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Interview with  
KENNETH BAHNSEN  
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Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
Randy Cummings  
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Oral History Collection

Kenneth Bahnsen

Interviewers: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello  
Mr. Randy Cummings

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas                      Date of Interview: March 5, 1984

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello and Randy Cummings interviewing Kenneth Bahnsen for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on March 5, 1984, in Denton, Texas. We're interviewing Mr. Bahnsen in order to get his reminiscences and experiences concerning the coming of Abner Haynes and the integration of athletics at North Texas State University.

Ken, to begin this interview, very briefly give us a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, tell us when you were born, where you were born, your education-- things of that nature.

Mr. Bahnsen: I was born in Vinton, Louisiana, on February 19, 1930. I graduated from high school at Vinton, Louisiana, and I went to Tyler Junior College and tried out for their first football team in 1947. I played there three years and transferred here to North Texas State at mid-term in 1950. I played football here and graduated from here in 1953.

After I graduated from here, I played with the Forty-niners

the following year and then coached at McNeese State College in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in the year 1954.

President Matthews--at that time he was president--called and asked if I'd like to come back to my alma mater. I said, "Yes, I sure would." So I came back up here on the coaching staff in 1955, and I coached the secondary and the defensive ball club that year. Then 1956 was the year that we had to have a freshman ball club, so naturally, with only four on the staff and me being the youngest member of the staff, I was voted as the freshman coach. My first experience was in the fall of 1956 with a freshman ball club. They showed up at the stadium, and that's when we had the experience of Abner Haynes. It was quite a good experience, but it was the first experience that we had.

We saw Abner and Leon King standing in line for a uniform. I was quite nervous and didn't know what to do, so I go and tell Coach Mitchell. Coach Mitchell called the president and asked what were we supposed to do. We had two blacks wanting uniforms, and we didn't even know anything about it. That was the start of, I guess, integration at North Texas, as far as athletics.

Marcello: Let's go back and talk a little about Vinton, Louisiana. Describe what kind of town Vinton was, let's say, in terms of its racial make-up at that time.

Bahnsen: At that time the racial make-up was that on one side of the tracks we had the black community, and no one came across or went either way after the sun went down. My relationship with blacks was that they worked for my dad and my grandpa and all that, and I guess we never did really notice color; I mean, he was Jake, and he called me Mr. Ken. Of all the ones that worked for us, we never did think about it. I probably drank as much coffee milk at their homes as they drank at mine, and we never did notice it much. My parents and grandparents never did really put them down or make them feel...they were part of the work. But they always called me...I mean, they never did call us by our first names. It was Mr. Ken. Even when I was a little bitty boy, it was Mr. Ken. So I never did notice it much.

I went through high school during the wartime, and I always wanted to be a football player. That's what I really wanted to do all my life. We didn't have football. We had basketball, but I played in the band. So my senior year, when the war was over and we had a coach and we played football, we used the uniforms that they had won the state championship with in 1936. You can imagine what those leather helmets were like. We didn't have shoes. We had brogans that the cobbler there in town put leather cleats on the bottom for us. In our first ball game, we had to hook... you know the hooks on the shoes? We tore up the hands of

the people tackling us, so at halftime they made us pull all those things off. We were really something. We had a boy that made All-State that ended up the season with two left sides to his shoulder pads because he broke the right side of his. So he just got another pair and took the other side, and he looked kind of funny. Everybody thought he was deformed, but it was just that he had two left sides of his shoulder pads--one turned around. We were kind of a makeshift football team, but we played for the state championship in New Orleans that year.

Like I said, all I wanted to do was play football, so I hitch-hiked to Tyler Junior College. This is off the point, but I talked to Coach Wagstaff last Friday. He was the coach that coached me. I knocked on his door, and he said, "Son, could I help you?" I said, "Yes, sir. I want to play football for you." He said, "How much do you weigh?" I said, "I weigh 154 pounds." He said, "If you weigh 154, I'll let you try out." I got on the scale and weighed 151, but I said, "Sir, I haven't had a drink of water all day." He teased me about it Friday. The reason I thought of it is, he said, "Can you still drink three pounds of water?" (chuckle) That was my start of football, and then I went through here. When I saw Abner, it was a shock--what was I going to do?

Marcello: I gather, then, that Vinton was probably located over in

Northwestern Louisiana somewhere?

Bahnsen: No. It's far south, close to Lake Charles. It's right in the corner, across from Orange, Texas. It's a community based on rice farming and stuff like that.

Cummings: Other than the working relationship that you and your parents had with these blacks, did you have any kind of social acquaintances with them, either playing sports in the park or...

Bahnsen: Yes. Every Sunday afternoon after church and before milking time, we played football or baseball. Whatever the season was, they would meet us at the school grounds, and we'd play.

Cummings: With other black kids?

Bahnsen: Yes. They had their school, but we'd play. We'd play touch football, and...whatever the season. You know, we had marble season and top season and all of that. Whatever it was, we met.

Cummings: You had no reservations to play with black kids at that point?

Bahnsen: Oh, no, not there. They could play any musical instrument, and my grandfather was one...my mother's family are French. My grandfather on the French side came from Nova Scotia. On the German side, my other grandfather came from Germany, and he had sailed ships and was washed ashore in Galveston in 1900, and he ended up in this country. My daddy was the full-blooded German side, and my mother was the French side.

I had two grandparents that weren't black-oriented, and they didn't...they worked them, but we couldn't abuse the kids or say anything or call them bad words.

Marcello: Is it safe to say that in that kind of background, there was still, however, an understanding that there were superiors and inferiors, that is, the white was superior to the black?

Bahnsen: Oh, that was very much so there. Like I said, they knew their place. They never did try to go out of their boundary. They were across the tracks. We didn't go down there, but they didn't come up to ours, either, at that time. There was a real...they knew where they were, we'll put it that way.

Marcello: You mentioned that you would play with them in the park and so on. Did this kind of thing end at a certain age, however? Do you recall?

Bahnsen: Yes, it did. When we got into high school athletics and when we got into that part, it mostly cut out by then, but at that time, you remember, a fifteen-year-old black boy was almost working full-time, and he'd probably dropped out of education. He was mature, and by then the girls were married and had children. I mean, they'd outgrown us real quick. They had to mature much earlier than we did.

Cummings: During the time you were playing the varsity sports in high school, is it safe to say that the team you were on was segregated and the teams that you played were all



segregated?

Bahnsen: Oh, I never did...the first black I ever played with was with the Forty-niners--Joe Perry. That was the first time I saw one. We got to be real close friends. We played the same position, and he made All-Pro and everything. I respected anything that could fly like that. He was big and strong, and I thought, "Oh, my, what athletic ability!" He was a real good guy, too. That was my first experience as far as athletics.

Marcello: When you were in high school, let us say, did you ever go perhaps to any of the black football games?

Bahnsen: Oh, yes. That was the show. That was the Saturday afternoon movie--watching their games. I mean, they would do things...hideout plays, laying in the grass next to the field. They didn't have any rules about coming out of the parking lot between two cars and catch a touchdown pass. I thought that if everyone had that much fun playing...it was worse than our games that we made up on Sunday afternoons. We had our own rules, but this was a lot funnier than that. Even when I came back up here and I went back to see the black games, I never will forget when I was watching Ernie Ladd's team play in Orange, Texas. There was a little halfback who came around--a defensive halfback--and he makes the tackle, and he did a fair job. The coach jerked him over, and he grabbed that paddle, and he hit him

on the rear, and he said, "Have a seat!" And he said, "Coach, didn't you see me get the tackle?" He said, "Yes, I see'd you get it, but I didn't hear you get it." This is the way they were. Discipline was their...they'd just wipe you out. That's what we couldn't understand. They had complete control. The coach controlled them, and the superintendent or principal or whatever they called them back then controlled that part of town. If you had any trouble--one not showing up for work or trouble--you called Mr. Jake, and Mr. Jake handled it.

Cummings: That's the coach?

Bahnsen: That was the principal. The principal would always have his coach with him. My brother had to teach in an all-black school--the first one in Louisiana to do so. He was transferred. They had a lottery, and he was the first white person to teach in that school. I asked him, "What kind of a year did you have?" He said, "I had a great year. The coach went 6-4." He said that one of the students said something to the principal, like, "Yeah." The coach just knocked him colder than a wedge. When he got up, he said, "You don't talk to your superiors that way." He said, "Mr. Bahnsen, if you have any difficulties with these children, just send them to my office." Hell, he ain't had no difficulty! This is what we had back then. It was the power...who was the bigger or the stronger.

The man who worked for our family...I'll never forget. I applied for a job loading boxcars with sack rice. Here this man was. He's 6'6" and weighs about 260 pounds. He'd make Joe Greene look like a kid. Here he was, and he saw me and said, "What are doing over here, Mr. Ken?" I said, "I'm trying to get a job between milkings to make some money." The guy said, "You're too small to load that sack rice." He said, "If you'll let Mr. Ken be my partner, we can load it." So he takes me, we go to the boxcar, and he said, "Give me all you've got." I'd just start that sack rice, and I couldn't pick it up. But I'd just start, and he'd take it (whistles) and put it up twelve high. Can you imagine a 220-pound sack of rice and putting it twelve high in a boxcar by himself? He didn't have me to help him. He just told me to turn loose. This is the way I was treated. He got me the job. He did all the work. I got my \$2.00 a day. So my feelings toward them was a little different, I guess, than someone who had had some bad relationships. But I never did.

**Marcello:** You really had no ill feelings at all toward blacks? Most of your experience in childhood and boyhood were fairly good experiences?

**Bahnsen:** Fairly good experiences because we happened to have the ones that worked for my daddy that were real good men. They had their families. They had their family at home--

their boys. They had a family home just like I had a family home. Now some of them weren't that way. I know some in town that...but they would tell us, "Don't fool with them. Don't have anything to do with them at all."

Cummings: Did you ever question either to yourself or among your high school peers or to your parents why in athletics the two races were separated? Why the blacks played with themselves or why the whites played with themselves?

Bahnsen: It never did run through your mind. You just thought that's the way it was. You didn't even realize what was really... you didn't even think about it. I didn't think about it. I never did...that's the way it was.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. Was the term "nigger" a commonly used term and not necessarily used in a nasty way and so on in that society at that time?

Bahnsen: I think about it right now...what did they...Negro. I never did hear any one call them a black. I never did hear that.

Marcello: You perhaps heard "colored."

Bahnsen: I don't remember. I know that they would call themselves... if there's one that wasn't a good guy...like the one that worked for us, he'd say, "Don't fool with that nigger." I thought "nigger" was a word that was really...he's a no-gooder. That's the way, I think, that word in our part of the country was used. You called him a Negro if he was a good guy. They called themselves...when they called

themselves "nigger," that is, when they talked about another one, he's a no-good. You don't fool with him--he's bad. I guess that's the way I remember it. I don't remember ever having to call one a black or something, just a Negro. But I always knew their names--the ones we played with.

Cummings: When you went to Tyler Junior College, did you sense any kind of different attitudes among either your teammates or...

Bahnsen: The East Texas kids?

Cummings: Yes, that's what I'm saying--the area of the country.

