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HOOP DREAMS

Baseball was America's favorite game in the 1940s and 1950s. It was the sport Americans played, watched, and talked about more than any other. Football and basketball would ascend decades later, but in the middle of the twentieth century baseball was the game. Willie knew a lot about baseball. Andrew Davenport played when he was younger and loved to tell him about it, and he would hear the old men talking about the Negro League players when he would go down to Howard Store on the weekends. Many people in Willie's community—both black and white—also enjoyed going to watch a game between local black teams on Sunday afternoon after church. And, of course, Willie and all blacks, young and old, followed the pioneering exploits of Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby, Roy Campanella, Satchel Paige, and others when they were finally allowed to play in Major League Baseball beginning in 1947.

Playing baseball, though, that was a different story for kids like Willie. The nearest baseball field was in Tchula, four miles from Clifton Plantation. After leaving Mt. Zion elementary school Willie attended Mileston High School. It was a 10-mile bus ride to Mileston, and he went there with all the other black teenagers within a wide swath of western Holmes County. Mileston didn't have a

baseball field or a baseball team, and Willie never had a chance to play baseball in any organized league when he was growing up.

Mt. Zion did have two basketball hoops and a dirt court. They would mark out lines in the dirt and Willie would play with kids from all the neighboring plantations during recess. Back on Clifton, he would play with his friends Henry and Samuel Mitchell.

“There was a pasture that was between my house and their house, and they had a basketball thing they had put up there in the pasture, so we would go down the hill in the pasture and play,” Willie said.

The boys crafted their first hoop with the rim of a bicycle tire that they nailed to a backboard made of wood and tin. Willie started playing consistently when he was 10 or 11 years old and he knew right away that he liked this game. It was one of the few times he had fun on the plantation. When he was working in the fields, he would constantly ask himself “Why? Why am I here having to do this? Am I going to be here doing this forever like my Mom? What can I do to get out of here someday?” He would also think about the abuse he and his mom took from Oscar Harris and how badly he wanted to make that stop, but felt powerless to do so. Playing basketball with his friends took his mind off all his troubles. It was his therapy.

Mileston High School was set out in the country, nestled amongst several plantations. Though its students came from a large rural area of Holmes County, they numbered only about 250 young men and women in the four grades combined. Willie entered Mileston High School in 1956, two years after the U.S. Supreme Court’s historic decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in which the court unanimously determined that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and in 1955 the court ordered all segregated school districts to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” The only thing deliberate about the reaction of school boards in rural

Mississippi was that they were definitely not going to desegregate. School boards and local governments were all controlled by whites due to the disenfranchisement of black voters, and they would be damned if they were going to let outside agitators tell them what to do, again. The white response to the court order to desegregate was to generally ignore it for the first decade, and then when the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in the mid-1960s, whites began pulling their children out of public schools, setting up private Christian academies with the financial support of the White Citizens Council. This practice continues well into the 21st century.

If blacks had been allowed to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s, things likely would have been different, as there were about twice as many blacks as whites in Holmes County. However, since they could not vote, they could not control the fact that the educational resources provided to them were significantly less than what was provided to white schools. Mileston High did have a basketball court and a football field, but other sports like baseball and tennis were not part of the extracurricular offerings. Willie's high school basketball teammate Stanford Murry remembers when he started to realize how unequal things were.

"Well see, the thing of it is, that's all we knew. That's how we had grown up and that's all I knew. Of course there was no television, there was very little radio, and we didn't know any better. Especially early, and then when I realized, probably late in high school, ready to graduate and stuff, and you start to see a little bit differently. Sometimes you're passing and you see the white schools playin' football, and you see the equipment that they use. They had the finest, and our equipment was cast over from theirs, they would give us what was left over from theirs. And the black schools never got new football equipment, you know. Now we could get new

basketball equipment because it was not as expensive, you know. You can get uniforms. Our gymnasium was about 20 feet shorter and about 5, 10 feet narrower than an average gymnasium. I remember when we went to Greenwood to play in a tournament and we walked in their gymnasium and it looked like a mile long. Our chemistry lab had nothing in it. Nothing. It was just a classroom. So when I started to look around and see, it is frustrating, and it does make you mad,” Murry said.

