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

African American Texans
Oral History Project

Interviewee: Charles Urdy

Interviewer: Heather Teague

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Transcriber: Heather Teague

Questions developed by Erin Murphy, Summer, 2006

Teacher Questions

1) **Integration and the Army**

   By the time Dr. Charles Urdy entered the Army in Alabama in 1954 President Truman had eliminated the Jim Crow laws in the nation's military. Even though all facets of the military were supposed to be integrated where did Dr. Urdy experience segregation? What was the primary cause for this separation and what were the reactions of the men to it? Were they successful in integrating?

   Length of response: 6 min 31 sec

CU: The military units were integrated, and, as far as anybody could tell, they were pretty much integrated. There was, for the most part, that is, your military

duty, [coughs] there were all kind of guys in every unit, you lived in the same barracks, you eat in the same dining hall, you marched together, you did all this together as a military unit.

It's not like it is now. It was, the army was, women were separate from men. So you had all of these men. They gathered, what did they do? They played ball, did this kind of thing, and all lived in the same barracks. There was no, then when people were off then everybody went their own separate ways because everybody outside the post things was not the same. This was in Alabama where I was, you know (laughs). On the post, we had, our teams were integrated. And there was no problems with, with our activities as soldiers. I never had any, any direct problems. I think there were some cases you know, I heard about. I never, I never actually experienced, I'm sure it happened. A number of times, people got into fights, and people using derogatory words or whatever, that kind of thing happened. But for the most part, what we did as soldiers, you had lights out at ten o clock, and you got up early in the morning and you went to breakfast as fast as you could so you could get back on time. Then you shipped off to your duties whatever it was. Then you started that all over again. So it was not much of a problem and most of the social interaction was just sitting around, like a group of men sitting around kind of a deal, talking about football or playing softball or something. You know, it was that kind of a deal.

In Fort McClellen, Alabama where I was, though, you had service clubs, the NCO clubs called them, noncommissioned officers, service clubs where, you could go play games, whatever, that kind of thing, play music, have dances, that sort of thing. Those service clubs were during the day also and pretty much during most of the week, were completely integrated. Everybody just went in and you could buy beer, or whatever, soda, you could play music, they had ping-pong, whatever, kind of games you had. So, and there were no problems with that.

Now where the, where the problem that remained there at Fort McClellen was that they would periodically, and I don't remember how often that was and I don't remember whether it was always—seemed like it was always like on a Saturday night, a weekend. They would have dances and they would, it was like an NCO, not NCO what do you call those things, American Legion kind of a deal. They would bring busloads of women from the towns, onto the camp and they would have a dance. Well what they did, was they segregated those. There were two, well, where I was the WAC training post as well so you had a WAC service club and the men's service club. So what they would do they would have Anglos at one of them on that weekend and at the other they'd have Blacks. They didn't want the intermingling [laughs] of the women civilians who came from off post onto the base.

I think the problems always came in where there were male-female interactions. You had that, integration of folks where--in fact we virtually had a riot there one time early on when I was in Alabama. This was not, this was in one of the service clubs over a guy and a girl who were both from California, just had known each other in high school and they ran into that and here they were away down in Alabama, she was in the WAC and he was in the army. He was Black and she was white. And they ran into each other. They were just in high school together. I don't know if they were even that, great a friend, they knew each other, you know? But here you from California and now all of a sudden you're way down in Alabama and you run into someone you know, so you talk to them, you know? And they were not at this time, they were not dating or anything, they were just talking. So they were just sitting at the same table, at this little beer, "X" it was called at that time and boy it was something. Some guys just couldn't take it, got hot under the collar, we almost had a riot, in fact did have a fight. You know. So you had that and that, I, I was in the middle of that [laughs]. I was there. I wasn't in the middle of starting it, but I was in the middle of the fight because everybody that was there was in it. It was like a riot. But you had, you had that and that's the only open incident that I know of that happened then and that was fairly early on as I recall. I don't know if that was '54 or '55.