Bahnsen: The East Texas kids...

Cummings: Talk about the difference in attitude toward blacks that you saw there.

Bahnsen: To the East Texas kids, all of them were "niggers." Getting back to Louisiana, you have to remember that in South Louisiana you have a lot of mix. You had a lot of what we called "high-yellows." There's a lot of mix there. When you see those blue-eyed cajuns, you'd better...they're something. When you got to East Texas, you had a different...you had the rednecks, and the Baptists were over in there. They'd throw rocks at you going down the road, and you'd wonder, "Hm, what's this?" Yes, there was a lot of difference.

Marcello: And at Tyler Junior College, I assume they were recruiting almost entirely out of East Texas?

Bahnsen: Oh, it was mostly...back at that time, it was the boys coming back from the service in World War II. There was only two

of us out of high school. The rest of them had made the march at Bataan and...they were men--they weren't kids. We were the only two kids there. I think he kept me because I was a little boy from Louisiana that...he said, "You need a college education." First, he said, "I can give you tuition and books, but I can't give you room and board." I said, "Well, Coach, I appreciate you letting me try out, but I guess I'll have to go milk those cows at home." He said, "No, you need a college education." I said, "Well, I have \$1.58 in my pocket. That's all I have. I guess I'll go home." He said, "No, we'll work out something." Like I said, I'd have been back home milking cows if it hadn't been for the coach. I kept saying, "Coach, I'm not good enough to stay here." He said, "Oh, you'll grow up one of these days." The next year I played at 185 pounds and the next year at 190 pounds. I did grow up after I got old enough to grow.

**Marcello:** Had you received any honors in football during your senior year in high school that would have influenced you to enter Tyler Junior College? Tyler had pretty good teams.

**Bahnsen:** We won the national championship. I'd made what you'd call All-District, All-Area, and that kind of stuff. With one year of playing ability, I went over there, and I guess he only noticed me because...he didn't have any shoes to fit at Tyler. He said, "All I have...you can wear some tennis

shoes." I said, "That's good. What I used in high school wasn't as good as this." So I'm standing back in the end zone while they're running some drills, and the punters were punting. So I caught the punt, and, golly, he was sending four down to tackle you, so I just strictly dodged them and brought it back and handed it to him. He said, "Can you do that again?" I said, "I don't know. I guess I can." So I caught another punt and run it on back. He said, "Good! You'll work out with the morning group." We had two groups in the morning and two in the afternoon. I worked in the early group, and that meant I was moving up a little. That's when he decided to keep me. I think it was just that I was a little boy that wanted to play football that needed a college education, so he kept me.

**Cummings:** This new attitude that you picked up when you arrived in Tyler...how did that fit with you?

**Bahnsen:** Again, that's the way they were raised. I didn't pay it much mind. Like I said, I was like a new dog on the block. You don't bark or...whatever they say, that's fine.

**Marcello:** During your career at Tyler Junior College, did you ever play against any blacks?

**Bahnsen:** Yes, we did--Compton Junior College. When we played in California, that was my first time. When we played Compton Junior College in the Rose Bowl, we played them. It was "we'll get those and they'll get us." I think we played

harder, and they played harder. We'll put it that way.

Cummings: Just from the mere fact that they were blacks?

Bahnsen: Just for that mere fact. We used to see that when Abner and all of them were playing and we'd go to Memphis.

Cummings: But that was a conscious thing on the Tyler team.

Bahnsen: It was a conscious thing, yes. You're not going to let them out-do you. It was always mentioned: "You're not going to let those niggers beat you, are you?" "No, sir! No way!" We were just not going to be beaten by them.

Marcello: What kind of an attitude could you detect on the part of Coach Wagstaff relative to blacks playing with whites and so on?

Bahnsen: Coach "Wags" was always one of those that...he's still that way. See, he won the nationals in football and basketball at the same time when he started recruiting the blacks. He is strictly for these good athletes. He's one that's kind of versatile. It didn't bother him much. Now he may tell them...he'll look them straight in the eye and say, "Do you want to be a black, or you want to be a nigger?" I mean, that's the way he'd put it to you: "If you want to act like a nigger, I'll treat you like one." I think "nigger" to him was the same as what I grew up with--that's the one that's not doing the job. He would look at you in the eye (chuckle).

Cummings: You say he won a national championship at Tyler?



Bahnsen: Yes, two years.

Cummings: What year was that?

Bahnsen: In 1947 and 1948.

Cummings: Two years back to back?

Bahnsen: Yes. If you'll remember, Coach "Wags" won the national in football and basketball two years back to back. He was the basketball coach, too.

Cummings: What position or positions did you play during your Tyler career?

Bahnsen: The first year I was a defensive halback, and the second year we moved to T-formation, and I moved to halfback and played halfback there two years. I came here in 1950 and played at right halfback. Then that's when we had Ray Renfro and Loyd Lowe and Womble. Four of us played pro ball--four halfbacks. Well, I started at right halfback, and Loyd Lowe started at left halfback, and on our second team was Ray Renfro and Royce Womble. We had all those backs, so Coach asked me if I'd move the next year to fullback, and that's where I moved--to fullback my second year and third year here. Back then...you wonder why those six years rolled in there. That ran through your minds.

Marcello: Yes, I was wondering about that.

Cummings: That was going to be my next question (chuckle).

Bahnsen: Back then, when the boys got out of the service, all of our players had been in the Southwest Conference and got

drafted in the middle of the season or something that messed up their college career. They passed a rule back then that junior college would count one year against you. It didn't matter how long you'd stayed. Well, you could transfer sixty-six hours, so you could stay three years-- in my case. Well, I was seventeen, so I stayed two-and-a-half years--three football seasons. Well, that counted one year against me, so when I transferred I was a sophomore. So it gave me six. For a young guy, it was a great benefit; for the old guys they had to get their...all those F's that they received for leaving at the middle of the semester...got drafted. They lost that year of eligibility, so if they were sophomores, say, like, at Texas A&M and were pulled out, they'd lost those two years. That would count one year, so they could go to a senior college and still get one of maybe two years of eligibility. It was right in that time that they were trying to give them a chance to get back on their feet, and they needed it, I tell you. They walked around like...they scared us kids (chuckle).

Cummings: So you played three years at Tyler and three years at North Texas?

Bahnsen: Yes.

Cummings: Real briefly, while we're on the subject of your athletic relationships with blacks, talk about your relationship with Joe Perry on the Forty-niners and your initial feelings and

initial emotions when you realized that you were going to be a teammate of a black player.

Bahnsen: When I got there, they had the All-American fullback from Notre Dame, and they had the All-Big Ten fullback from Ohio State, and there ol' Ken was. Then I saw Joe Perry at 228 pounds and 6'2" and watched him run a 9.7 hundred-yard dash--black. He made All-Pro. So I thought, "Well, I won't be here very long." As a matter fact, I stayed in my suitcase for two-and-a-half weeks. I didn't even unpack. I'd just change from my suitcase.

But we get out there, and like I said, Joe helped me change my stance, and he helped me get my...they changed me completely from what I was in college--my stance. They showed me some things I wished I had known those other years, but I didn't. Anyway, he says, "Ken, you can get off better, and you can do this or that." I thought I was going to be a...back then they had McElhenny running halfback, so here we had two All-Pros sitting back there, so it was just a matter of who they were going to keep. Here's an All-American fullback from Notre Dame and an All-Big Ten fullback, and where are you going to go?

So we'd have wind sprints. Perry'd say, "Ken, I'll just stay a little ahead of you. You run as hard as you want to." Well, hell, I'm running as hard as I can run--him just staying there in front. When he'd run against the

other two, he'd beat them so bad. He'd just leave them. Well, he liked me. I wasn't any threat to his position. When he didn't want to block, he'd always just come off the field and let me go block or stuff like that. So they cut the other two. They cut them because they only kept thirty-two at that time--no taxi squad or anything like that. You had thirty-two people.

I really appreciated it. I knew what he was doing. He didn't want the threat of that fullback from Ohio State that was 6'3" and weighed 240 pounds. He didn't want the threat of that All-American Notre Dame fullback. He didn't want that threat. He didn't have to worry about me. He helped me. And he did. Like I said, I wished I had known the things that they showed me. I thought it made me a better coach by knowing Joe and all that. He played at Compton, see, the year that we played them. He went straight from Compton to the Forty-niners. He didn't go to senior college--he went straight to pro ball.

Cummings: So I guess, again, it wasn't any big deal for you to be on a team with a black at that time?

Bahnsen: Like I said, it was like looking at the old movies when you saw...what were their names for Army that you used to see in the series?

Marcello: Doc Blanchard and Glenn Davis.

Bahnsen: Doc Blanchard and Glenn Davis. And here you saw McElhenny

and Perry and Tittle. Hell, I'm still on cloud nine. They drafted me, and I didn't think I'd ever get to play pro ball for sure. So I talked to my parents, and they said, "Well, Ken, it's not embarrassing to get cut. You've never seen San Francisco. Why don't you go. You don't have anything to lose. You always have a place to stay here if you don't make it." So I just went out as kind of a shot in the dark. Tittle happened to play for Coach Mitchell in high school. Bill Johnson played with me at Tyler Junior College. He was the center. They kind of...here's another little kid on the block that we're going to help. So that's the reason... it wasn't athletic ability.

**Marcello:** As you look back on those experiences at San Francisco, do you feel that you in any way changed your attitude toward blacks even if it was just Perry?

**Bahnsen:** Oh, yes. I think that's the reason...I think a black can tell how you feel. I think any person can tell how you feel. I think that's the reason Abner likes me today. I liked Abner back then, but I didn't know what to do. I never felt funny around a black, I mean, as far as recruiting one. I think that they can feel how you feel without you saying anything. I think that. I think I can tell whether an athlete likes me or he don't like me or if he respects me or not. I think that's the reason I never have had any troubles with any blacks, because I just never did feel

like...I thought they'd been mistreated.

Some of them have pushed it too far, and I don't have much respect for some of those that have used it like, "Well, you owe me. I'm going to get something because I've been mistreated." That's not the way to go at it. That's what I used to talk with Abner about. One time I heard Abner when he came back from Denver. He made some comment about a white "honky." I said, "Abner, I'm not real white, but I guess I'm in that category." "I'm not talking about you, Coach," he says. I says, "Don't put people in categories. Don't do that. You're bigger than that." So this is the way I've always felt. I'm not going to cut down that one. It's not going to make me any bigger.

Marcello: Were there any other blacks on that San Francisco team besides Perry?

Bahnsen: No, we only had Perry. But California, as you know, was wide-open. My first shock--if you want to know my first shock--was in San Francisco when I saw dating--the blacks and the whites. That still don't sit with me. I'm still not that far along yet. I don't know if I'll ever get that far along. I don't know if that person is real sincere or if he's just trying to put on a show--both ways. Is he trying to show that he can go with the prettiest white girl in the world, or is she trying to show that she can go with a...is she using him, or is he using her? This is what bothers me.

I guess if it's real sincere, it's okay. But it still bothers me. I'll still walk out of a club if I see too much of it.

Cummings: At that time in the NFL, what kind of problems, if any, did the integration of the NFL teams have as far as traveling?