Willie’s anger sprang from many sources. Having subpar educational and athletic opportunities bothered him, but it was just another brick on the load. What made him seethe most intensely was the system of segregation and white supremacy—the knowledge that those who control your society consider you less than the whites, and that manifested itself on a daily basis. While many of his friends adopted the attitude that they didn’t like the system and they didn’t accept the system, they tried to “make the best of it” because no one believed it would ever change and they felt powerless to help make it change.

“A lot of my anger was the treatment. You could be walkin’ at night, or even during the day, and some of them young white boys would come through in their cars and they would try to run you over. There wasn’t nothing you could do about it. And they would call you all kinds of names. You know, all kinds of stuff. That is the part that I really hated. ‘Cause I couldn’t speak out, and I couldn’t fight back, knowin’ that you could whoop a lot of these guys’ asses. But you couldn’t do anything. That’s stressful. Real stressful. That you got to let some jackass call you a name, and tell you ‘Get out the way, nigger!’ or ‘Pick that up over there for me,’ or ‘Go in there and get me a soda.’ Stuff like that,” Willie said.

As Willie gets bigger, he gets more defiant, even if that defiance must by necessity be internalized. He dreamt of hurting white men

who had mistreated him. He couldn't talk to his brother Robert about it, as that wasn't Robert's style. Robert took after Andrew Davenport and had a measured approach to everything. Willie, on the other hand, had inherited his mama's fire.

"His ideas were a little different from mine. He was, I wouldn't say he was a radical, but compared to me he was a radical. I was on the calmer side," Robert said.

Willie could talk to his good friend Henry Mitchell about it. They would often plot how they could get back at somebody who had abused them, but the most important part of the scheme was how could they pull it off so that no one knew they did it. They never quenched their thirst for vengeance, but it was cathartic to talk about it. Thinking in detail about how you could hurt someone is not healthy for a 15-year-old kid, but the environment he was living in often guided Willie's thoughts to very dark places.

His mom Evie saw Willie getting more and more frustrated and as he got bigger, and that started to scare her. She worked relentlessly to try to keep Willie under control so he wouldn't get hurt. When Willie was a teenager, it appeared to him that all white people were racist because they kept the system of white supremacy in place. It was only when he got much older that he understood it wasn't that simple. There were good white people, but he just couldn't see that when he was a teenager. His world literally looked black and white.

"A lot of white people back in that day wasn't as bad; some of them went along with it because of what the other white people was doing, and they didn't want to buck them. So they went along with some of the stuff. They didn't like it, but they had to go along with what the neighborhood was doing. All white people that lived in the South at the time wasn't racist," Willie said.

Surviving high school was Willie's immediate concern, but he was also at the age when people start thinking about their future. What

will I be when I grow up? He watched his mom work endlessly and never end up with a dollar to her name. He would have loved to go live with his dad Andrew Davenport and help run the farm, but Andrew's wife Ruby didn't like Willie, so that wasn't going to happen. If he stayed in his community, the best prospect awaiting a young black man was to get a job driving a tractor. Working in the fields paid \$2.50 a day. Driving a tractor paid \$3.00 a day. That held no appeal for Willie and was sure to lead to a life of continuing to live hand to mouth. He saw some of the older teenagers either quitting high school or moving to Chicago or Detroit to work right after they graduated from high school. They were part of the Great Migration, the movement of more than 6 million blacks from 1916 to 1970 from Southern states to cities like Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and New York. Most would have family already living in the big cities of the Midwest and Northeast who would provide the newcomers with a place to live until they established themselves. In Willie's part of Mississippi, this movement was often a risky proposition. The plantation owners exerted economic control over their sharecroppers lives under the system that kept many of them perpetually indebted. Blacks who were planning to move didn't tell anyone about it, especially the plantation owner. One day they would just be gone. In Willie's case, leaving the plantation would be especially difficult because he came from such a small family. Taking away any healthy body that worked in the field could jeopardize the family's ability to get all their work done.

"A lot of the black people that worked on the farm had relatives that left Mississippi, and a lot of them had relatives in Chicago. Then, you wouldn't tell the plantation owner you was leavin', you just take off , 'cause you tell him you was leavin' you'd be in trouble," Willie said.

So Willie stewed about it when he was picking cotton or baling hay. He could eventually go north and live in a big city, but he wanted to do something special. He had been told his whole life he wasn't worth a damn, whether that was by Oscar Harris or the society at large, but he knew better.

"Why me? How in the hell did I wind up here? How can I get out of this? What's the prospect of a black kid ever gettin' out of here? And the two things that mostly that was got you out of there were sports, and every once in a while, music. Otherwise, you were pretty well stuck," Willie said.

