come a LONG, LONG, WAY.

After you got out on your own, you stayed here, what about Olathe made you want to stay here?

I worked at TG&Y. I worked at Photomat. I worked at the Army Recruitin' office. I worked at Highline Plastics. I...hairdresser. I didn't have any trouble getting a job. *(She laughs)* Seems like I did everything.

What was it like raising your kids in the same town you grew up in?

They say they hate this town. *(She laughs)* Because they said I knew everybody...everybody knew my family. And if they did anything wrong they knew they'd be in trouble. *(She laughs)* So, but...my oldest son is movin' in March...he's movin' to Texas. He's boxing...huh...so...

Did you like the fact that you knew what your kids were doing?

Yes, yes I did. They in trouble man I was on them like...I was just on them. *(she laughs)*

How is it different from your childhood growing up here?

A lot! The kids have a lot more stuff that they can do. Cause back then we didn't have much to do. Go to the skating rink, go bowling or something like that. I loved bowling. I can't skate a lick but, *(she laughs)* but my kids...yea...there is so much more for them to do, which they don't think there is but...you know...there was.

So the big things to do when you were growing up was skating...bowling?

Mmhm...House Parties! *(She laughs)* Had a lot of those...yea.

How has Olathe changed in your lifetime?

It has really grown...a lot...a lot more stores, more people...hmm...it has changed.

What would you like to see for the future of Olathe?

I would like to see more stuff up town. On the west side of town. Instead of havin' to go on the east side of town where everything is at. You know...

You would like to see it built up all over not just the east side?

Right.

Is there a favorite memory you have growing up?

Hmm...I could but I don't think...NO *(she laughs)* Oh my god! I was a NARK when I was in high school. Do you know what a NARK is? I was friends with the police officers *(she laughs)* 'cause I was their babysitter...yes...yes...so...back then that's when drugs and stuff started back in the '69, 70's and I would tell 'em who I knew that was doin' drugs *(she laughs)* *[then the person asked her another question and she asked it so quietly I couldn't understand what she asked]* they didn't know it...I was awful...but it was good...I don't know there are a lot more stories but...I don't know...your mom and I hung out a lot. *(She laughs)*

Any other stories?

No I can't think of any more.

Anything else you want to tell us?

Nope