Bahnsen: We didn't have any problems. I only remember one statement from Coach Shaw. He says, "As long as the blacks are playing with the whites, you will win. When the whites start playing with the blacks, you will lose." And I see...you look around today...I don't know. You know what he meant.

Cummings: I mean, as far as your traveling or hotels and restaurants.

Bahnsen: We didn't have any travel. Look where the teams were back then. We didn't have any teams in the South. There weren't any pro teams in the South. They were in Chicago and in New York and in Washington and Philadelphia. There weren't but twelve teams...Los Angeles and San Francisco. When we went to the East Coast, we had to stay. We didn't go back and forth. We stayed four weeks on the East Coast and played all the teams and then go home. Then they'd come out there, and we'd stay home for four weeks. There wasn't this traveling back and forth.

Cummings: So there weren't any problems as far as traveling, eating?

Bahnsen: Not in the hotels, no. We didn't have any games down South.

Marcello: Even Saint Louis wasn't in the league then? Is that correct?

Bahnsen: No. There was Cleveland.

Marcello: The Chicago Cardinals eventually became the Saint Louis Cardinals.

Bahnsen: The Chicago Cardinals. We didn't have any team in the South that was anywhere close to where integration problems would occur.

Cummings: Go back and tell us again the whole process of how you left San Francisco and came to North Texas as a coach.

Bahnsen: I came back the next summer, and I was playing softball with my little cousins in Louisiana and tore up a knee that summer playing softball. I had never had been hurt before, but I got hurt. So I was in the hospital, and they called me from San Francisco, and they said, "Can you be ready by October 15?" I said, "I don't know." The president out at McNeese State College, which was twenty-five miles away--I happened to be in a hospital in Lake Charles--came in and said, "Ken, what are you going to do?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Do you want a backfield coaching job at our school out here?" I said, "Well, yes, I guess I do." So I called the Forty-niners and told them I'd take this coaching job, and then if I rehabilitated and everything got okay, then I'd go back the next year. So I took the coaching job there.

Then Coach Mitchell had an opening here for a coach. Coach Walker went to Amarillo as athletic director, so he had an opening. They asked me if I'd like to come back here, and I said, "I'll take the cinch" instead of going back out



there. They didn't need me. I'd never been a starter. All I got to do was play when Perry didn't want to run with the football. That was basically what it was. That's when I got a chance to come back here.

President Matthews will probably tell you I didn't even ask them my salary. I came back here, and I was working a month, and he called me in his office. He said, "Ken, do you know how much your making?" I said, "No, sir. But I figure you'll pay me what I'm worth." I worked for \$3,600 the first year. I took a thousand-dollar cut from McNeese to come here. He said, "We'll do better next year." I said, "Okay." He said, "We don't ever talk about salary. We don't talk about duty. If we don't like that, we can quit." I liked that kind of working arrangement. I don't like to know what you make. I don't like you to know...it doesn't make any difference. We're going to do our job. I've never known what Fred McCain and Herb Ferrill and Coach Mitchell made in the twenty years I coached with them. I didn't want to know. This is the way I got here.

**Marcello:** For the record, then, why was it that you decided to take a pay cut to come to North Texas?

**Bahnsen:** I graduated from here, and I guess it was a part of the country that...it's not like Louisiana. It's a part of the country where you can see anything you want to see in the Dallas and Fort Worth area. I don't know...I just like

this part of the country.

Marcello: How did the caliber of football at North Texas compare or contrast to what was being played at McNeese?

Bahnsen: This was the big time, and they were the little country bumpkins down the road. They couldn't do things. They were a little tiny school down the way. This is the big time at that time. Like I said, on the ball club that I played on here, fourteen of us played pro ball. At McNeese they didn't have anybody that even knew what pro ball was. As a matter of fact, I had one kid on that ball club that I got him a chance with the Rams, and he happened to make it on that ball club, but it was because I had a few contacts.

Marcello: What influence did Coach Mitchell have in your decision to come to North Texas?

Bahnsen: Well, Coach Mitchell was the type of guy that when you worked for Coach Mitchell or you're around Coach Mitchell, the worst word I ever heard him say was, "What the heck." That's when he was really mad. He was blowing in two when he said, "What the heck." When I first came up here, I said a cuss word one time. At a workout my first two or three days here, somebody hit me late, and I said one, and he sent me to the shower. I'm inside and Mr. DeFoor says, "What are you doing in here?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Did you say a cuss word?" I said, "I did." He said, "That's the reason you're here." Coach Mitchell walked in, and he

says, "Son, if you can clean your mouth up, you can come back out tomorrow." So here I was, with a guy that's a real gentleman.

At that time I was running a defense down at McNeese that we called it the "old numbers defense." I wanted to get it back up here and show them what we could do here. I told Coach Mitchell, "Coach, if you let me run the 'numbers defense,' I'll come back." He said, "Sure, anything you want to run." In all the years, if I had something that I wanted to try or something, he made me feel like..."Sure, go ahead and try it. If it works we'll go ahead and use it on the varsity." If I'd see something scouting and I'd want to try it, he'd say, "Sure, try it." He'd let me do anything. It was not like working for a coach that says, "Here's your sheet. This is what you're supposed to say." At McNeese I had one that wanted to tell you everything and none of your ideas. But now I know that I was the president's boy, and he was afraid, but that's the way it was.

Marcello: So you did find, then, that Coach Mitchell was, for want of a better word, rather a flexible person in terms of being head coach.

Bahnsen: Real flexible. He made the assistants feel like they were just as important as he was. For example, someone gave him twelve golf balls. I used to laugh. Some sporting goods man would give him twelve golf balls. There was always

three for Coach Mitchell, three for Herb, three for Fred, three for me, It wasn't twelve for him. It was three, three, three, three. There were four of us. We always felt that way. That makes it pretty easy to work for somebody like that.

**Marcello:** The reason I'm asking these questions may be obvious by now. Do you think that Coach Mitchell was the ideal person to be here when this whole business of the integration of athletics got started?

**Bahnsen:** Let me tell you how it happened. Getting back to the first time when they were in line, and we were told we had to give them a uniform, President Matthews said, "We've been beaten in court. You have to give them a uniform, but you can chase them off." The first thing we say is, "Oh, he won't be tough. We'll get rid of him." That was my statement; that was Herb's statement; that was Fred's statement--"We can get rid of him." The first thing Coach Mitchell says is, "He has good moves, He's got good feet." He never did say so. We tried everything that we could do to chase him off. I'll tell you, we tried.

One day I put him over...we tried him some on offense. Sure, he could smoke that ball; he could really go. So we decided to put him over on defense. We had to play both ways. "He won't hit on defense." We had a boy we was redshirting, and we told him...we told all the

linemen, "We're going to open this hole. I'm going to sit Abner over here at defensive halfback, and we're going to fill that hole." We had it all worked out. We give Groce the ball. He takes off, and soon as he hit that hole, ol' Abner hit him right in the numbers and almost knocked him out. He came that hard. Coach Mitchell walked over and said, "Looks like you got a nigger boy on your team." That was his thing--he would hit. Coach Mitchell was always saying, "Boy, he's has good hands, good feet." We thought, "He's just lucky. He's just lucky."

Cummings: So he wasn't quick to pre-judge a player.

Bahnsen: No, he never did do that. He was strictly...he's another one of these people who thought that if you had good hands or you got good feet or you jumped pretty good or something like that...and King...we thought we were just going to keep King for somebody to ride with him, you know, somebody to put in the same room and stuff like that. Then King takes two steps and bumps it out of the end zone on the kickoff--like you're kicking an extra point. And he could catch the ball. He's tall and thin. So now we also had us an end. We didn't even look at him at first. We was looking at Abner. Then we found out that Abner was raised here, and "Jitterbug" was his brother. He played at Prairie View, and he was quite an athlete. So I thought, "Hm, we may have something."

- Cummings: You told us that your first introduction to Abner was the very first day of practice when you were passing out the uniforms.
- Bahnsen: Passing out...lined up for uniforms.
- Cummings: Now we've understood that Abner and his brother came up to North Texas either during the summer or late spring to talk to Coach Mitchell about walking on.
- Bahnsen: Yes, but, you see, we...
- Cummings: Was that just between...
- Bahnsen: That was them, see.
- Cummings: ...him and Coach Mitchell? You did not know anything about that?
- Bahnsen: I didn't know anything about it. I think Coach Mitchell, really, at the time just thought, "Well, he's not going to walk on." It was kind of a shock when I walked down there, and he says, "We have two in line to get uniforms."
- Cummings: So even before that first day of workouts or passing out the uniforms, Coach Mitchell never mentioned it to you?
- Bahnsen: Coach Mitchell never did mention it. Like I said, Abner's folks were raised here, and they had the church here--owned the church here. They may have talked with him. We didn't know. I don't think Fred or Herb knew either because somebody would have mentioned it to me. I didn't know it until I walked down there and watched them in line to get uniforms.
- Marcello: Again, like you say, Coach Mitchell may have had the impression

that "these guys will never show up anyway so why even bother to mention it."

**Bahnsen:** Yes, because Coach Mitchell's that way. Y'all have been around Coach long enough to know he's not going to say, "Hey, we can't have any black boys on the team." You know, he wouldn't say anything like that. He'd just say, "Sure, sure," and probably not remember it when they walked out the door. He's not going to hurt anybody's feelings.

**Marcello:** It would be interesting to know if even he were surprised when they stood in line that day.

**Bahnsen:** He was pretty surprised because he rushed to the phone and called President Matthews and wanted to know, "What do we do?"

**Cummings:** So he got ahold of President Matthews that very day.

**Bahnsen:** Right then. He said, "You give them a suit. You can get rid of them off of your team, but...."

**Cummings:** You got to let them come out.

**Bahnsen:** ...got to let them come out." We used to play Ole Miss and Johnny Vaught. Coach Mitchell probably told you this. Johnny Vaught says, "You don't bring them with you, and we'll still keep our contract if you just leave them at home." Coach says, "I can't do that."

**Cummings:** So prior to that very first day of workouts, you as coaches had no opportunity to talk to the white players and warn them?

Bahnsen: No warning or nothing.

Cummings: You were as shocked as they were probably.

Bahnsen: We were as shocked as they were, and they had their little ...they had their words. We had some of those East Texas boys, too.

Marcello: I think you had a bunch of those East Texas boys since Coach Mitchell had originally coached at Marshall.

Bahnsen: We had some East Texas boys, and they would make the statement, "Nigger, you better be tough." He said, "I am." If it hadn't been for Abner, we couldn't have handled it because Abner would joke and laugh. He would laugh about it. Just like when I'm going to put the black stuff under his eyes... you know, Vernon Cole from Pilot Point had never played with any blacks. Here he was, a cotton-topped quarterback, and they were like this (crosses fingers). Vernon happened to be that kind of person himself--he was easy-going. Anyway, they'd sit by each other all the time, and I'm going to put the black stuff under his eyes. I got to Abner, and he put up his hand, and he says, "Coach, don't give me any of that. God gave me all that I need." Statements like that--he'd joke about it.

I told you about the game up at Tishomingo. I'm giving them that Frank Leahy talk for them--dropping it on them--and he's laying on the dummies in the back of the room. It looks like he's asleep, and I said, "Abner, did you hear me?"



