

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

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Unedited Transcript

Interviewee: Charles Urdy

Interviewer: Heather Teague

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Transcriber: Heather Teague

[Begin Disc 1 of 1]

HT: This is February 23, 2004, and I'm sitting here at the LCRA with Dr. Charles Urdy. And, why don't we just start by, maybe you can tell us a little bit about your experience growing up in Austin?

CU: Well, we moved to Austin actually when I was 11 years old, in 1945. And, you know, of course, [laughs] I didn't know much about anything at that time, but I, I[[typing and talking in background] came here, and went to, went to high school here, and then Huston Tillotson College and then the University, and I guess my {tape goes off then comes back on} time you had to be twenty-one to vote, so I was not old enough to vote. But, because of a city council election, people were feverishly trying to, and you had to register to vote, and you had to pay

a poll tax at that time, so people were registering people, meaning collecting poll taxes, all over the place, and particularly on the campus of Huston Tillotson. So, my, you know, my colleagues and I volunteered to, you had to be twenty-one to vote, but you could collect poll taxes [laughs] if you were under twenty-one, so that's what we did during that time. [talking and typing in background] And let's see this must have been, oh, I don't know, 1952 or so, something like that.

HT: And so what was your experience in, in that sort of activist endeavor, trying to recruit people and get them to the polls?

CU: Yeah, well, you know, [clears his throat], it was mainly [clears his throat] getting people to pay their poll taxes. Because most people, in those days, most people that, if they paid their poll taxes, they would end up voting, so, there didn't seem to be at that time so much of a get-out-the-vote effort once the election came along, but more of an effort to beat the deadline and pay your poll taxes so you could vote. So that's where the, at least what I remember, the greatest amount of activity was. [background voices]

And this, this centered around the City Council race, that, at that time, the system was now vaguely described as a type of proportional voting in which everybody just ran, and then the top vote-getters, you know, were elected to the Council. I think it was five members at that time. And, in that race, and I don't remember if that was '50, '51 maybe, was the election, a Black man came in close, you know, like, I think we were five and maybe he came in seventh

or something, I don't remember exactly. And so, people said, you know, "if more people would vote, we could've elected him," and so that effort started. And that was in the next election, which would have been '53 I suppose.

But anyway, meanwhile, in between that time, those two elections, they changed the election system to a place system very similar to what we have now. Well that was sort of my beginning, you know, in the whole business of voting, and, you know, sort of tracking it since that time, you know, throughout the fifties and you know, and then, as the, sort of a Civil Rights movement started, the student sit-ins and all of that. Then a lot of that came to the forefront, and the elimination of the poll tax and all of that until finally the passage of the Voting Rights Amendment.

HT: Now, when they switched the local election system to the place system, do you think that had an advantage or disadvantage as far as the representation of minority groups?

CU: Oh, it had a very definite disadvantage. In fact, it was not, this was in 1952 or '53, and it was not until 1975, no 1971, that a, a Black was elected, and not until 1975 that a Hispanic was elected to the Council. So this, you know, this sort of, where we felt that we were very close in 1951 or so, and then this {dropped back?} so it was twenty years later before anyone was elected.

HT: So were you involved in, you know, in that in between period, where you involved in community efforts to try to get more minorities into those places?

CU: Yeah, although I was not here in Austin long after that, because I graduated from HT [Huston-Tillotson] in 1954, and then I went into the Army. But this kind of activity was started up all over the country, so you had similar kinds of things, you know, all over. I went, in the Army I went to Alabama. And, then the whole Civil Rights thing started, you know, so, all of this was caught up in it, so, even though in that period at least I was not here doing it, there was that activity around. And then by the time I came back in 1957 and started graduate school at the university, then the, you know, all kinds of things had gone on here locally then, as well as around the country, and then shortly after that, you know, sit-ins started. Just the whole, Civil Rights movement caught on.

HT: What was your experience being a student on the UT campus during that time? I believe you got your Ph.D. in 1962?

CU: Right.

HT: So you would have been there right in the middle of the big events [CU coughs] of the Civil Rights movement.

CU: Yes, well, a lot of it, of course, centered around the university itself. There was the issue of integrating the dormitories. There was a movie theatre on the drag, and all those kind of things, were sort of the, the issues that, that surrounded the university at that time. And, some of it spilled over into, into East Austin and the local stuff as well, you know. But it all had the same focus and somewhere in the, I guess in the late '50s, when the sit-ins started all over the country, that sort of had a national effort that was pretty strong at the university as well, you know. At some point in there, I don't remember the year now, but Martin Luther King was invited to the university to speak. So, you know, there were a whole bunch of student activists, it was mostly [talking in background] undergraduates at that time, but a number of them were graduate students as well. And, the universities were a hot bed of all that, all over the country, were a hot bed of all that activity, and the University of Texas was, was no exception. There was a lot, just a lot, just lots and lots of stuff, going on, just all of the time, so, oh, everybody that was there was impacted. You had to be a, [talking in background] it was not hard to be a part of it. You just felt obligated to try to do, as a graduate student [chuckles] your time was so limited, to try to do something to support that.

