

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Lightly Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Berl Handcox

Interviewer: Rick Taylor

Date of Interview: February 23, 2004

Place: Mr. Handcox' residence, 5202 Rambling Range, Austin

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Berl Handcox: I'm ready any time you are.

Rick Taylor: All right. What's today? The 23rd.

Berl Handcox: Mm hmm. That's right.

Rick Taylor: February 23rd, 2004, this is Rick Taylor, interviewing Mr. Berl Handcox, who was, not the first African-American on the Austin City Council, but the first one since the late 1800s? Is that correct?

Berl Handcox: As far as I know. I don't have any idea when anyone of color preceded that. I've heard it from a professor over at UT by the name of John Butler that gave me a name. I don't know who it was or when it was. But I heard there was an alderman, something when we had a different form of government back in the 1800s.

Rick Taylor: Tell me how you came to be elected to the Council.

Berl Handcox: Well, it's, it's kind of a long road, but directly, there was a friend of mine called me one Sunday morning and said he wanted to talk to me. We got together and he didn't want to tell me [why he called], and he took me to another guy's house, and finally we got around to saying, "Why am I here?" A group of

people had been talking about an African American running for a seat on the Austin City Council. Between them and their conversations, they decided that I was the one that should do it. I think the thing that was most motivating for me is an involvement that I had with a group at the time. We described ourselves as [the] Young Men's Progressive Club, to which I was the president. In the course of that activity, two or three years, four years, I guess, preceding the time that I was asked to run, I had always tried to get our members to get involved in the community. Part of my message was, and our theme was, "progress or perish," which suggested that we need to get up off our butts and do something rather than complaining about what has not been done for the community. So that's kind of like what we set out to do, and in so doing, then being the president, I was always at the point of any kind of activity we were involved in. Of course the president had to get up and make a statement or say something as to why we were there, what we were doing, or whatever. I got to be known publicly around the East Austin community quite a bit. That's how I think the people that discuss trying to find someone to run for political office, that's how they came across my name, that I was kind of doing some things out there that created some recognition I guess you could say.

Rick Taylor: Can you describe East Austin at the time?

Berl Handcox: At the time? [laughs]

Rick Taylor: Early 1970s?

Berl Handcox: Geographically, you know, it was a boundary that was--see, the west side was Interstate 35. The south side was the river. The north side was Manor Road, and everything east. Everything between those three, east, west, north, south, and going east and everything east was kind of like East Austin. That was predominantly the Black neighborhood of quote unquote "East Austin." There were several other little communities outside of that corridor that was described as Black communities like St. John, which is kind of north and off of St. John Street or Avenue. South Austin there was, I can't think at the moment what that community was called. I guess the three of them kind of made up the bulk of the habitat, the Black, in Austin at the time. Was that [the] kind of description you're looking for? You wanted more?

Rick Taylor: I was wondering what it was like to live there.

Berl Handcox: To live there? Well--

Rick Taylor: You mentioned the Young Men's Progressive Club.

Berl Handcox: Well, let's take that as an example. We thought about things that were not happening, and that always, there was an accentuation of the negative, and not the positive that was going on in the community. There's always been something positive going on, but it was never written about in the newspaper, and of course, TV coverage does not cover those. It covered all the stabbings and the killings, if there were any, and maybe some house fires or something like that. But there were not a lot of neighbor-to-neighbor kind of, of things, contributions, and taking care of one another, and hoping, helping and hoping, for a more prosperous life. There was something that could be described as a decent community life. But there was also crime and corruption, to which no one was able to escape.

If you lived there, and if you were quote unquote "making a decent living," and you wanted to move away from that environment of the crime and corruption type environment, you couldn't do so, because you were locked into something called "where your folk had to live," quote unquote. If that was East Austin, that was East Austin. You could move around a corner or two in East Austin, but you were still in East Austin.

Shortly after I moved to Austin, of course the, Civil Rights Act of '64, '65 had taken place, and it was now law, and therefore there was an opportunity if you wanted to test the law, you were able to do so. My wife and I, we did that. We decided to do it. Let me rephrase that, because there was a little club, a little water hole where a number of us used to frequent for happy hour and cocktails and that kind of talk, and having conversation about the law, and what it meant. We also had some things going on here in the Austin area that made a lot of news in the area, and that was, who's going to enforce the law? Would it be the federal government to enforce the law, or would we have local enforcement? Well, as I recall, the Council at the time wanted to give the authority to the City Manager and City Manager staff, and they had hired a, for lack of a better word, or the only word I know, kind of like a Director of Civil Rights in Austin. That was protested soundly by many of the powerful real estate builders in the Austin area that stated publicly that if any Council member voted for having local enforcement, they would band together and kick them out of office.

Rick Taylor: This is about enforcement of the segregation laws? Or where you could live?