He said, "Yes, sir, I heard you. Don't worry about it."  
I was telling them about the lights were bad, watch the punts, and don't...the lights were bad. They weren't twenty-five feet--it looked like--in the air. I said, "When they punt the ball out of the lights, be careful," and all that. He said, "Don't worry about it, Coach. All they're going to see is a white suit running down the field." You know, that cracked everybody up. We got through it.

The boys accepted him because he could laugh and joke about it. I'd tell him, "Boy, you know what they call us in Louisiana? Coon asses!" I said, "Don't y'all call me a coon ass, now." You know, we'd joke. So it was kind of a joke. You know, if I get out in the sun, I can get pretty dark myself. But Abner's attitude of being able to handle it made it where we could do it.

Marcello: Let me just ask you this, though. Let us suppose that Abner were an athlete of average ability, and he still had the same personality.

Bahnsen: He wouldn't have made it. I don't think he'd have stayed around. They respected his athletic ability. I mean, you got to look at it just like when I looked at Joe Perry. I'm looking at a big animal here that can run and do things and just fly. Everybody has to respect athletic ability if he's in athletics--as a player or anything else. Then the personality is extra. Now we've had some that had chips on their

shoulders and stuff like that.

Carl Lockhart was a perfect example of one that we couldn't give a scholarship to, and he stayed here and played. But he was just chatter, chatter, chatter--just the perfect attitude. He played with the Giants a hundred years. Some people would say, "Why didn't you give him a scholarship?" Well, we could only have two. That was the limit, so we couldn't have more than that. Back at that time, you couldn't have but two.

Marcello: Let's back up a minute and go back to 1955, which, of course, was when the courts...

Bahnsen: The year before.

Marcello: ...the year before, which was when the courts ordered North Texas to integrate. Do you remember anything about that court decision in terms of how it affected North Texas?

Bahnsen: I didn't even know that it existed until the next fall when they said we'd been beaten in court. Supposedly, there was one here in graduate school. I never did see him. But you remember that our school paper...we didn't have any negative things in our school paper. Our school paper was straight-running and positive. I wish it was that way today, but it's not that way. I never did see it. I was here on the campus.

Marcello: You would know this better than Randy or I, but I get the impression that North Texas was kind of isolated at that time. Dallas and Fort Worth were kind of close, but there

were no interstate highways between the two.

**Bahnsen:** Well, that wasn't closeness. When I went to school here, we had one car on the football team. When a kid came to North Texas, most of them were from...they didn't have cars. We didn't have cars. They lived at the dorms. You can see where they were located. We were off to college...even the Dallas kids might get to go back home once a month. Mom and Daddy would come get them and take them. Like you say, we were off in the country. We didn't have the influence of Dallas that much.

**Marcello:** Let's talk about another person--J. C. Matthews. What kind of a person was Dr. Matthews as you recall him in that time?

**Bahnsen:** Dr. Matthews was the type of person who knew everything going on. I just finished a boys and girls regional tournament. In 1956, I ran the first boys and girls regional tournament. He was the type of person that on Monday morning I would have had a note in my box saying, "Good job on the regional tournament, Ken Bahnsen. J. C."

In 1955, I was back here and I was running the athletic dormitory. Well, he called me in, and he said, "We need to keep those rooms a little cleaner." I said, "President Matthews, I think if we had a broom and a mop and a trash can in each room, we could keep them clean." He said, "Well, you've already used 120 brooms and ninety-five mops and so many trash cans." He already knew what...and he didn't know

what I was going to talk about. So I go back, and I found that the trash cans were those regular ones you see that hold water, and they were taking them to go drink beer at the lake--icing down beer. I went back, and I said, "I think we need to have trash cans that don't hold water." He said, "I think that's a good idea."

Like, when I was coaching, he called me in and said, "You're the tennis coach." I said, "Oh, President Matthews, I don't know anything about tennis." He said, "Ken, that's the reason we write books." You know, you'd go in, and if you go in half-cocked, he'd rip you apart; I mean, he'd already had the answer. But if you had a good reason and you knew what you were doing, it was okay. But if he told you something, you could mark it down in granite. He made the decision. I'd ask Coach Mitchell, "Coach, you think I can do such-and-such?" Coach would say, "Why don't you go see him, Ken?" Dr. Matthews then might say, "I think that's a good idea, Ken." If he said, "No," you'd get up and walk out and not question it. Just don't do it. And that's the way it was. I think that's the way he ran the whole setup.

Marcello: He didn't run the whole university by committee?

Bahnsen: No, we didn't have any. He ran the university. He and Mr. Wooten of the Board of Regents. We had one vice-president, Dr. Sampley; we had one dean of men and one dean of women. And that was the administrative staff. But how did he know

so much? That's what was spooky. He'd scare you. You'd see him walking around the campus, and he knew...like I said, on Monday morning I'd have a note in my box: "Thank you, Ken, for the girl's tournament or the boy's tournament. You did a good job."

The year after Abner graduated, we had the worst football year of Coach Mitchell's history. We were 2-8, but we were 0-7 at one time, and all around the campus they said, "Good-by, Odus and Company." Herb and Fred and I would laugh and say, "We know who's 'Company.' We're 'Company.'" That year we got the best raise we ever had. He put it in the paper that we'd worked harder...and we did. We just didn't have any...we lost thirty-five kids in Abner's senior year. We didn't have any...we weren't any good. We couldn't play. He said, "They worked harder, and they deserve a raise." You didn't see any more in the papers. No one put any...no more "Good-by, Odus and Company." That was it.

Marcello: I guess, in other words, that the word came down from the President Matthews to the effect that, "Okay, here are two black kids that are coming out for football, Coach Mitchell. That's the way it's going to be. That's the law. And I don't want any trouble."

Bahnsen: That's it. There was no "if's" and "and's" and "but's"-- you were going to make it work. If he says, "We'll make it work," it will work. It was a pleasure as a person working

here at that time...I had the intramural program; I taught my classes; I had the tennis team; I coached football. I had all these, but I didn't have to worry about...if he told me to do it, I knew that he'd back me up and say, "Yes, I told Ken to do that." Nobody else questioned it. That was it. I don't think we could have made it through integration as easy as we did if we hadn't had somebody that made everyone else say, "Yes, that's the way it's going to be."

Cummings: Did he specifically get with Coach Mitchell or the coaching staff...

Bahnsen: Just on the phone.

Cummings: ...as a whole and just say, "This is how we're going to handle this whole situation."

Bahnsen: Oh, he just phoned and said, "That's the way...." I imagine he and Coach Mitchell had a visit. But, you see, it was nothing to go up and visit with him. If I had a tennis problem, it was nothing to just go...he had time for you. You better have it ready because he was sitting there with that pipe, and he knew it all (chuckle).

Cummings: So he did put a limit of two for the first few years?

Bahnsen: He didn't. I imagine it was his idea to not let it get overloaded. He and Wooten came up with...when they talk about the board of regents, I don't remember another name. I don't remember another name as a student or nothing else.

I really think he hired me because I was working a

Wednesday night dance when I was in college--I'd just transferred here--and I was the door keeper. Mr. Slack says, "Don't let anyone in that does not have an activity card." President Matthews, Dean Bentley, and Mr. Wooten walked in to the dance, and I said, "Do you have an activity card?" They said, "No, sir." I said, "Well, you can't go in." I go get Mr. Slack, and he turns green. He says, "You don't know who this is, Ken?" I said, "No, I don't." He said, "This is the president of the college; this is the dean of women; and this is the president of the board of regents." I had told them, "I imagine he'll let you in, but I can't let you in." That's the way President Matthews operated. If the rule was that you had to have an activity card...no one goes in without an activity card. I don't care who it is--even him. I think that's the reason he was willing to take me back here on the staff. Being a graduate from here, they don't let too many of them come back. That just wasn't done back then. Everybody wondered why. I ran the swimming pool, and I knew his rules. You don't get in until twelve o'clock. No one hit the water until twelve o'clock. That was his rule.

**Marcello:** That's an interesting point, that is, his being a stickler about rules. Again, you could apply that to this whole business concerning integration, I think. The courts had ruled, and that was it.

Bahnsen: That's the rule. That's the way he operated with rules. If there was a rule, you go by the rule. If that was your budget, you go by your budget. He told me one time...I said, "How can I spend this tennis budget?" He said, "I don't care, Ken. When you run out of money, you've finished your season. If it's in October, you're through." So you plan your schedule, and you plan your budget, and you don't go over your budget. It doesn't matter what, don't come back. We knew that's the way it was. If you didn't have anymore phone calls, tough--no more calls.

Cummings: His rule on the limit on the number of blacks on the team... did that come out immediately after Abner and Leon got here, or how did that evolve?

Bahnsen: Oh, no. That was after because he was afraid that the Dallas press...when they saw it, somebody was going to put on the big push, and we were going to have just a big bunch of black athletes, and we didn't know how we would handle that. We was afraid that would kill our schedule. It had already killed us with Ole Miss, Mississippi State, and Mississippi Southern. We were playing three Mississippi schools at that time, so that killed that. Where were we going to get some games? We had to go...remember, about that time we had to go to California to get games and play in Fresno and San Jose, and we had to move to Arizona. He was afraid it was going to really wreck us financially, and you can see where



it would have because we didn't have any luck getting any more games with Houston and all that.

Marcello: Also, given the times, do you think it was perhaps wise to integrate in that manner to avoid trouble?

Bahnsen: I don't think they could have planned it any better than we did. Now it makes you wonder. I saw Charley Taylor play in Grand Prairie. He scored five touchdowns, and I had to tell his coach we couldn't use him. I called the coach at Arizona State and had them come get him, and they took him out to Arizona State. I mean, when you see athletes like Stone Johnson, Abner's best friend--he'll tell you--we had to tell Abner we couldn't use him. He ran the Olympics in 9.3 seconds.

We couldn't come out and say it. That's something that was never said. It was never said until...it was just something we never mentioned. We never let anyone use it as a recruiting gimmick against us because it would have hurt us just as bad as it would anyone. We had to think of other excuses. It had to be called that you didn't know anything about coaching. We turned down Ernie Ladd (chuckle). I brought Ernie Ladd up here and found out we couldn't take him. You know, he was 6'9" and weighed 270 pounds. He ended up at Grambling.

They were there. It didn't take any Houdini to go find athletes then. Charlie Johnson got fired as basketball

coach here because he turned down Stallworth and Bowman from Fort Worth. They went to Wichita and won the NCAA and all of this. But he couldn't have them because he had a little ol' guard, Brown, from Dallas and...he had two... Savage. If you'd have put Stallworth and Bowman with Savage, we'd have had the best basketball team in the world--no doubt in my mind that we'd have had the best--but he couldn't take them. We couldn't get "Pop" Noah to take one. We kept saying, "'Pop,' you take them, and we'll use them in football. You can take two in track. We'll get them for you." He wouldn't do it. He was from the old school. He didn't want to fool with them.

Marcello: That's interesting because if you go back and look at the yearbook, especially when you look at the freshman teams, you see two, two, two each year.

Bahnsen: (Laughter) After you know, you can see it.