Everyone in Willie's community looked up to the Mississippi musicians who had become famous playing the blues: Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Mississippi John Hurt, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King, and so many more. Willie's friend Joe Smothers had two older brothers, Otis "Big Smokey" Smothers and Abe "Little Smokey" Smothers, who had left the plantation in high school and went to Chicago where they became successful musicians. They taught themselves how to play guitar when they were kids after their aunt made them a guitar by crafting it from a wire broom. Willie's good friend Lee "Shot" Williams also left the plantation in high school, moved to Detroit, and started a 50-year career as a professional rhythm and blues singer. His mama gave him the nickname Shot when he was young because he loved to dress up like a big shot. Much of his songwriting explored a man's quest for female companionship, including the hits "The First Rule of Cheating," "I'm a Nibble Man," "Drop Your Laundry Baby," and "Wrong Bed."

These musical success stories were a source of pride and gave hope to black folks in Mississippi, but Willie wasn't musical, and he didn't like to dance. But when he entered high school Willie's family got their first television and his world started to open up. His mom

told Willie and Robert that they needed to watch the evening news every night so they would know what was going on in the world. Having a TV meant Willie could also watch NBA basketball games. The NBA integrated in 1950, but for most of the next decade, the impact of black players was modest. Only a handful of blacks were allowed to play, as the league didn't want to upset their fan base which wanted to see big, tall white guys succeed. The black players were told not to score, just pass the ball and rebound. They were scattered throughout the league, like flies in buttermilk. But Willie saw them. He saw people who looked like him, many of whom came from the South. He saw them playing the game he loved on television in front of thousands of fans. White fans. He was a freshman in high school, and he was tall and still growing. And he could play. He could do this. He could be a professional basketball player. He knew he could. It was his ticket out.

“I think we got TV, I think in '55, and I started watching professional basketball. I remember watching the Boston Celtics, the Fort Wayne Pistons, and Knicks and all of that. And watching these few black guys that was playing basketball. And at that time in '55 I think I was about 6' 2", somewhere along there. And I was playing basketball, and I figured it out for myself, this is my meal ticket. That's when I really started to focus my time, every spare time I had I was playing basketball. That's how I figured out how to get out of there. No one figured then it out for me, I figured this out for myself. I couldn't sing or dance, or nothin', but I could play ball,” Willie said.

During Willie's junior year Wilt Chamberlain entered the NBA as a member of the Philadelphia Warriors. He averaged 38 points and 27 rebounds in his rookie year. This is someone Willie could look up to: a black guy dominating a league that was overwhelmingly white at the time. He looked like a man playing amongst boys.

As much as he wanted to stay focused on basketball, Willie was a young man and other enticements pulled him in different directions. He started dating Emma Patterson his freshman year in high school. She was a sweet girl who lived on Clifton Plantation and had five brothers who Willie was friends with, including her older brother Pinky. Her parents were strict so she would sneak out to see Willie and they would try to avoid being seen at the juke joints together, because then people would talk, and it would get back to her parents. Their romance lasted less than a year when Emma found another boy who could offer her more than what Willie had.

“There was another guy who dropped out of school and he drove a tractor and he bought a car, and I didn’t have a car,” Willie said.

As soon as they became teenagers, Willie and his friends would look forward to heading into Tchula on weekends in a pack. The town of 2,000 residents felt like a big city to them, and they would get there any way they could. Very few people had a car back then, but Jimmy Bailey did, and he ran a little taxi service. If you gave him a quarter, he would give you a ride to town. Louis Quinn was a bus driver who had a flatbed truck and the kids would pile onto the back to get to Tchula. When there were no rides available, they just walked the four miles each way. Sometimes it would be so dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face, and so quiet that the only sound was the rocks crunching under their feet.

The restaurants and bars in town were segregated. Willie and his friends would head to one little street that had four or five cafés that sold beer, soda, and hamburgers. They steered clear of the cafés where the white folks congregated.

“We wouldn’t go close to them because the younger white guys, teenage white guys would be out there, and, you know, you would definitely be in for trouble if they see you walkin’ by, so we mostly avoided those places, didn’t go close to them, ‘cause they’d be out

there drinking beer and acting the fool, then if they hit you and you tried to hit back, you knew that Dick Byrd and them was gonna beat your head in so you tried to avoid that,” Willie said.