So anyway, it was our group that pretty much, I say our group, one of my friends actually was the ring leader and pretty much the one who caused the big commotion over that. A number of us were supporters of that, there was no active part in it but anyway, that was the thing that was broken up, during that time that I was there. And what happened of course was like what happened in many other cases. They just eliminated the dances for a while. And that went on for, I don't know how long, some months, maybe a year. I don't know how long it went on, but anyway, they just dropped that whole activity. And then they started gradually sort of having smaller functions that were integrated. And then by that time I was gone. But that was the one remaining thing that I know, know of, that was, that was obviously a separate, quote, separate but equal situation in the army in 1954.

2) Segregation in the City

Dr. Urdy moved to Austin in 1945 from Jonah, Texas, a small country town. What differences did Dr. Urdy see between the two places in terms of segregation? Why was segregation more prevalent in the city than in the country? Where did Dr. Urdy see a dividing line between the whites and the Blacks in Austin? Was the line always in the same place?

Length of response: 4 min 19 sec

CU: Out in the country it's sort of different. People all lived to themselves anyway so it's not, the housing situation was not, was not, one that was obvious. So it was not, there was not a community where Black folks lived and a community where white folks lived. People were scattered all around all over the

whole place. So there was very little, with the exception of schools, there was very, and churches I suppose, very little to segregate out in the country. As I said, mostly Black folks were sharecroppers but there were Anglos who were sharecroppers as well. So there were a few Anglos that were sharecroppers and a few Blacks that owned property, but it was not like in the city where you had the stark contrast, of the division lines, you had segregated communities where whites did not live and segregated communities where Blacks did not live.

So it was a completely different world, for many kids who came from rural areas into, particularly into the cities like Austin. Austin was a small city and the other communities, surrounding communities, were distinctly different small towns--Pflugerville, Round Rock, Georgetown. Those were all completely separate communities and not really related to Austin, at all. So, folks who came from those very small towns out in the rural areas into Austin, the metropolitan area that was, that had all of the characteristics of a city anyway [laughs] if it was not a real city--at that time in terms of population, but all of the kinds of things that you had in the, in a city, in an organized city that you did not have generally in, in those smaller towns, and especially did not have in the, in the Black community. So, parks, swimming pools, libraries, those kinds of things belonged to you, even multistory buildings, and, and many teachers, that kind of thing. But, it was completely different, and was unavoidable in the city. There was no place that you didn't see that society was segregated in the city. There was a line

there somewhere, that everybody knew pretty much where, where it was. It might have been a moving boundary but it was, it was there, and you pretty much, whereever Black folks lived white folks didn't. That was the way it was wherever you, however you perceived it. That was not an unknown thing.

It was different, it was East Avenue at that time, and it was not a high rise or anything. You could walk across it. It was a divided avenue, particularly down in that area from about Twelfth Street on down to the river. And there was a little creek that was out in the middle of it that ran through part of it I guess from about Eleventh Street on down someplace. So there was not a barrier, a physical barrier in that sense, but it, it pretty much--In all I guess that really was not true because on the other side of East Avenue there was Sabine Street which was and Red River, it was Red River, Sabine, which was predominantly Black, that stretch of Sabine up around Twelfth, Eleventh Street, in there. So you had, that sort of, but it was still pretty near, there was not much in the way, although that, that migration farther east was still going on. There had been like a large number of Black businesses along East Sixth Street, and then Blacks owned Red River and even whatever the next street over was. And then sort of, and Hispanics, too, as well. And that sort of started moving farther and farther east as time went by. So that movement obviously had already begun. But was not perhaps completed at that time.

But all, whether it was I-35 that you thought of as a physical barrier there was a *line* there somewhere, that everybody knew pretty much where, where it was. It might have been a moving boundary but it was, it was there, and you pretty much whereever, Black folks lived white folks didn't. That was the way it was wherever you, however you perceived it. That was not an unknown thing, you know.

3) **East Austin Revitalization**

As Chairman of the Austin Revitalization Authority, Dr. Urdy plays a significant role in helping to restore and revitalize East Austin, particularly 11th and 12th Streets. What was this area like in the 1970s? What were/are some of the problems that Dr. Urdy runs into while trying to help the area? Has the project been successful?