Berl Handcox: Yes. Right, right. Basically housing. Other public accommodation things were challenged in different ways. But in housing, that affected the builders, primarily real estate developers. They're the ones who protested the loudest. Of course, they could always find a lot of sympathizers, enough to where, when they promised that the people who voted for local

enforcement of the Civil Rights Act, and promised them that they would work to unseat them on the Council, which they did, very successfully. I think that at the time, there was a five-person Council, guy named Dick Nichols, Emma Long, and the mayor, Akins was the mayor at the time. The three of them voted for the local enforcement, the three of them was kicked off the Council [laughs] at the next election. So, the powers to be still had some power I guess. You know, the real estate folk were a pretty powerful bunch, I guess. Following that there was new laws for expanding the Council to seven the following year after they, when was that? '68, I suppose? May have been '68 is the best I can recall. Then 1970, 1968 was, I don't recall exactly, but then it went to a six-person council, and then seven. Les Gage became the sixth--

Rick Taylor: Seven meaning six council people plus the mayor?

Berl Handcox: Plus the, plus the mayor. That made it a seven person total council in 1971 for the first time.

Rick Taylor: That's when you ran.

Berl Handcox: And that's when I ran. Let's see, what were we talking about, the East Austin community. Segregation was pretty much the law of the land, and a lot of business establishments, separate, or Black-owned, were thriving. Not, you know [laughs] burning up anything, but they had enough accommodations that could take care of the community's needs. As I recall, at one time, before Interstate 35, was built in the area, the Black community extended more over toward the campus, and on over to Red River, I believe. Primarily so, it was before my time, I don't know. But I hear some of the local people talking about the existing businesses that were there at the time. I don't really know.

Rick Taylor: But the Council, now, and I assume at the time, if you were elected, it was a citywide election. Is that right?

Berl Handcox: That is correct.

Rick Taylor: So you weren't just--

Berl Handcox: No.

Rick Taylor: representing East Austin.

Berl Handcox: That is correct.

Rick Taylor: Okay.

Berl Handcox: No, you had to run citywide, as it is today. Been several efforts to get wards, or precincts. Things like that exist with the County Commission, but that has never come about.

Rick Taylor: Was it difficult to run a citywide election campaign?

Berl Handcox: I didn't find it so. As a matter of fact, I was so ignorant of fact [laughs], I didn't know what I was doing, even though I had the desire to try. I really wasn't a real political-type person. I still think that people ought to do what you can when you can, to help out in the community as best you can. What I found out later is that there's a lot more to the political world than what meets the eye, the real political world. It can be extremely interesting [laughs] and difficult. You try to impose your will on others that don't know your intent. They do not embrace the same factual, or do not hold the same views that you have, and never been exposed to the many things that you've been exposed to, or vice versa. Trying to persuade them to see it your way is not always easy.
(minute 14:34)

Rick Taylor: I wanted to ask about this. I actually just read about this a couple of days ago, and maybe you're not familiar with it, but, do you know about the 1928 City Plan, in which two people recommended that the best thing to do was to segregate all of the minority people off into East Austin, and the way to do that was to deny services to Wheatsville and Clarksville and the other neighborhoods that were predominantly Black and Hispanic.

Berl Handcox: [laughs] No.

Rick Taylor: You hadn't heard about that?

Berl Handcox: I had, I hadn't heard about that at all. No, I hadn't. Where, may I ask, where did you find that information? I'd like to read about it, and go back and check that out.

Rick Taylor: I can get you the, citation.

Berl Handcox: Okay, I'd appreciate that. No, I'm not familiar with it.

Rick Taylor: Let me ask you about growing up in Denton, Texas. What was that like? What was your neighborhood like there?

Berl Handcox: Pretty much like I just described East Austin, and it's kind of like, that's my feeling about living in a Black community all over the South. It's pretty

much the same. You had artificial boundaries, that this is your section. There's no fence up there but you kind of grow up knowing what is the--back during my youth it was the colored section, where all the colored people live. You grew up just knowing that. It was a very segregated city. Schools, churches, no parks, recreation, it was all separate. Everything was, everything was, everything was separate. You go to the theater, but you went to the balcony. If there was, I don't recall ever seeing a Broadway play, or anything like that, and if I did, I don't know how it would have been segregated, but I'm absolutely sure today it would have been, if it was allowed at all.

Rick Taylor: Did anybody ever challenge the boundaries, or was that just not done?

Berl Handcox: Well, I don't know. I would suspect that at some point in time, oh, I don't know the person who perhaps may have done it, but if it was done, then that kind of insurrection was put down and not tried again for another generation or two, you know. The powers to be had methods, historically, you know, you go back into pre-slavery and slavery, and, and post-slavery, and there were always methods imposed on minorities to keep them in whatever position the powers to be wanted it to be. We all know about Martin Luther King's position, and others fighting for public accommodation. The method used there was not new to Black people of the world, of the United States. I think it may have come as a shock to some White people when they saw it on television in [laughs] maybe in Massachusetts and other states. But it was occurring on a rather frequent basis throughout the southland, and everyone was aware of it. So you, as a parent, your parents kind of taught you how to skirt the issues and stay out of this situation and that situation in order to perhaps even save your life. You were taught actually how to manage that, navigate through the minefield.

(minute 19:23)

Rick Taylor: Can you recall any specific lessons along that line?