The blacks were allowed to get together at their places in downtown Tchula until 10:00 pm on Friday and Saturday nights. At that time, the one police officer in town would go out into the street and blow a whistle as loud as he could, and that meant only one thing: all blacks had better leave the downtown area immediately. You had your fun, now go on and get out of here. People started running around in all directions so that you would have thought there was a dragon with matches loose on the town. If they didn’t leave, they either got thrown in jail or hit in the head with a nightstick and told to get lost. Some would go home, but most would head to the juke joints that were lined up on the road leading out of town.

Juke joints were institutions created, perpetuated, and celebrated by blacks in the South following their emancipation from slavery. They were part unlicensed bar, part gambling hall, part dance hall, part music venue, but they were all fun. The idea was that you worked all week and then went there on Saturday night and tried to commit as many sins as you could before you got up to go to Church on Sunday morning. There was a gambling room in the back where you could roll dice or play poker, music would be provided by a juke box or someone playing a guitar or harmonica, and the drinks for sale would be beer or locally crafted moonshine whiskey. In Willie’s community most juke joints were set up on the outskirts of Tchula, but there were also a few within a half mile of the plantation. Most were set up in private homes, and many of them were owned and run by women.

“You work all week and make two-fifty a day and the tractor drivers made three dollars a day. But on weekends they have to have somewhere to go let their hair down, get drunk, and there were juke

joints where they would go. We couldn't go, you know, to the nicer white folks' café and their places, so the blacks had what they called juke joints, and that's where they went to spend their money. And not only that, most of the people that ran juke joints were in with Dick Byrd. He let you sell whiskey for a price."

Teenagers were welcome in the juke joints because as long as they had money and were tall enough to put it on the bar, they would sell you a drink. Willie especially never had any trouble getting served because his height always made him look older than he was.

Willie loved going to Tchula with his friends on Saturday night to have some fun, gamble, and try to hook up with girls. When he didn't have to work in his family's field, he would either bale hay for Peyton Abbot Jones or do day work on other plantations, earning \$15 for the week, five of which he would give to his mom, leaving him with \$10 to blow that weekend. When they couldn't go all the way into town, they often played dice behind the cotton gin next to the Howard Store. On nights like this they would pool their money together and buy a gallon of moonshine for two dollars. If they didn't have even that much money, they would spend 15 cents on a bottle of Dr. Tichenor's Antiseptic, pour it into a bottle of Coca-Cola, shake it up, and suck it down. They didn't know why, but it made them as high as a Georgia pear because Dr. Tichenor's formula was 70% pure alcohol. The label said it was to be used for "cuts, bruises, sprains, superficial burns, sunburn, and mouthwash—Keep out of reach of children." They also didn't know that Dr. Tichenor was a Confederate Army surgeon from Kentucky who concocted his antiseptic formula during the Civil War to save his own leg which was badly injured and scheduled to be amputated. His formula quickly became widely used to treat injured Confederate soldiers, but he refused to allow it to be used on Union prisoners of war.

Willie loved to shoot dice. He loved the thrill of it, the chance that he could win some money and go have a big night on the town, buying drinks for the ladies and his friends. If he lost, it didn't bother him. If he won, he was ecstatic. One night he was rolling dice with his friends behind the cotton gin near the Howard Store.

"Slim, it's your shot," Willie's friend Mitch said to him.

"Okay," Willie said, "Four," as he called one of the most difficult numbers to roll.

He was getting himself pumped up by shaking the dice in his hand and cussin', shaking the dice in his hand and cussin', and he was squatting down with his back to the road.

"Slim, I think you'd better look over your shoulder," Mitch said.

"What the hell for?" Willie asked, and then he turned around and saw Andrew Davenport towering and glowering over him, not saying a word.

"Oh, shit," Willie said, and then Andrew poked him in the ass with his foot and knocked him onto the dice game. Andrew still didn't say anything, so Willie scooped up his money and ran away as fast as he could.

Andrew never mentioned the incident to Willie, but if Willie asked him for money he would say dryly "Are you going to gamble?"

As Willie was transitioning from being a boy to a young man in high school his life was focused on three Gs (and none of them were God): Girls, Gambling, and Getting the hell out of Mississippi. It was a lot to handle, but he managed it well. Willie did work hard to get better at basketball and it helped him become a four-year starter on the Mileston High team. They didn't have a JV or freshman team, and while Willie played forward as a freshman, but his sophomore year he was 6'5" and was installed at center. He was a ferocious defender in the paint and Naylond Hayes, the team's point guard, remembers what a strong offensive game he had.