Marcello: And then it looks like after 1959...

Bahnsen: Arthur Perkins and Carl...

Marcello: Christle.

Bahnsen: Christle, Billy Joe. You can go through there, and that's the reason...if you notice, Lockhart was the third, but we couldn't give him a scholarship. He stayed here free. We had to say, "Son, you're just not quite good enough yet. You're going to get better." He started every game (chuckle).

Marcello: And then it looks like maybe about 1959...

- Bahnsen: Well, in Abner's senior year, then we started...
- Marcello: You seemed to get a little bit bolder with your recruiting of blacks.
- Bahnsen: Well, that's right. We didn't get anybody to tell us we could, but we just got a little braver. We was kind of pushing our luck. We knew that next year we were going to die. That's that 2-8 year. We knew that was going to be no-man's land because we had them all gone. Then when we were 2-8, we said, "We have to do something." So we said, "If we're going to get fired for losing, let's go get them." So we just said, "We'll let somebody tell us." By then no one mentioned it. It was never mentioned to us.
- Cummings: Did you get any kind of instructions...again, I'm going back to 1956 when Abner and Leon first got here. Did you get any instructions from the president or the board of regents or so forth on how to handle the publicity end of it when newspapers covered the team?
- Bahnsen: No. Jim Rogers would know that because Jim was at our place. He was there. We never did push any...we never did use an athlete like we should. The way you do publicity now to build a team, you build you a star, and people come to see that star. Coach Mitchell was never that kind. He never did have...well, you know, he's had enough of them that you could have taken some and really pushed them, but we never did do that. We never did have any that we pushed. As you

know, Joe Greene made it on his own. There was very little pushing to get him to make All-American. No one jumped on his bandwagon because we never could get the Dallas Morning News because the Dallas Morning News was going to get a SMU boy. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram's going to get TCU boys pushing for All-American and all that. So where were we? We were a little town up north. We didn't have anyplace to go. This is the way it was. I'd just call the Denton Record-Chronicle when I was on the road, and they'd write it up.

Cummings: Go back to that very first day of workouts and tell us what you remember about the physical characteristics in both Leon and Abner.

Bahnsen: We laughed at what Leon wore because he looked like a blade. Hell, there he was--legs that long and that big around (gestures). We kind of laughed at Leon--big ol' feet. We said "Boy, he must eat a lot of watermelon," and we'd make those kind of statements. "We'll have to start serving spare ribs and watermelon at the training tables" or some comment like that. Abner wasn't...hell, he wasn't very big. Fundamentally, they weren't very sound. But their schools didn't work on drills--how to tackle and how to hit. He just hit you. He'd just come and "POW!"

Cummings: So neither one of them really looked like the "football player."

Bahnsen: No. They didn't have anything that made them stand out.

If Abner would have weighed 185 or 190 pounds...but he was about...he never did weigh very much, but I bet about 160 pounds would have covered him like a blanket. And Leon was probably 180 pounds, 6'3" or 6'4". Maybe he was 175 pounds. He was so skinny. So, no, they didn't catch your eye as far as physical ability. Like Coach Mitchell said, he had good feet. He moved them good.

**Marcello:** Okay, so here these guys are, standing in line to get their uniforms. You were shocked. The other coaches perhaps were shocked. What kind of reactions were you getting from the players?

**Bahnsen:** Hey, the kids were really shocked. The varsity kids just said, "We'll get him." We were working out over here (gesture), but we'd have to scrimmage...we'd run the plays of the team that we were going to play against the varsity. Boy, they'd get them. They tested him. They tested him in every way. Garland Warren played here--played in Canada all those years --and he told him, "Nigger, we like it rough around here." Abner says, "I do, too." That's all he said: "I do, too." He took a lot of licks.

**Marcello:** Was Garland Warren...

**Bahnsen:** He was on the 1955 team. He was on the varsity. He wasn't on...see, we were off by ourselves. I had my big bunch (facetious comment).

**Marcello:** I assume that the North Texas varsity at that time had a lot

of these older players, also?

Bahnsen: Yes.

Marcello: They would be Korean War vets by that time, I guess, would they not?

Bahnsen: Yes, they was. But, anyway, we had pretty much of a senior ball club. We were a pretty old ball club. You see, the next year Coach Mitchell decided to keep the freshman ball club together as sophomores. He probably told y'all that when we played Hardin-Simmons and Sammy Baugh, we'd always start our upper classmen, and then we'd put those others in. Sam told him, "Odus, if you hadn't put those tennis shoe players in, you wouldn't have beat me 40-something to nothing." But they could beat our varsity like mad. They could kill it. So we decided to keep them all together on a team. So we played like two units. We'd have the sophomore group and the upper classmen. We didn't take Abner and some of the ones off the freshman ball club and move them on the varsity. We just kept them together.

Cummings: How long during that fall workout period--Abner's freshman year--did this testing by the older players go on?

Bahnsen: Okay, you know, we have the Green and White...we used to have the Green and White game right before the varsity had their first game. We'd have a scrimmage at the last of training camp, and, say, that was the first of September. Well, Coach Mitchell had got all his halfbacks hurt. He'd

just wiped them out. They just all got hurt. So we decided, "Well, we'll just use Abner in the varsity Green and White game. We're going to use Abner." He'd been running right halfback for me, so I put him at left halfback so he'd make some mistakes. The first time he touched the ball, he's gone--TD. The next time, he's gone again. Hell, he just stole the show that night just running with the football. That's when the varsity really got respect for him because they were out there trying to tackle him. That's when they really respected his ability.

Cummings: How deep into the fall workouts was this?

Bahnsen: We probably had ten days of two-a-days before they had their scrimmage. It was before their first game. You know how they have what we used to call the Green and White game, but I don't know what they call it now. This is right before our first ball game. They would have a scrimmage to show the townspeople and stuff, and he put on a heck of a show.

Cummings: That's probably the turning point of when...

Bahnsen: That's the turning point when the varsity people got to respect him. Then the next week or so, we go to Corsicana, and he scores the five touchdowns, so then they really know.

Cummings: The freshman kids that had come in with him...now did they learn to respect him a little quicker than the varsity kids?

Bahnsen: Oh, yes, because we didn't have many. We had...what...  
eighteen, nineteen kids on that team, and we went undefeated.

Well, they had to be pretty close. They had to play a lot. I guess they really got close when we played Navarro because that was a long night.

**Marcello:** We'll talk about that in a moment. I have a couple of more questions I want to ask at this point. Did the coaches ever have to hold any team meetings or come down on any individual players because of things they had said or did to Abner or Leon? Did that ever occur?

**Bahnsen:** No, we never did have to. We had one boy--East Texas kid--that really got after him. Boy, he'd hit you! I think that Fred told Mac, "Don't hit him late." That's the only thing I've ever remembered. We were scrimmaging them, and it was kind of close to the sidelines. I don't know if Fred would not have said that to anyone: "Just don't hit him late." Hell, I didn't want them to wipe out my freshmen because I didn't have enough of them to make it, anyway. No, we never did have to do that because he was such a promoter and bull... like, he calls it "bull-corning." That was his statement: "He's a 'bull-corn.'"

**Cummings:** Is this Mac Reynolds you're talking about?

**Bahnsen:** Yes.

**Cummings:** From the interview that we've done, we get the impression... and we've also talked to him...

**Bahnsen:** Mac?

**Cummings:** ...got it from him--from the horse's mouth, so to speak--that he was probably one of the more vocal...



Bahnsen: He was.

Cummings: ...East Texas players that was against having a black player there.

Bahnsen: He was. He played at Tyler, and he was from East Texas. He'd tell you like it was.

Cummings: So he gave Abner and Leon probably the toughest time of any player.

Bahnsen: I would say so. He probably would have. I guess, if you ask all of them, he was the one that was hardest to convince, but I imagine they got to be...I don't know, but I imagine they both respected each other by the end as much as any.

Cummings: What does that say--that fact right there? What does that say to you about the role of athletics and integration.

Bahnsen: I don't think we'd ever had integration if it wasn't for athletics. I don't think it would have ever happened if you hadn't had...you know, when you get to the athletic field --when you get there as a coach or when you get there as a player--you never look at color. It's, "Are you getting the job done?" That's one place that I don't think you really look at color--as a coach or a player. If he's getting the job done next to you, that's all that's necessary. If he's falling down, it doesn't matter who he is--you don't want him there. I don't think we'd have had integration in the South if it hadn't been for athletics. I may be wrong. I don't care what rules they made. Where were you

going to meet? Socially? Socially, we're still mixed. I have mixed emotions socially. We're just now getting to where they have homes and are living right next to you, but they have to keep their yard clean and they keep it up. Once they do that, you then respect them. That's fine. But you don't want anyone to have theirs trashed up and all that next to you. It doesn't matter who it is. But it's still easier on the athletic field.

Marcello: Let me ask you this. We've been talking a great deal about Abner, but we have to remember that Leon also plays a part in this. Let me ask you a hypothetical question, a speculative question. Suppose Leon alone had come up here and was the first black. How would it work?

Bahnsen: He wouldn't have stayed. He wasn't that good of an athlete to stay. He'd had to be a good athlete with a personality. Leon had a better education. He had less problems in the schoolroom. He was a different kind.

Marcello: How would you describe his personality?

Bahnsen: Well, he would back off if he heard the statement "nigger" or those kind of things. He didn't have the sharp comeback and stuff like that. It would hurt him inside. He would take it that you were really getting after him. You had to be a little more careful with Leon because he didn't have the quick wit about it.

Marcello: What role does Vernon Cole play in the acceptance of Abner

and Leon as members of the football team?

**Bahnsen:** Vernon Cole probably had more to do than anyone during that period of time because Vernon was an easy-going kid that had all the respect of every player that ever played with him because he was the clean-cut American boy. He didn't say anything wrong; he didn't do anything wrong. He was the All-American kid if there was ever one. When he walked in the huddle, you could hear a pin drop. If he'd say, "We're going to run...." Against Houston, I think he ran six quarterback sneaks, and we beat them. He marched it right on down the football field. He ran behind Bill Carrico and just swept right on down the field. Who would think anybody could run six quarterback sneaks and make them work? I mean, he was this type of person. When he walked in the huddle, what he said was it.

**Marcello:** He had some real leadership qualities.

**Bahnsen:** He was the real leader. Like I said, he was the kid that never said anything bad about any other kid. It was just one of those times that I guess the Old Man upstairs put them together...Vernon just happened to be here at the time Abner showed up, and it was a combination of the whole thing.

**Cummings:** Vernon apparently had that kind of charisma right from the very start--from the first day he stepped out...

**Bahnsen:** From the first day he stepped on the field. He was from Pilot Point. When the pros...I kept putting him on my draft

sheets. I was working for the Forty-niners and San Diego and the Rams at that time scouting, and I kept putting him on my sheets, and they said, "Ken, what can he do? He can't throw very well." I said, "No." They said, "He can't punt very well." I said, "No." They said, "He can't run real well." I said, "No." They said, "Well, why do you have him here?" I said, "He can win. That's what he can do." So he goes to Canada, and he beats out Parker from Mississippi State and all that in Canada as a rookie because he just wins. That's the way he was. He was one of these kind of people that when he walked in the huddle, what Vernon said, that's what would work. It will work. That's what it took.

