

Jus' a Bus Ride

by Michael Boyd

From 1967 through 1970, I played football for Wichita State University. "Playing football" is a euphemism for my attending football practice while pretending to pay attention. The number of enjoyable football moments at WSU were few and far between. During my career we won 2 games and lost 27. Despite our record, or perhaps because of it, our teams had some truly memorable characters.

Among them was Chief Al Boyd, a Native American. Chief was given a scholarship, not because of his football ability, but because he spoke fluent Spanish. His main job was to interpret for our best player, Margarito Guerrero, who spoke no English.

Another character, Randy Jackson, participated in our 1968 game with Arkansas for only one play. On that play, Randy ran 80 yards for a touchdown. Afterwards, Randy refused to re-enter the game. He was sure the Arkansas players would hurt him for having made them look bad.

Perhaps the most memorable character of all was Larry Talton. Larry was a mild-mannered guy who didn't drink much, didn't smoke, and didn't do drugs. He was a black guy from Harlem. How a black guy from Harlem ended up in Cowtown, USA was never clear. He may have gone to a junior college in Kansas, or he may have known a coach from a junior college who recommended him to WSU.

I'm not one to criticize anyone's football ability, but Larry was not a good football player. Larry was nicknamed "Willie" because he was a huge fan of New York Jets' quarterback, Joe "Willie" Namath. Like many sport nicknames, this one was meant to be humorous and slightly ironic.

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Larry was shorter than the rest of the guys, maybe 5'8" or 5'9" and weighed about 190 lbs. He was muscular and strong, had an oversize head, and suffered from acne. Don't judge the size of 1960's football players by the size of today's players. While few guys on our team were Larry's height, several weighed less than two-hundred pounds.

As a football player, Larry Willie had only one idea, "Knock people down." Sometimes Larry Willie knocked down the right people. Sometimes he knocked down his own teammates. But, whomever he knocked down remembered both the event and the perpetrator. During practice, Larry Willie, playing linebacker, had difficulty staying in his area of responsibility. If the offense faked a handoff to the running back, Larry Willie would knock down that running back. Unfortunately, the actual play often went into the area Larry Willie had just left.

The racial mix on those WSU football teams from the 60's was about 50-50 and was not toxic. We didn't know much about each other, but in truth many of us came from similar backgrounds. Our parents expected us to behave ourselves and get an education.

I'd say the black guys tended to dress a little better than the white guys. They wore slacks and nice shirts and preferred square toed black leather shoes. In 1967, Wichita, KS fashion tended toward blue jeans and cowboy boots, neither of which the black guys would have been caught dead wearing.

Blacks and whites didn't hang-out together regularly, but we sometimes sat around in the dorm commons and talked. Talk was mostly sports, but often it included stories from home. Engaging Larry Willie was sometimes difficult. He didn't speak often. But every now and then we got him to talk about New York. Being midwesterners with limited travel experience,

Many of us learned about New York City from Larry Willie. Unfortunately, Larry Willie spoke a language none of us understood.

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We thought the black guys should be able to understand and interpret what Larry Willie said. I guess we white guys thought all blacks knew each other and spoke the same language. Okay, that was stupid, but we were teenagers with very little worldly experience.

When we asked him to describe life in New York City, Larry Willie responded, "Harlem is Harlem."

Unsatisfied with that answer, we tried to expand the question, re-asking it slower and louder, "WHAT IS DAILY LIFE LIKE IN HARLEM?"

Unfazed by the repeated question or the way it was asked, Larry calmly responded, "Harlem is— jus' is—jus' is."

My mouth opened and closed without anything coming out. My mind repeated, "Harlem is—jus' is—jus's is." I blinked my eyes. I looked to Kenny Lee, a black guy from Philly. I turned my palms up, lifted my shoulders and eyebrows. Kenny's mouth turned down at the corners. He wiped his left hand across his mouth and chin. He looked at the floor. After a few seconds, he looked up. He turned his palms up, lifted his shoulders and eyebrows. I guess guys from Philly didn't speak Harlemese either. When asked to explain, Larry remained mute.

Perhaps we were in the presence of a philosopher and we were simply unaware of it. Maybe Harlem was a place which defined itself. If so, Larry Willie's response was surprisingly deep. We needed more from Larry Willie to know for sure. We tried having more conversations with him in the hopes of drawing him out.

"Hey, Larry Willie, what do you do in Harlem?"

"We plays da dominoes, da piccolos, and da ho's."

Kenny Lee wasn't around, but he hadn't been any help earlier. Randy Jackson was there. He was black, but he was from Big Sandy, Texas. That town was smaller than Butler, Missouri,

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where I came from. None of us white guys expected Randy to understand what Larry Willie was saying any better than we did. Kenny had at least come from a big, eastern city.

Stuttering, "L-L-Larry W-W-Willie, H-h-hold on now. What the hell does that mean?"

"Dominoes is numbers. Ya knows numbers?"

Universally, "No."

"Ya buys a number. If y'wins, y'wins."

Not even trying to understand the process of selecting a number, from whom it was bought, or how the winning number was determined, we asked, "What do you win?"

"Doh."

"Dough? Like pizza?"

Looking at us as though we might be idiots, Larry shook his head.

"No, man—doh. Bread!" He rubbed his thumb and two fingers together.

"Oh, money. Okay, okay, we got it. Go on, what's piccolos?"

"Man ain't ya never been nowhere? Piccolos is music, man. Is music."

"Oh."

Lowering his head a little and giving us a bit of the eye, "And, ho's is ho's." Larry Willie paused for a bit, "Ya knows ho's, right?"

We nodded yes. We had no idea. In our defense, we were embarrassed by our obvious cultural ignorance. In hopes of salvaging some sense of cool, we had nodded as though we knew what he'd meant. I doubt Larry Willie was fooled.

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Now, don't judge us too harshly. The above conversation occurred in early 1969. At that time, "ho" had yet to become part of the general Kansas lexicon. In fact, Larry Willie Talton may have pioneered the use of the word "ho" at Wichita State University.

Larry Willie made such an impression on us, that a few white guys began walking around campus mumbling "dominoes, piccolos, and ho's." If they had hoped to impress someone, they were disappointed. Few people could pull off what Larry Willie did on a daily basis.

Someone once asked Larry Willie if Harlem wasn't a long way from Wichita. I don't know if that person was asking about the physical distance or the cultural distance between the two places. However, Larry Willie answered both questions as only he could.

"Is jus' a bus ride, man. Jus' a bus ride."

Thereafter, "Jus' a bus ride," became our standard for distance measurement.

"How far is it from Wichita to Kansas City?"

"Jus' a bus ride, man."

"How long will it take you to get home for Christmas?"

"Is jus' a bus ride, man."

You get the idea. We enjoyed playing hep cats, at least linguistically. I've often wondered if our borrowing his words amused Larry Willie. If so, he would likely have said, "They is—jus' is—jus' is."

We were amazed at the depth of Larry Willie's human understanding and his ability to express it in unique and mystifying ways. It's possible Larry Willie Talton was a cultural icon who went unacknowledged because he was a short, stocky, black, and not very good football player toiling on a bad team from the windswept high plains of Kansas.

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When we returned to WSU for football practice in the fall of 1969, Larry Willie was a no show. No one knew where he was or why he hadn't returned. Larry Willie was—jus' was—jus' was gone.