Mileston High School basketball team, circa 1959. Willie Harris in middle.

“Willie D., he was the man, especially on defense. He had a nice little power move around the bucket. Nice little turnaround jumper going away from the bucket falling back. Then going to the middle, too. Then turn to his left and shoot a little jump shot. He was a real good ballplayer,” Hayes said.

Willie loved playing basketball because it was the one thing he could do where he was special, he was dominant, and people looked up to him. When you grow up in a society where you are always told you aren’t worthy of respect or equal treatment, it felt really good to be great at something. He would have loved to share the game with his dad, but Andrew Davenport didn’t like basketball and Willie never saw him at his games until one night when one of his teammates said to Willie during warmups “Willie, Mr. Andrew is here.” Willie scanned the bleachers and spotted his father sitting alone. When he saw Willie, he nodded and gave him a little smile. Willie played with a special fire that night.

Eli Grayson was the Mileston basketball coach during Willie's freshman year. Friendly and easygoing, Grayson had played basketball at Jackson State University, an historically black college that was named Jackson College for Negro Teachers when he attended. For Willie's final three years in high school his coach was Willie Thompson, who had played basketball at Alcorn State University, another historically black college which at the time was named Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, reflecting its role as more of a vocational school than a traditional college or university. Thompson was more of a hardass than Grayson, and he pushed Willie to get better.

"If you screwed up in the ballgame Willie Thompson would make you run a couple of miles the next day around the football field," Willie said.

Thompson also told Willie that if he stayed focused on basketball he might be able to earn a scholarship to play in college, which is exactly the motivation he needed to keep working to get better.

Willie's lifestyle did not go unnoticed by Coach Thompson. Coach saw the great raw potential in Willie, but he knew he was a rascal. One day he talked to him after practice, Willie sitting on the bleachers and Coach pacing in front of him.

"Harris, you been working hard on your game?"

"Yes, Coach," Willie said.

"You been working on the stuff I showed you with your inside moves?"

"Yes, Coach," Willie said.

"You sure?"

"Yes, Coach," Willie said.

"Really? Then why did I hear you were at the juke joint Saturday night, shootin' dice and actin' the fool?"

Willie looked up at the Coach and said nothing.

“Were you at a juke joint Saturday night?”

“Maybe, Coach,” Willie said.

“Don’t sass me, Harris.”

“I’m sorry, Coach,” Willie said.

“Oh, I bet you think you’re something special, don’t you, going out gambling, drinking, romancing the ladies. I bet you think you’re a really big man.”

“Well, the boys do call me Big Man, Coach,” Willie said, looking down.

“Don’t sass me, boy!”

Coach slammed the ball that he was holding into the court and then caught it, squeezing it tight.

“Harris, you like picking cotton?”

“No, Coach,” Willie said, starting to get angry.

“You like doing whatever the man in the big house tells you that you need to do?”

“No, Coach,” Willie said.

“Listen, Harris, this is not the way for you to go. You’ve got a lot of God-given talent, maybe more than you deserve, but it’s there, so you can’t waste it. You need to focus on chasing the basketball, not chasing girls. If you spend every weekend in juke joints surrounded by hustlers and hoochie mamas, I can guarantee you that something bad is going to happen. If you want to get out of here and do something special you need to work on your game, not on getting your noodle wet.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Willie said.

Though by the latter part of his high school career Willie had very little interaction with Oscar Harris, his hatred of his stepfather did not subside. He could not let go of the anger he felt toward him for the way he treated the family, especially his mom.

“I knew well that the man my mom was married to, that he knew all the time that he wasn't me and Robert's dad. I think that's why, see my brother was quiet and all of that, you know, he never would hardly say anything. But it wasn't me. You couldn't push me around the way that he would take things, I wouldn't. And I used to lay in bed at night, thinkin' about what I'm gonna do to this man when I get big enough? How can I get rid of him, or really do something drastic to him without somebody knowin'? That's how much I disliked the man,” Willie said.

Then during Willie's junior year he learned that Oscar Harris was having problems with his prostate. One day Peyton Abbot Jones came to take Oscar to see a doctor in Lexington, and the doctor sent him to a hospital in the state capitol of Jackson, an hour south of the plantation. It was just two days later when Mr. Jones came by the house and told the family he had died. They never learned how he died, and Evie speculated that they might have just put him out of his misery.