**Marcello:** He evidently was one of the first, if not the first, to go out of his way to make Abner and Leon feel comfortable and accept them.

**Bahnsen:** Sure. You walk in a dressing room before a ball game, and he's sitting by him. They're sitting next to each other. They were always on the bus with each other. Here he was a cotton top, just white as can be. Why would he go out of the way? He was just that kind of kid, though.

**Cummings:** What effect did that bond between them have on the rest of the white players as far as their acceptance of Abner and Leon?

**Bahnsen:** That's the reason they accepted them. If Vernon Cole hadn't

accepted them, they might not have, either. I'll put it that way. Vernon Cole was the leader that made it work.

Cummings: And the fact that he did accept them early on...

Bahnsen: He accepted him early, and that made it easy. Everything fell in. I think back to the personalities of all that first group...you know, I had George Herring--real nice kid. Then I had Bobby Way. Bobby was from Amarillo. Tough! Oh, Lord! You know, I had a real mixture. But then you always had Vernon there. I've always visited a lot with my freshman quarterbacks. We talked about things that weren't talked about to the rest of the ball club. He knew how I thought. I knew how he thought. He knew more of my feelings and everything. We talked about players-- personnel. I'd say, "Don't give it to him on the third-and-one. He'll cost you." This was talk between he and I, and we'd always say, "Don't tell him what I said, that he can't carry it on a third-and-one." But this is what I think you have to have with a coach and a quarterback. Your wheels have to be together.

Cummings: How did that friendship between Vernon and Abner grow throughout their four years?

Bahnsen: They were always together. Everywhere you'd go, they were most of the time together. They were just real, real close. I think he could depend on Vernon, and I think Vernon could depend on Abner. By that time, if you remember, we had

Arthur Perkins, and we had Billy Joe, and Abner could... it was kind of like Vernon saying, "Abner, keep your blacks straight. Now let's not have any trouble." Between the two of them, they kept it quiet. If we'd hear a little bit of rattling, we'd always let them handle it. We've always had one. We had one with Joe Greene. If we were having trouble with one--one was getting a little bit out of hand--Joe would go talk to him. We just always had it. We didn't have a black coach, but we always had a player--an older player--that would handle it, and they'd lay it out there.

Cummings: Talk about the first game. According to the records that I've got, the first game of that freshman season was against Hardin-Simmons.

Bahnsen: No, no.

Cummings: You say it was against Navarro?

Bahnsen: Navarro. We played there first.

Cummings: Okay. And that was the game where the crowd chanted and...

Bahnsen: No, that was when we unloaded off the bus. There was four men who asked me if I was planning to play those two "niggers." I said, "Well, I plan to." They said, "They may die."

So about that time we get out on the field, and we start the game, and you hear them stomping the stands and the bleachers and saying, "Get that nigger boy! Get that nigger boy!" We kicked off to them, and they scored. They

kicked to us, and we fumbled, and they got the ball again. My defensive ball club is still looking up at the stands, and they're stomping those stands. We're down fourteen to nothing. About that time, I called Abner and Vernon off the field...we played both ways, naturally, with eighteen people. I sat one of them on one side of me and one of them on the other, and I said, "Now, boys, you cannot be rabbit-eared ballplayers. You won't ever be worth a damn. I want you to run...." We used a quick pitch back then. I said, "Abner, I want you to run it, and want you to get us a score." And you tell ol' George over there that he's the pulling tackle." I said, "Let's get it."

About that time the crowd says, "There's that nigger lovin' coach! There's that nigger lovin' coach!" I'll never forget it. I think I'd have fought a circular saw if I could have got one. I said, "I want you to score." Well, Abner scored, and I remember that one. So all this time, it's just getting...we get them 35-14. I told Johnson, the bus driver, "Go get the clothes, turn the bus around...."

Cummings: This is before the game was over?

Bahnsen: No, it wasn't over. It was about the third quarter. I don't have a manager, I don't have a...no one. I'm there by myself. I did all the taping. I'm the equipment man and the whole works.

I told Johnson to turn the bus around and get our clothes and get on the bus and have it where it's facing

where we can go straight on. I told the boys...I called a time-out. We had a time-out, and I get word to them. I said, "Now, boys, when the game's over, don't shake hands with anybody. Don't do nothing. I want you to go straight to the bus. If I get on the bus before you do, I'm closing the door. I better be last." So I told the boys that was sitting on the bench, "You grab the bags and the footballs, and when the game's over, don't hesitate."

Marcello: Don't take off your helmets.

Bahnsen: Don't do nothing. I said, "You don't say anything to anybody. You don't say nothing." So we get on the bus and take off out of town. We see a pay phone, and I'm supposed to call the Denton Record-Chronicle. So I call. I got them on the phone, and they said, "How'd you do?" I said, "We won 35-14." They said, "Well, good. Who scored?" I said, "Abner." They said, "Well, who else scored?" I don't know. I said, "Hold it." I get on the bus, and they're cheering and yelling and hollering. I said, "Boys, who scored?" They said, "Abner." I said, "I know that. I know he scored the first one. Who else scored?" "Abner." Well, he scored all five of them, and I didn't even know. Heck, I'm looking at the stands and waiting on lightning to strike. It was an experience that I didn't even think could ever exist, so the next week is when I asked Judge Gray to go with me.



Marcello: Describe your feelings in being in the midst of that hostile crowd. I'm sure you'd never experienced anything like that in your life.

Bahnsen: I'd never experienced anything like that in my life. I was afraid, if you want to know. I know you've had experiences sometimes where you just kind of flutter, and you just kind of...you don't know. You know you can't win. If the crowd comes, what are you going to do? What if they come out and they hurt him or hurt them all, or you? You just don't know. You're sitting there afraid. You're mad. You're afraid. You just don't know, and you can't believe anybody would be that way. You just can't believe it. That was my feelings.

Marcello: Were they getting nastier or more hostile as North Texas was scoring?

Bahnsen: No, no. I pulled Vernon and Abner off at 35-14. They started saying, "Put him back! We want to see the nigger run! Put him back! We want to see the nigger!" Hey, they got on his side, but I didn't want to run up any more score. At the end I don't think they were hostile. They'd seen athletic ability. Man, here was somebody who could really turn it on. But I wasn't any more at ease. Just because they wanted to see him run, I didn't...I was afraid. This made it hard.

Next week, as I say, I asked Judge Gray to go with me

to the game. Well, he was a booster of ours out here and had been a good friend and all that. We get halfway there, and then I started telling him. He said, "That's the reason you invited me, not to help you coach!" I said, "That's right." I said, "You can coach the bench." He used to laugh about that he was the bench coach. Anyway, it made it real good that we had him because he'd made some calls, and we had some highway patrols meet us at different places and stuff like that.

Cummings: Did you ever get any kind of an apology from anybody connected with Nararro after that first game--apologizing for the way the crowd reacted?

Bahnsen: No, no. You were in a part of the country right there that they had only been used to pick that cotton and work at the gin.

Marcello: About how many people were up in the stands? You would obviously have to estimate this.

Bahnsen: There were probably 5,000 maybe. Their stands weren't that big at the time. I imagine you could get 5,000 in both sides of the stadium. It was about like Denton high school. What's that size stadium, Randy?

Cummings: I bet they're around 7,000 or 8,000.

Bahnsen: Well, say 5,000 maybe. There were probably 5,000.

Marcello: That's still a pretty good crowd of "hostiles" to have around.

Bahnsen: Yes, to start off with...I don't imagine they wanted the

people in that part of the country to realize what was coming up. They had their black schools, and they played their games, and I don't imagine the people in that area wanted to know that this was happening in the South.

Cummings: Obviously, word of North Texas having two blacks on their team had gotten out before you even got there that day.

Bahnsen: That's true. I don't remember what was in the paper--the Dallas paper or anywhere--that we were going to play and that we had two blacks. They were from Dallas and both from Lincoln, so there may have been some publicity. It had to be for the four to ask me, when I got off the bus, if I was going to play them. I planned to. It was an experience I don't care to go through.

Cummings: Was the crowd the topic of conversation among the players in the bus after the game?

Bahnsen: Yes. They laughed. They were saying, "We showed 'em." They were real thrilled that they played like that. That's the reason, I guess, it went so easy. We went undefeated--the first team to ever go undefeated. Look what we had to... we were proving things. Damn, we didn't need much pep talk. I just had to get them ready to go. I didn't have to build them up and say, "Now we're proving something." We were proving something. It made it easy. The only thing I had to do was try to keep their mind on what they were doing.

- Cummings: So the feeling among the players after the game in the bus was more of one of celebration of a victory and the fact that "we showed the crowd" rather than "boy, I was afraid of that crowd."
- Bahnsen: Oh, they never did even...I don't think that...they weren't as afraid as I was. We'll put it that way. I was thinking all the things that could happen to me--what all could happen. They were just proving that we could take our eighteen kids and beat their forty. We're going to romp it on them.
- Marcello: Do you think this kind of thing brought the team even closer together?
- Bahnsen: Oh, I know it did! I know it did! And that helped our problems everytime. It helped to get a little bit closer. We walked out of...we hadn't been able to use restrooms at a station. Our kids said, "Coach, we'll stop on the side of the road." We did--at a roadside park (chuckle). But the white ones wouldn't go. We'd stopped and they wouldn't feed him...wouldn't feed him in the front. Abner could sit in the back, and they'd feed us. The kids would say "no." I'd say "no," and they'd be with me. They'd say "No, we're a team. We go together." We had chicken so much that they thought we was advertising chicken at roadside parks.
- Marcello: There's a contradiction here, however, and it was brought out to us by one of the players that we interviewed. On

the one hand, the team would stick together when you went on the road and when this sort of a situation occurred. Yet, back here in Denton those guys couldn't stay in the dormitory...

Bahnsen: That's right.

Marcello: ...couldn't eat at the training table, and probably most of the restaurants in Denton wouldn't serve them.

Bahnsen: Oh, you couldn't...no, they couldn't. Abner...they rented that house, and they shot through it, too. It wasn't whites that shot through it; it was blacks that shot through it. Abner probably told you. No, they had to walk to get here to school, and we'd take them back over there. We had to get them fed over...it was...no, it wasn't complete here at home.

Marcello: But it's kind of interesting that the players didn't seem to...

Bahnsen: The players wouldn't have minded here. That's when our training table...we got it...that little room over here... we got it segregated. Then we could feed who we wanted in that room. But in the other room, they was afraid it would be...it just didn't happen. The first year they stayed down there.

Marcello: Now whose rule was that? How did that come about?

Bahnsen: Well, that was one of those we just...I don't know if they had asked for housing. See, they weren't on scholarships,

so we didn't have anyplace in the athletic dorm for them because they weren't on scholarships. They had to have their own housing. I don't know if they asked for housing. We never did know. But they already had an old house down in the east part of town that they lived in.

Marcello: But this wasn't necessarily a rule that came down from President Matthews that they had to live off campus?