Length of response: 8 min 8 sec

CU: The thing that I've been most involved with is the 11th and 12th Street Revitalization effort. I've been on that board since 1997. That area is a very important area to East Austin. Some people consider it to be the gateway to East Austin and other parts of the community. The area had become completely run down, and was a huge deterrent for people to travel any place in East Austin, because there was so much crime on that little first two or three blocks east of I-35. Oh, people always traveled down East 7th Street to go to the State Cemetery or to Huston-Tillotson. Nobody would go through 11th Street because they had all the drug dealers and everybody all over the street. It was just a wild, pretty wild place, and so they, the concern, this started way back in the '70s again, that

the area had become so bad and people had started working trying to revitalize it.

During pretty much the whole time Snell was on the Council, and my early days on the Council, there were things that were done. We did things; we did some sidewalk projects, street lighting projects. We put a police substation there. Every year we were doing something, we were trying to do something, trying to-- There were a couple of apartment complexes over there that had become havens for drug dealers that were subsidized apartments that the City was involved with, tore them down. So things were being done all the time, but meanwhile the area just kept deteriorating. And when they realized that, in order to really make it what it could possibly be, we'd have to revitalize the whole area.

And, that in itself was a challenge, because you had a few businesses there, and so you had challenges there. You had some opposition to anything that you wanted to do. And people would say, "Well, the City just wants to come in and do an urban renewal thing and take away, you know, what few existing businesses we have," and that sort of thing. So you had opposition. So you had to work through all of that.

It was really never a conflict so much between the city and the neighborhood, but conflicts between different neighborhoods, or, because you have two different

things going on there, really. You have the historical issue, where that was principally an African American business district, but now, most of, or all of those folks are gone, and so now you have the neighborhoods that are surrounding that are saying, "Well, yeah, but, but whatever is built here now is going to affect our neighborhood, so we want to have some say about what is, you know, what is done here. We don't have any problem with you recognizing the historical involvement of African Americans, but we don't want you building things that are going to destroy our neighborhood." And those neighborhoods now are pretty much integrated, so you have Anglos, you have Blacks, you have Hispanics. And then you have, you had, other folks, who were, they were considered to be outsiders, saying, "We remember when this was this, and this was this, and this is what we want to do." It's just one of those kind of things where it's sort of easy to appear to be, to seem to be divided, when you're really not.

At one point, we had to, the city, in fact, did call in this group from the University of Texas, what do you call it? The people who try to negotiate, what do you call that, now, I can't even think of that, it's a very simple term for it. Dispute resolution group. It's a dispute resolution, something or other, at the University. Anyway, they had to come in and we sat, and when we sat down, and everybody wrote down their goals, the only thing that we disagreed on was who should be a member of the board. [laughs] Nobody had any problems with

any of the other things that people were talking about. Folks said, "Well, you know, I live over here, and so I don't want, a skyscraper, over here across the street from where I live." "Hey, I don't see any problem, I wouldn't either." That's the kind of discussions we got into, again, when people sat down and actually talked, rather than listened to what the perception is, that you had. "These folks don't even live here, and they're going to come in and tell me what they can build in my, around by my neighborhood." And these folks saying, "Well, these folks have just moved in here. They're not a part of the old neighborhood, they don't have anything to do with the history." And so on and so on. But that was a problem. Again, if you will sit down and listen, you can, that's your best chance of getting anything done. You may not get anything done then, but that's your best chance. [laughs] But anyway, that's sort of the, that's the kind of thing that, that we've done, and so, on a smaller basis, I guess, the main thing I've done is try to settle disputes among different groups.

It's getting there. Of course, we've had programs before, [laughs] and so people were waiting to see the results of this, and so. But I think when we actually started building, when the buildings started going up, and the streetscaping started, and we built the archway, and the plaza and those kind of things, and some of the other buildings were restored, and people began to really believe that something was happening. And, and then, the concern switched to, "Well, how many community people are being involved in this, both in the construction

and you know, and then in the businesses that will, will ultimately be there?" So we're hearing more, more of that now, whereas in the past we heard a lot of criticism and just saying, "Well, you know, God, when are they starting? They haven't done anything yet?" kind of a deal. So, I think, our feeling is that we've sort of turned the corner on that now and people will begin to look to more things happening.