The pain Willie felt from 18 years of living with a stepfather who mistreated him and having his real dad living so close by, all that pain would not go away, even after Oscar Harris died.

“And all of this stuff had built up in me. And I wonder today if that man hadn't have died, what would I have done to him. And it's bad to hate, 'cause hate poisons your whole insides. I would go to bed and get up thinkin' about wringin' his neck,” Willie said.

On a practical level, Oscar Harris' death meant that the family was losing one-fourth of its workforce, and Willie, Robert, and Evie would have to do more.



Coach Thompson helped Willie improve by connecting him with Cleveland Buckner, who at the time was playing basketball on the

Jackson College for Negro Teachers team. Buckner was three years older than Willie and would go on to play in the NBA for the New York Knicks, including one memorable night in 1962 when he was given the impossible task of trying to guard Wilt Chamberlain during the historic game when Wilt the Stilt scored 100 points. Buckner, who was also 6'8", worked out with Willie and showed him how to play against a big man. Make him uncomfortable and don't let him do the things he wants to do around the basket. If he is right-handed, overplay his right side and make him go left, giving you a much better chance to block his shot.

While Willie was good enough to play basketball in college, there were only a handful of schools where he could actually get recruited, and these were limited to the black colleges in Mississippi. Black athletes were generally not allowed to play on teams in Southern colleges and universities attended by whites until the late 1960s. The first black athlete in any sport to play at the University of Mississippi was basketball player Coolidge Ball in 1972. Since someone like Willie couldn't play at a big school in the South, he could dream about playing at a school like Michigan State or Notre Dame or somewhere back east or in the Midwest, but the reality was that major college programs were not sending scouts to look at ballplayers in rural Mississippi. It wasn't just that colleges and universities in the South had white-only and black-only teams, collegiate basketball teams across the country were very much segregated before the 1960s. In 1948 Clarence Walker became the first black player in any college postseason basketball tournament, playing at what is now called Indiana State University. In order for him to play, the National Association of Intercollegiate Basketball had to reverse its policy of banning black players from playing in its tournament, and it only happened because Walker was supported by the NAACP and his coach, the legendary John Wooden. Blacks were

sprinkled in small numbers in major basketball programs across the country, usually no more than one or two on a team, so the schools wouldn't upset their rabid fan bases, which generally preferred white players. Having a small number of black players on the team wasn't tokenism—that concept didn't exist in the segregated America of the mid-twentieth century. It was just the opposite; the black players had to be some of the best in the country to be allowed to play. The first college team to win a national championship with a majority of black starting players was the 1955 University of San Francisco team which featured Bill Russell and K.C. Jones, both of whom are now Hall of Famers for both their college and professional careers. As in other areas of their lives, these black ballplayers had to work at least twice as hard and be twice as good as whites in order to be given a chance, or even be considered as an option. They were the same barriers that have been erected in the path of blacks in America since they were dragged to its shores centuries ago. So to put it mildly, if Willie wanted to make it as a basketball player, he had a tough road ahead, but he was a fighter.

Before Willie could concern himself with playing basketball in college and beyond, he was focused on his high school team. Willie and all his teammates had one goal that none of them would ever be able to achieve: to play basketball against white high school players. Due to segregation, black high schools were only allowed to play other black high schools.

“They had put us down for so long, and we wanted to get show them what we could do on the basketball court,” Willie said.

There was not a basketball state championship for the black schools, and the most they could achieve was to win the Delta Conference Tournament, and that was their goal.

Willie and his senior class teammates had stuck it out in Mississippi while many of their classmates had migrated north after

their sophomore or junior years. His senior class had only 56 graduating students, but in their freshman year it had 80. The thirty percent who dropped out did not do so because they wanted to work full-time in Mississippi. There weren't any good jobs for blacks in Mississippi, and if they left school, it was most likely to move to Chicago or Detroit or St. Louis where many had family and could find work that paid a decent wage, or at least it was decent compared to \$2.50 a day.

Willie's teammate Stanford Murry recalls his mindset as a teenager in Mississippi in the late 1950s.

"My thought was to get out of there, 'cause I figured there was no hope of change. Blacks couldn't vote. Blacks held no political office. Blacks had no way of bettering themselves, except to leave Mississippi. I graduated May 19, something like that, and left within about 5 or 10 days," Murry said.