Bahnsen: No, no. This wasn't a rule. I would imagine this was housing, and if they'd have been on athletic scholarship, they would had to have lived in the dorm, but they weren't at that time. See, all our athletes had to live at the dorm at that time unless they were married, and we had so few married because the married rule...Coach Mitchell's married rule was, when you got married, you had to make the ball club again. You didn't have a scholarship unless you made the ball club. He said he wasn't paying for any honeymoons.

Marcello: How about in subsequent years, then, when Abner was holding a scholarship?

Bahnsen: Well, when he got on scholarship, then he ate in the dormitory. That's when we moved into this little part of the Quads and made this the athletic training table. We had a hell of a training table.

Cummings: But he still lived off campus?

Bahnsen: No, no. He moved to the dorm then. He moved to the Quads.

- Cummings: Oh, did he?
- Bahnsen: Yes.
- Cummings: His sophomore year?
- Bahnsen: He and Leon lived together. When he got on scholarship, then he was able to move. That was the next year--sophomore year.
- Cummings: Speaking of scholarships, when was he officially awarded his scholarship?
- Bahnsen: September of the next year.
- Cummings: So his entire freshman year he was not on any kind of financial...
- Marcello: And for the record, why was it that he didn't have a scholarship?
- Bahnsen: We didn't have any. We gave them all out. Back then I think the total scholarships we had was fifty-five, and we had to add a freshman ball club. I didn't have but eighteen players. We didn't hardly have enough on scholarship...we didn't have very many on scholarship on that bunch. I was trying to think how many really was on that group. We didn't have enough.
- Marcello: When we talked to Leon about their not being able to live in the dorms, one of the things that he speculated on was that perhaps this may have been President Matthews's way of dispelling any rumors that these blacks guys were messing around with white girls and this sort of things by being

in that close contact in the dormitory.

Bahnsen: Well, you see, in the Quads the two here were men and the two over here were women (gestures). That may have been his...may have been. I never did think of it much. I knew he wasn't on scholarship, and I knew we had a bad setup down there. We said, "Golly, we got to get him away from down there because they're going to kill him." See, the blacks didn't like him there, either. They were against it, too.

Marcello: Why was that?

Bahnsen: I don't know. I wished I had known back then, but they didn't want them here at all. They shot through his house down there at him one night. We was afraid that they was going to bump him off.

Cummings: This was his freshman year?

Bahnsen: Yes. They were real hostile for him coming out here. They didn't want him to come.

Cummings: Could it have been a case that they felt like he was being a traitor or an Uncle Tom to the black race?

Bahnsen: That's right. And his brothers had all played at Prairie View, and maybe he thought he was too good to be with the blacks, that he was wanting to be with the whites. He was in no man's land. He couldn't come out here, and it wasn't too safe down there.

Marcello: Did you ever talk to him as to why he decided to come to



North Texas?

**Bahnsen:** No. I figured it was ol' family preacher ties. His daddy owned the church here, and I think the coaches from out here wanted him to go to North Texas. I don't think he was heavily recruited by the black schools. I don't know. I never did ask why. But I knew it had to be some Denton ties.

**Marcello:** When you went downtown, what sort of comments did you hear or receive from the local townsfolk relative to North Texas having two blacks on the team?

**Bahnsen:** It goes back to the same thing. You had a lot of comment until Judge Gray rode with me, and Judge Gray was the district judge and had a heck of a lot of power as far as what he thought. He got to like them as much as I did. He'd been in the FBI with a lot of blacks when he was in the FBI. His relationship...he'd had some prior contacts with blacks in the service so...we didn't have any more. It seemed like if Judge Gray approved, that got the downtown people. I didn't hear any comments.

**Cummings:** What about the campus reaction when word got around that the football team suddenly had two black players?

**Bahnsen:** I was lucky to have Miss McLain in the English Department. She was a nice, nice old lady. She called me and said, "Come here, Ken, I need to talk with you." So I go in, and she has Abner. She said, "Read that." And it was bad. Whew! She said, "He needs a lot of help." I said, "Yes,

ma'am." She said, "Could you get him to come to my class everyday instead of three days a week?" I said, "Yes, ma'am, I sure can." So Abner was signed up for Tuesday and Thursday, and I made him go Monday, Wednesday, and Friday--all five days. His first theme had a capital and a period just throughout...it looked like it was decorated. So I asked him, "What kind of class did you have, Abner?" He said, "I never did have an English class. That's when I picked up the mail for the coach." So he...well, he didn't have any. She brought him so far in that semester that when he took his test for his student use of English and he flunked it, she went to bat for him. She said, "Look how far I've brought him. If you let me pass him, I'll get him to take my class five more times everyday next semester." She had already talked to me about it, and I said, "Yes, he'll do it." Well, they didn't pass him; they flunked him. He's never passed one. I always thought that if they would have let her keep him one more time, we'd have made it.

He would have made it because he got to the point... and I wish I could think of the teacher's name. His junior year we'd run out of everything he could take that we thought he could pass. We got to the junior year, and we just didn't have anything left. He had to go to summer school, and he took an accounting class. I've forgotten who it was, but he was a tough nut. We'd already counted him off. We

said we wouldn't have him his senior year. We put him in there, and he makes a "C." Well, I thought, "Man, I done found me a pigeon again. I found me a teacher." So I load him up the next semester, and they all flunked. I done wiped them all out.

So I got to finding out about why did Abner make a "C" and why did they all flunk? Come to find out his was all oral. He would lecture, and then he'd ask you in class to explain certain things, and he'd give you credit. Well, Abner never missed a play in his life. If you tell him, he'll remember it. I guarantee you. He could do it. But he can't write it down. He couldn't explain it if he had to write it down. So the guy gave oral tests. He knocked them dead. This was a case that the kid just needed some extra help, and if we'd had a chance back then...I really think that if Miss McLain would have had a chance, we'd have made it. See, Leon was further along than Abner. Leon could get it done, but Abner just didn't have any background at all. As far as school, they just let him go get the mail, and that's about the way it was. I imagine that's the reason the other schools didn't fool with him and he didn't have anyplace to go. I would imagine.

Cummings: Did he ever end up getting a degree?

Bahnsen: No, he never did. He never did pass 131 English. He passed everything else, but never did get that. But Ray

Renfro didn't, either.

**Marcello:** Getting back to the special difficulties or problems that having two blacks caused, what other specific instances can you think of in that freshman year? You mentioned the Corsicana game. Of course, there were all the chicken meals along the way. Obviously, lodging would not have been a problem because the freshman team wouldn't have been staying overnight.

**Bahnsen:** They wouldn't let us stay. We couldn't stay, but that was with...we played Houston with Perkins and Crystal. They wouldn't let us stay in Houston. We had to come back...not knowing that we were going to have to drive back. With Abner that year, like I said, we went to Oklahoma, and we played in Tishomingo. Then we went to Abilene and played out there. I don't remember any that hostile as Corsicana at that time. It didn't seem like it was really a real big factor in Oklahoma. I don't remember any of those that bad.

**Marcello:** Let me ask you this. When was it that North Texas joined the Missouri Valley Conference?

**Bahnsen:** It was 1956 because that's when we had to get a freshman team. That's right--in 1956. That's the reason...but the first year we had to have a freshman team to get in the Valley.

**Marcello:** You would know more about this than I, but you just don't say one year, "Hey, I'm going to join a conference," and

then the next year you join. That's takes some time, does it not, with regard to scheduling and all? I wonder how far in advance, for instance, the whole process would have had to have gotten started?

Bahnsen: Well, I don't know about this, but I would think, if I were just guessing, the reason they accepted us in the Missouri Valley is because we had the blacks.

Marcello: Okay, that's what I was leading up to because the Valley was integrated.

Bahnsen: The Missouri Valley Conference was Cincinnati, Bradley, Drake, Saint Louis, Tulsa, North Texas, and Wichita. That's what it started off with, and then Louisville came in later. I wouldn't think we'd have talked with them or visited with them any time before 1955--before it came into court. Now I wouldn't know this, but I would think that would be the reason we were voted in.

Marcello: I could see that causing all sorts of difficulties for a team like Cincinnati or Wichita when they came here.

Bahnsen: It caused them a little trouble. It caused them a little trouble when they tried to stay in Dallas. They had to stay in Denton, and in Denton they could stay because President Matthews had enough power to...we found them a place to stay.

Marcello: And evidently, Abner was an entertainment committee of one when...

Bahnsen: That's right.

Marcello: ...teams would come in from out-of-town like that.

Bahnsen: That's right. He was an entertainment of one because they didn't...but he could get that done. We didn't have any problem there.

Marcello: He told us some war stories about when Oscar Robertson and so on would come here.

Bahnsen: Yes, he didn't have any trouble.

Cummings: You mentioned a second ago about the shot fired through Abner's house over there. He also had his house burn down the spring semester of his freshman year. What do you recall about that and the problems it caused for him and so forth.

Bahnsen: Well, here we were, trying to keep things from getting a lot of publicity. We didn't want much publicity about it. And here was his own people giving him the hard time. That's, I guess, what made it easy for us to get him on the campus the next year. President Matthews could see, and everyone could see, that we were having more difficulty with him down there. It would blow into...if they had happened to kill him or something down there, we would have been in trouble, I think, especially if he was on scholarship. As long as he wasn't on scholarship, then we didn't have any grounds. What grounds would we have to not put him on scholarship the next year? He was a starter. We didn't have any grounds. We couldn't say, "You're not good enough."

With his athletic ability, he forced us.

Cummings: That house burning, though, do you recall it being an accident or being another act of his own people...

Bahnsen: I personally thought it was another act because he lost his clothes...lost some things. I don't know. Like I said, there was a lot of that that I just didn't want to... I didn't go down there and check. I let Fred go (chuckle).

Marcello: Do you recall the outpouring of sympathy from the local townspeople, though? Evidently, townsfolk went out of their way to give them clothing and all that sort of thing.

Bahnsen: Hell, that got back to Judge Gray. Judge Gray handled that. He handled a lot of things that we didn't even want to know he handled. I imagine Abner went to Judge Gray a lot of times that we didn't even know with a problem or things like that. I wouldn't know, but I would imagine.

Cummings: But there was a lot of sympathy and help from the townspeople when that happened?

Bahnsen: Yes. Like I said, Judge Gray had a lot of influence. He was a district judge.

Cummings: What did happen? What do you recall, as far as the support he got from the townspeople? What did happen exactly?

Bahnsen: We didn't want to know. I don't know and I never did want to know because that was illegal (chuckle).

Marcello: Yes, that's what Coach Mitchell told us.

Bahnsen: That was illegal. We don't want to know. We had one rule

here, too. If you break the rules, you don't have a job. So when they tried to tell me, I said, "I don't want to know. Don't tell me nothing. I don't know nothing." That's the way we handled it. "Chief" Perryman and Jack Gray... "Chief" was at the drugstore down here, and he was one of our real boosters. We had some people that handled that. "It's none of our problem. We don't want to know because we'll get fired, I guarantee you." If they wanted to help him or anything like that, that's their business. I think it was a pretty good way to handle it. It was the best way I know to handle it. It was handled pretty well, is all I know.

Cummings: Was there also some worry about, in addition to breaking North Texas's rules and J. C. Matthews's rules, also some worry about breaking some NCAA rules or Missouri Valley Conference rules?