And, as this is happening now, particularly on 11th Street, the other thing that people have seen is that the street has basically been cleaned up of crime. And it was, police say it's one of the lowest crime areas in town now, of course, there's not much there now [chuckles]. But, people around some of the places, there was one business where I think the police said there something like 400 police calls per year, and it's one business, and it's gone. And we bought the building, so that, that disappeared, and went down from four hundred and something to twelve or something, probably, that kind of thing. So people are beginning to see that a new, are beginning to open up, that gateway, so to speak. And, we'll start doing some things with the state cemetery, to try to enhance that and attract people through that, through that area again. And I think by the time we open up the major buildings that will pretty much be accomplished where, people will see and feel that it's safe to drive through there.

4) Electing Minorities to Political Office

Dr. Urdy was very involved with local politics in the 1970s. According to Dr. Urdy, what was the political climate like for African Americans and other minorities at that time? What was the goal of Dr. Urdy and other minorities for local government? Was it easy to get the public involved in the political process?

Length of response: 5 min 42 sec

CU: Well, when I came back to Austin permanently, because I always called Austin home [laughs], but when I came back, in 1972, the whole movement here was to try to elect minorities, Blacks and Hispanics. And in 1972, you had, I think, two Blacks had been elected to anything by 1972: Wilhemina Delco in '68 had been elected to the school board, and 1971 Berl Hancox to the City Council. Richard Moyer was on the county commissioner's court, and I think those were the only Black elected, minority elected officials around as far as I can recall, at least in those higher profile positions. And so, when I came back in '72, there was still this overall movement. I guess the first thing I got involved with was Delco was leaving the school board and running for the state legislature, and so I ended up getting drafted to run her campaign [chuckling], and be her campaign manager. But that was where I first got involved.

In the '70s that was just sort of the whole political deal. That's what everybody was doing. You know, Delco was leaving the school board, so Reverend Griffin was running in her place, we were trying to keep that seat and then shortly after that, or at that same time, Hancox was leaving the City Council so then we got

Snell running for that, and then Trevino was running and Gonzalo that was running at the same time as Wilhemina. And, so all of these things were going on, so many campaigns were going on at all of those levels, Justice of the Peace, Richard Scott was still Justice of the Peace, was running at that time, so we just had all kinds of elections that for the most part involved the same people, except for the folks that actually ran the campaign, but the electorate was pretty much the same, and the people that we had to appeal to was pretty much the same.

So you had all of those kind of things, trying to keep the gains that you'd made, trying to keep somebody elected to the Council or the commissioner's court or this, and try to move into other areas. Anyone who was involved had some valuable expertise for the whole process. And so you were constantly involved with everything that was going on, not just one particular race, so.

It was a fairly easy political climate to get people to listen. In that climate then, you can distribute brochures, and whatever, and have signs, and have discussion meetings, and whatever. And so, it was pretty much just a hot bed of political activity where people were all ready to have campaign rallies, and have campaign picnic-type activities, and we'd have speakers, and we started, you started bringing in speakers, Congressmen and state representatives [bell clanging] and folks like that, and we would bring in folks from other parts of the state, just all kinds of things that could be done. You didn't have to have a lot of

money to do this. These people were politicians themselves, they'd volunteer to do this. So, it was sort of easy to create, once you had the basic interest there, it was pretty easy to create a climate that sort of reinforced that.

There were issues of course but the general issue was neglect, and so, everybody had the same issues, everything that came up it was the same thing, well, you know, the streets are worse and this sort of, everything, you know. So it was easy to focus that on simply the issue of trying to gain representation. The obvious hope at least was that that representation would improve the situation for you, at least would bring some insight to it, and help to improve it. But as a political goal, it was simply trying to elect minorities in general, and so, [clears throat], so you had this, these sort of agreements of sorts, you know what I'm talking about, the gentlemen's agreement? Now, but you had an agreement of sorts between all of the different factions, you know, if the Hispanic community was supporting this candidate, the Black community didn't ask any questions about it, said "Okay, so that's the guy they want, so they're going to get behind them, we're behind that person," and vice versa. And the whole Progressive Coalition worked in that way. It sort of brought, if the feeling was that the Black community was supporting a person, then everybody would support them, even though, in some cases, they may sort of disagree with them philosophically on many issues, and on some other candidate they may not have supported them with those same positions. But a lot of people would say, I used to go around

with candidates before I ever ran myself, to those various forums, and I'd talk to people and they'd say, "Well, I don't like that at all. That's the op…you know, it's the wrong position, but, but, if you guys support them, we'll support them then."