Berl Handcox: That my parents taught me? Well, maybe not directly, or maybe indirectly, something like, say well, you know, you better not talk back to a police officer, to that white man. Bad things will happen to you if you do. They'll beat you, or, you know, it was said to you in a certain way that you knew exactly what they were talking about. Perhaps learn to govern yourself accordingly, I guess.

Rick Taylor: Your parents were separated, and your father lived in Wichita?

Berl Handcox: Wichita, Kansas, yes.

Rick Taylor: Wichita was, how was that different from Denton, if at all? You basically lived there during the summers, as I recall.

Berl Handcox: Yes. The schools were integrated, and the public transportation was integrated. The other public accommodations were integrated, but life there was a, there was kind of like, what I would describe now as a Black life, a Black community, a Black society, that did things in traditional ways that was not necessarily as it was done in another part of the state or the city. There was probably no threat, that I experienced, of living someplace else other than where we lived [laughs] on North 29th Street. My experience with the social integration of that time, I had no problem with it. I've learned since then that most of your interaction was in school, most of it ceased at the locker, when you took off your uniform, your clothes, or put your books away. They went this way and you went the other. You know? Which is pretty much the way that I've found it to be in all the cities that profess to have been integrated for so long. It was integrated to a point, activities were, not by law, but de facto.

Rick Taylor: I'm actually surprised to hear that the schools were integrated, because wasn't Brown v. the Board of Education in Topeka?

Berl Handcox: That was Topeka. That's correct. Yeah.

Rick Taylor: So, Wichita was integrated, but Topeka wasn't.

Berl Handcox: Right. At the time, I guess they only had two high schools at the time. And they were completely integrated. There was no separate Black high school that I was aware of. That was it.

Rick Taylor: Did you belong to a church growing up?

Berl Handcox: Yeah, I belonged to a Baptist church.

Rick Taylor: Did that have a big effect on your future?

Berl Handcox: Well, maybe yes, but, you know, it's hard because the things that I witnessed as a child growing up in this quote unquote Christian home, and Christian community, and Christian church. Later on it got to be a burden for me. It's all the hypocrisy, like a bootlegger living three doors down from the church, two doors down from the pastor, and cars running in and out of this place buying whiskey all night. And we're talking about the sins of whiskey and voting for it, which, Denton today does not have legal sale of alcohol. They have beer and wine, but not hard liquor. And [laughs] it's still going on today. I find

so much hypocrisy in that. It's incredible that--I look at people who tell me about all the sins of the world, and God, and da da da, da da da, and, and permit the illegal sale, bootleggers if you will, in their neighborhood. There's a lot of hypocrisy there that I still today cannot understand. It disturbs me, greatly. I don't know how you can tell me what [laughs]. Your reasoning or logic is not too sound when you approach it in that way.

Rick Taylor: Who were your influences or heroes when you were growing up? Who did you look up to?

Berl Handcox: Well, some people that stand out most in my mind is a guy by the name of Mitchell Jackson who was kind of like an all-world type athlete to me, for me, when I was growing up, eight, ten years older than I. There was a professor named Alfred Tennyson Miller, [he] was a math teacher and coach, kind of an all-world kind of guy, too. He could do everything. I thought he was just--he was just a magnificent man. He was tough [laughs], you know, we got away with nothing with Mr. Miller, but he was quite an influence in my life.

Rick Taylor: When you did go to school, you majored in math. Is that right?

Berl Handcox: Yeah. Then we got away from that because of the labs, the long labs, and the pursuit--I started out pursuing engineering, then to math.

Rick Taylor: Okay.

Berl Handcox: Then, ah boy, you know, that's an interesting thing for me, how you can be counseled into pursuing a study, and really don't have, you can do perhaps the work, but you don't have the desire to do it. But you go because someone said, "That's a wonderful profession! You can really find a job in engineering anyplace!" I found those labs were very, very boring, and I accepted the math route as a minor and graduated in industrial arts. I just couldn't handle the long--oh, I can see, I find engineering interesting today, but I would not want to spend my time that way. I find that also in my work, throughout my professional life, that so many people are counseled into going in a direction, and fail, and you find more failing in college with decent GPAs and so forth, with good backgrounds, but they find that they don't have the interest to pursue that. It's a drudgery to go every day, not that you don't have the ability, it's just the desire, then they fall out, they quit, say, "Aw, hell, I don't want to do this," and walk away. Find that in the unskilled world. [People saying], "I want a job." "Doing what?" "I don't know, just anything, man, I can do it." Well, no, not really. That doesn't work. I've had people say to me that, "I'd like a, a job with IBM." "Doing what?" "I don't know. What do they do?" [both laugh] "I want a job in," oh, what's, something like in computers. That's a good one. "Oh yeah?"

Well, what do you want to do with computers? You want to be an analyst? Or you want to be a maintenance person? Or you want to be a repair person, maintenance person, what is it?" There's a lot of different subject areas that you can engage in, but they don't have a clue as to what to pursue to get them the opportunity that they seek. So it's things like that that I run across.

End of Part One

End of Part One