As the Delta Conference Tournament approached in February 1960, Willie did not yet have any college coaches who were recruiting him. A few days before the tournament Coach Thompson pulled him aside.

"Are you ready for the tournament, Harris?" Coach asked.

"Yes, Coach," Willie said.

"Well, you had better bring your A game, Harris."

"I always do, Coach," Willie said.

"But especially bring it on Friday, because E.E. Simmons is coming to the game."

"The coach at Alcorn?" Willie asked.

"Yes, sir, he is coming to see the center on Leland High School, a guy named McNeal. He is 6'8" like you, but he's got about twenty pounds on you. Simmons is real high on McNeal, but don't let him outdo you, Harris. You can change Simmons' mind," Coach said.

That night when Willie went to bed and looked up at the stars through the hole in the cabin's roof, he wasn't thinking about getting up to work in the fields. He was flipping a basketball up in the air and thinking about the tournament, and smiling.

On Friday morning the team boarded the school bus for the half-hour ride to the tournament, which was being held in Belzoni, nicknamed "The Heart of the Delta." It is another small country town surrounded by endless acres of cotton, soybean, and corn fields. Normally boisterous, Willie sat quietly and looked out the window and watched the fields roll by. They were just rows of soil in February, waiting to be planted and for the start of that endless cycle to begin again. Maybe he wouldn't have to do that again, ever. If he could play great and take care of McNeal, maybe he wouldn't be hunched over in the field in October, picking cotton. What a delicious thought.

The Delta Conference Tournament was an all-day affair. It started at 9 am and wasn't finished until 11 o'clock that night. If you made it to the championship game it was your fourth game that day. Mileston was a longshot to win the tournament. The smallest school in the conference with only a few hundred students, it was certainly the underdog, but Willie felt that any team he was on had a chance. They grinded out a few wins that morning and afternoon and later that night, in what may have been the biggest stroke of luck in Willie's life to that point, they found themselves in the championship game facing Leland High School and their big talented center McNeal. Willie was so keyed up before the game he thought he might explode.

"Harris, go do your thing," Coach Thompson said in the pre-game huddle.

When the game started and Willie posted up against McNeal for the first time he could tell it would be tough to move this guy off his

spot, but he remembered what Cleveland Buckner had taught him and he kept battling. Willie loved to talk trash to his opponents, but McNeal was quieter. The only thing he said to Willie at the start of the game was “Don’t bring that shit in here or I’ll make you eat it.”

“Okay, we’ll see,” Willie smiled.

The game was tied at halftime, but in the second half Willie took over, blocking McNeal’s shots, fighting harder for rebounds, nimbly shooting over him, and outthrusting him. Mileston won by 10 points and the underdogs were the tournament champions.

The following Monday after practice Coach Thompson called Willie over.

“Harris, I got something to tell you.”

“What’s that, Coach?” Willie asked.

“You played real good in the tournament.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Willie said.

“Coach Simmons thought so, too. He liked that he saw. He thought you whooped McNeal. He wants you to come play for him at Alcorn. He is giving you a scholarship.”

Willie was shocked. He stood there with the biggest smile of his life on his face and thought about how his hard work had finally paid off.

He raced home and excitedly told his mom. Evie was stunned and so proud of her boy, hugging and squeezing him like she never had before, the tears rolling down her cheeks. Her pride and joy quickly morphed into concern about how Peyton Abbot Jones would react. With Oscar Harris gone and now Willie, how could she and Robert keep up with the fields? Evie, however, always put her sons’ welfare ahead of hers, and she talked to Mr. Jones about it the next time she saw him.

“Mr. Jones, you know my son here, don't ya, Willie?”

“Yes.”

“You see how tall he is?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he has gotten a scholarship to go to Alcorn to play basketball.”

Jones goes berserk.

“Hell, no! Niggers don’t need no damn education! You can’t live on my plantation and have this boy go to school!”

Evie straightens her back and speaks carefully.

“Mr. Jones, I can't read and write. I want my son to get an education so he can get a good job. What can I do so he can go to school?” Evie asked.

“Well, goddammit, if he’s going to go to school, you’ve got to get someone to take his place in the field, pickin’ and all of that.”

Evie tells Willie to go get his father Andrew. Whenever Evie needed something, she would turn to Andrew, and he found someone to replace Willie in the field so he could go to school.

Willie would never pick another boll of cotton for the rest of his life.