5) The Impact of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In the late 1950s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. came to visit the University of Texas at Austin campus. Dr. Urdy attended the speech along with many other UT students. According to Dr. Urdy, how did the Black students perceive the event differently from the white students? What was Dr. King's message? What effect did Dr. King have on Dr. Urdy and his personal life?

Length of response: 6 min 40 sec

CU: That was the first time I had ever seen him in person. I don't know exactly what year that was, maybe '59 or somewhere in there, I don't know. But that was, I thought that was very interesting. I thought he was a very powerful speaker and very charismatic. I didn't really know who was invited to that, to that event, but by and large with the exception of a handful of us the audience was predominantly white. I'm not sure, I guess it was the student association or whoever that had those forums on campus. And I don't know if anybody outside of the campus knew of those events.

But there again, sometimes we were over there stuck in the laboratory. We didn't know what was and what wasn't publicized. And I don't know whether, I don't

think there were that many students, that many Black students on campus who were present at that affair and I don't really know, don't know why, there were a lot of things that were different at that time and I'm not sure what, because a lot of the activist students were not particularly fans of Martin Luther King at that time. They were more fans of the Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panther Party, and the [Cope] movement, I've forgotten Carmichael's group right now, [laughs] but anyway. So you had that kind of a thing where, I don't know if students knew about it but just not really interested, at that time. Because early on in that movement, aside from the folks who were, like in Montgomery, Alabama, the organizers there, there were particularly a lot of young folks who thought that Martin Luther King was not militant enough, at that time, early on. And I, I think that, I think that changed pretty quickly, but there was a period when that was certainly true.

HT: And how did he manage to have such an influence if the majority of the audience was white?

CU: Well see, a lot of those kids were very active, students who were very active in the movement and I think they were very much enthusiastic about his appearance and were motivated considerably by his presence, which is, where many people felt that the action needed to be. Probably that was not necessarily the truth, that's what a lot of folks thought, you needed to motivate a lot of white

people, in order to get the movement going. Anyway, I think that in fact did happen. And I think if you had asked at that time, most Blacks would have felt that they were already there. That might not have been the truth, but that would have been their feeling, [laughs] that they didn't really need motivation, that they were already beyond where Martin Luther King was motivating you to go to. That probably would have been their thinking.

HT: Do you remember what he talked about?

CU: Yeah. You've come a long way, we've got a long way to go. [laughs] Basically what his message was. Which was, he outlined a whole lot of things that had been accomplished. It was basically talking about how, how you can do things and he was talking about the Montgomery bus boycott, which had happened, that was all over the, and you're thinking, "Boy in the middle of Montgomery, Alabama, integrate the buses. Well, we probably can do some things in Austin, Texas as well," you know? So it was it was that kind of message about how far we had come in terms, from two points of view: from overcoming, some of those obstacles like back of the buses which meant by some mechanism, either through the courts or through whatever of convincing the majority of the community that that needed to be done, but at the same time on the other side, convincing the minority community, the Black community, that you need to do

it. That if you don't do it it's not going to get done. You have to make this commitment to do this, and if you do, some things can be accomplished.

To me it was pretty much overwhelming, I just, because he is, he's such a powerful speaker and in person I think much more powerful than, you could ever portray on television. When he is sort of, free to use the kind of examples that he used, like the Montgomery bus boycott and talked about the kind of people that caused that to happen, just ordinary working people who rode the bus to work every day. These are not professionals and all that kind of stuff, they were just those folks who got up every day and got on the bus to ride to their job across town, just ordinary citizens. And if those kind of folks can come together and make a difference, then everybody can. And just the way he presented all those kinds of factors, just compelling, saying "Well, you know, I mean I don't have any excuse." [laughs] And a lot of times, we, you know how it is, particularly science majors in graduate school, you can hide everything behind that if you want to. You really don't have time to do anything [laughs] and you feel comfortable doing it. "Hey I got to go. I got an experiment going in the laboratory I got to do. I'm sorry but I have to have this," you know, kind of a thing. But then you felt compelled that there was nothing more important than making a commitment for yourself and for your community, for how you wanted to perceive yourself as a person and how you wanted other people to perceive you.