Bahnsen: Like I said, that was all the same rule, as far as we were concerned. You just didn't do it. You just didn't do it because you knew he knew everything. We knew that. There wasn't no doubt. You can't slip out here and do something. You're going to get caught. Coach Mitchell can tell you-- he didn't know, either. And he meant it.

Marcello: You were the freshman coach, and this was a very difficult period, actually, since it had never been done before. You hadn't had any experience with it. What kind of advice



and guidance were you receiving from the other coaches, whether it be Coach Mitchell or the other two?

Bahnsen: Or Fred and Herb? I used to tease all the time that there was only one assistant coach, and that was Fred. I was coaching tennis. I was the head coach of tennis, and Herb was the head coach of golf, and we used to say, "Well, we'll go talk to that assistant coach." We only had one (chuckle). There was "Pop" Noah and Mr. Shands. They were head coaches, and then Fred was the only assistant coach on the whole campus. Sure, we decided a long time ago...we heard Bud Wilkinson one time talking about...you have to have good guys and bad guys on the staff. The bad guys we always talk about are the ones that will chase you off or reprimand you or really get after you. It couldn't be me because I was the tennis coach, and I couldn't be the bad guy in football and the good guy in that. Herb was the same way. He couldn't be the bad guy in football and the good guy in golf. Coach Mitchell is not naturally a bad guy; he's a good guy. So it just dropped to ol' Fred. So we said, "If you're going to be the bad guy, you also have to be the good guy in the sense that you're going to chase them off, and you're going to do all the bad things; but if you have one that needs a little help or something in class--something--we send him to you for the help, too." So Fred has been the good guy and the bad guy all the years that we were

coaching together. Bud said, "Every good staff has to have good guys and bad guys. I don't care if it's in a faculty or business or whatever. You can think about yourself. Somebody has to do it." So Fred was the one. If there was something--some storm--I'd say, "Fred, I've got a problem. Can you get it done?" Well, Fred would do it.

Marcello: I gather that somewhere along the line, Leon King evidently lost the incentive to continue to play football. He dropped out, of course.

Bahnsen: Yes.

Marcello: What do you know about Leon's decision to leave?

Bahnsen: I don't know much about it. I know that when Leon moved to the varsity...well, like I said, as a freshman he'd take those two steps and "BOOM!" It was out of the end zone, over the goal post. He had a heck of a leg. All of a sudden, he got hurt as a sophomore, and without his kicking there wasn't really much left. He didn't like contact too much, so he couldn't play the tight end. We had to play both ways, so where would you play something that tall and that thin and not very tough? You couldn't play him as a defensive halfback, and we didn't run split receivers and all that much. We had a wing and...but we wasn't a pro-type offense back then. So he was kind of a misfit, and he kind of got discouraged and could see that his best bet wasn't

going to be pro ball. It was going to be to get a degree and go to work. I don't remember why...what came up to do it.

Marcello: And in the meantime, I think he did get married, also.

Bahnsen: Yes. You see, we had the rule. Remember that I told you Coach Mitchell had that rule that when you got married, you start again. You make the ball club again. We don't pay for honeymoons. We had so many bad experiences about one getting married and the wife...they'd come home from workout, and the wife would want to go to the movie or go here or go there; and their football dropped off, and their school dropped off. So we just kind of had it a standing rule that you started again. You have to prove that you're doing it. We've had some that just kept getting better after they got married, and it never did affect them. It never did affect their scholarship or anything else, but they did know.

Cummings: When you look back on all this, are you sometimes surprised or amazed at how smoothly overall this whole process went?

Bahnsen: Well, no. I don't even think it would work that good right now.

Cummings: Why not?

Bahnsen: Why? Because it took somebody at the head to run it like President Matthews did. We had to have somebody with enough power--like you was talking about before--to say, "We're

going to do this." Now, I think we'd throw in 900 committees, and before we got out of the committee, nobody would know what was said. I don't think we can make a decision of any kind that somebody wouldn't have them in court the next day. If they had taken us back to court, they would probably have whipped us and everything else. Whoever thought about what would happen if you took a ball club down and you stopped in a town and they wouldn't feed you? They'd be in court the next day, wouldn't they? We didn't take anybody to court. We just didn't eat. We just got our food and went on to the park, but there was nothing in the paper. There was nothing in the paper that blew it up and made it sound like there was a bunch of bad guys. They just didn't say anything. All of a sudden, it happened. You look back, and somebody says, "That happened three years ago. We've been doing that for three years." Are they going to say anything about it then? No, because it has already been going on.

**Cummings:** When you look back on this whole situation, do you feel like North Texas and the people at North Texas at that time were pioneers in a movement--pioneers in an integration movement in athletics in any way or form?

**Bahnsen:** I think we were fortunate to have the people that we had that were here as far as administration, as far as the heads of the departments like Dr. Curry in business and Witt Blair

in education. We had the different people that would help us or that we could talk to and would kind of get us through all this. The faculty was real close at that time, I mean, extremely close. You didn't feel like you were stepping on anyone's toes if you were trying to find out what was going on. I think we were fortunate in the kind of kid we happened to get with Abner. We were fortunate to have an organization like we had at North Texas State at that time to be able to handle it. I don't know how the other schools were organized at that time, but I don't know if they would have been able to handle it. When you take...who's Mr. Wooten? Wasn't he president of the Republic Bank, the largest bank in Dallas? He had the most power of anyone in Dallas. So when Mr. Wooten said something, people would sit up and listen. When he said something in Dallas, they would listen and wouldn't question, and over here we had the same kind of thing. It had to work.

**Cummings:** That first year in particular, did you as coaches get a lot of feedback from other coaches in the business in the state.

**Bahnsen:** Well, yes, naturally. "What are you doing?" "How are you handling it?" The other college coaches were wondering, "What are we going to do." It was kind of frightening. Like I said, we were losing all the schedules in the South. We were losing them. We were lucky that we tied on to the Missouri Valley Conference. That saved us because of being

able to play...having that conference to take care of us, as far as that many games, because we lost the three Mississippi schools.

**Marcello:** Describe what you remember about Ole Miss dropping North Texas from the schedule.

**Bahnsen:** The only thing I remember is Coach Vaught...I was over there scouting him. We were going to play Houston, the next week, and I was always one week ahead of the ball club. He said, "Tell Odus to leave them at home, and we'll keep playing. I enjoy playing y'all, and I want to keep the schedule up." He said, "We can't bring them to Mississippi. That just won't work at all. We just can't do that." Coach Mitchell naturally wouldn't do that. He wouldn't do it as a person or anything else. That was his statement--if we would keep them at home, they would keep playing. We wouldn't do that, so we naturally had to give up our games with those schools.

**Cummings:** If you were getting a lot of questions asked of you by all these other coaches in the business in the state and the Southwest Conference and the Lone Star Conference, what's your opinion as to why it took the other schools in this state so long to...

**Bahnsen:** To do it?

**Cummings:** ...to do it...to integrate?

Bahnsen: Well, the Southwest Conference schools weren't interested. Why would they be interested? They get the best white kids in the state. Texas University...why did they ever have to have blacks? They really never did have to. If it happened now...

Cummings: At the same time, I would think they could look at this little rural community school in Denton, Texas, and they get a couple blacks, and this one kid, suddenly by the time he's a junior, he's being mentioned as an All-American candidate, and he's helped earn the school two conference championships.

Bahnsen: Yes, but they...

Cummings: Didn't they see what contributions these kids could make to a program?

Bahnsen: Yes, but you go back to the schoolwork--the schoolwork problem. They'd say, "What problems do you have with Abner?" Keeping him in school was my problem. It was not the athletic ability. We can handle that. It's the school problem. You go to Lincoln and Madison and all those back then. How many kids could do college work? I still say we've watered down our universities, and we wonder why we watered them down. We had to water them down because they didn't have any background. They're getting better backgrounds now. To do integration you have to start down where they started. That gave you twelve years for those

kids to come through our public schools to do the work.

We were fortunate to keep Abner eligible. There was enough Music Appreciation and enough stuff that we kept him eligible-- nine hours.

**Cummings:** You just don't think the Southwest Conference schools wanted the hassle of that?

**Bahnsen:** They didn't want to go through that. Why would you? When you're going to get a kid, you're going to get the best kid from Odessa and the best kid from this school and that school that can do college work. Back then what kind of football were we playing? We couldn't use linemen. They don't block and tackle back then. You go to the black schools then, and they were throwing the ball and flipping the reverses and all that. You could get a receiver, and you could get a running back. But could they play that "cloud of dust" like Texas University and run the football? Not then. They didn't know what a block was. They just weren't coached that way. They played the wide-open game. It looked more like basketball back then. It fits the football today, but not then.

**Cummings:** That being the case here in the South and Southwest, why was it working in the North--in Colorado and in the northern schools? How come they had integrated earlier?

**Bahnsen:** Because they went to their public schools. They were educated, and they were taught how to block and tackle and



stuff like that. Think of the linemen that went in the Southwest Conference the first five years. Were there any? No. They had Levias. You don't have to teach somebody to run and catch. You can do that. But that blocking and tackling...like, they used to run wing "T." You stick your nose in the middle--the first one--and the other one pivots and pushed and all this. How about in Arkansas where they run the stunts and all that? Like I'm saying, the black schools and the tackle football that they played at that time didn't fit in the Southwest Conference. It just didn't.

Cummings: So really, both the educational and the athletic...

Bahnsen: It was too far apart then.

Cummings: ...was advanced more in the North and the East than it was down here.

Bahnsen: Yes, because they were in those schools. They were in the white...they were mixed. They were getting the same start at it. So their linemen were being taught by the same... I'm not saying...I'm just saying they played an entirely different game. If you want to talk about the game--how it was played--ask Coach Collins at Fred Moore. When he was at Fred Moore, he was flipping the ball around and things way before we were out here. We'd go watch them play, and it was the laterals and trick plays. They weren't in a stance, it looked like to me. Playing against each other,

it was real good. During the first few years, Randy, when the black schools started playing the white schools, they were getting killed. They were killing them, wiping them out. They didn't know how to block and tackle.

Cummings: The technique was so much more advanced.

Bahnsen: Technique was so much better, and, like I said, Southwest Conference coaches back then didn't want to have to teach. They recruit the big AAAA high school kid that knew it all. What did we have to get? We had to take Greene...just like you have to now. We'd take a big kid...Joe Greene got down left-handed the first time he got down in a stance...right foot forward. This is the way it was. That's the reason, I think. And Levias was the first one, but you don't have to worry about coaching him. Just give him the ball.

Cummings: I don't have any other questions.

Marcello: Well, that exhausts my list of questions, too. I want to thank you very much for taking time to allow us to pick your brain.

Bahnsen: Well, you know, that was the most interesting part of my life, I guess. It was coming back to your school, and here we had a chance to have a good football team. I wanted to have a good freshman ball club. It happened that I had a heck of a running back, and I had a quarterback, and I had people that could...gosh, I'm walking around on cloud nine. If you check my record, I was 0-5 the next year.

So I was batting 50 percent after two years (laughter).

Marcello: Maybe that's a good place to stop.