HT: How did you feel those events affected you personally in your experience there?

CU: Oh, I think, you know, it, it made me aware of, of two things. The fact, number one: the problems themselves. And number two that you had to, you had a responsibility to try to solve a problem like anybody else, whatever your circumstance was, you know, you had your

obligation to contribute your part. So that's pretty much, I think, the two primary things that impacted me.

HT: And how did you go about choosing what to do to make your contribution?

CU: Well, you know, it was more wherever I was. I tried to do something to help, and I was then, when I left the university I was in North Carolina for a year [coughs] and there was already a great deal of activity there, and pretty strong leadership, so you know, I just sort of joined in what was going on there, and then [coughs] the year later, when I came to Prairie View, there was hardly any leadership there. In fact, you know, there were people who were working in opposition to folks who were trying to lead. And so, you know, I suppose I had more of a, I just sort of joined in as usual, but I ended up having more of a leadership role there than I did in North Carolina, because there just weren't any, you know, there were not many people who were stepping to the forefront to lead the effort. So that probably was my first experience in actually in trying to lead some effort to do something, you know.

HT: And were you leading an organization?

CU: Yes. We had an organization called the Waller County Civic League. And, you know, we worked, it ended up, we were sort of trying to do some things with the schools and that sort of thing, it ended up being more of a political action committee than anything. So we started promoting folks to run for various, various offices, and, I don't think anyone [chuckles] was

elected before I left, but shortly after I left some folks started getting elected and you know, in, one was in the school board, and oh, you know, county, and city councils and so forth, so...

But I think our organization was one of the early activist groups in Waller County, and we supported the student activities at Prairie View pretty strongly, whereas the administration was always in opposition to us, to the students. Students had a very difficult time. They were trying to do things, like, you know, they were doing at other colleges and universities. They were, one thing is, isolated, you know, out.... But the administration was never supportive of, of the student activities, including the, voting, and, I think, it was in the news here recently, that Prairie View students I think were the last, were the last college students in the state to be able to vote in that local election. And then on after they went to court. And I think that case ended up going all the way to the Supreme Court. But, that was, you know, that was the kind of situation you had there, very difficult. The attorney for those students at that time was one of my former students, by the name of Craig Washington, who was a U.S. Congressman, back earlier, a few years back. But you know, that's, it's sort of, I guess I've sort of seen all sides of it at various times, from having to try to pull together an organization and lead it, to just being one of the, one of the workers, you know.

HT: Have you found that there are any patterns in how you have to go about trying to, to win people over when you are, you know, fighting people who are so against what you're doing?

CU: Well, at some point, you have to be able to find somebody that you can talk to, you know. [laughs and clears throat] That's the problem they're having here now with the police situation, that no one wants to sit down and talk. Well, you know, at some point, somebody has to sit down and talk. But back in those days, you know, I guess the general tactic to sort of force folks to the table were the demonstrations. And you could rally a whole bunch of students to just go out in the streets and rant and rave, and, you know, raise a fog, and stay there for days and whatever until people would say, "Well, you know, start trying to find the folks that could get together and talk, and try to work something, you know, out." In other cases, you know, you just had to, had to, had to work at it. I mean, the whole business of elections, you know, you've got to, you've got to get people to run, and then you've got to run realistic campaigns, and you've got to tie in, you've got to have somebody to tie in with so that you become, somewhat of a, of a political force for people to recognize. That part doesn't change, the political part.

And of course here in Austin there was the, that whole Progressive Coalition that started with the University of Texas students, you know, and so then you had Black political groups and Hispanic political groups that sort of joined in with that coalition, which, made a pretty formidable political force. It sort of forced some things to change, because you had, you know, you had a strong enough force to elect or un-elect some folks, you know. [laughs and coughs] And by and large, that's what has to happen in voting. You've got to somehow get a majority of the people to support your position. And you know you have to do whatever you have to do in order to accomplish that. You've got to form coalitions, you've got to work with other

folks, you know, you've got to do just, whatever you can and realize that it generally doesn't happen overnight. You just have to keep working at it.

HT: So when you came back to Austin, what was the environment like?

CU: Well, when I, when I first came back, when I came back to Austin permanently, because I always called Austin home [laughs], but when I came back, in 1972, sort of the whole, you know, every, 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. And, Richard Moyer was on the county commissioner's court, and I think those were the only Black elected, minority elected officials around [doors shutting in background?], as far as I can recall, at least in those higher profile positions. And so, when I came back in '72, there was, you know, 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. I think probably because I was the only one that didn't make half of the other side mad by [laughs] by the first election, you know it was all political infighting and all of that. But anyway, that's sort of where I got started here. I had actually been a little bit, not, not much, I know I gave my contribution in Berl Hancox's race, even though I was still at Prairie View I, you know, got a little bit involved. But that was where I

first got involved. And then that, 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 Delco, and then, shortly after that, or at that same time, Hancox was leaving the City Council so then we got Snell running, you know, for that, and then Trevino was running and Gonzalo that was running at the same time as Wilhemina. And, you know, so all of these things were going on, so many campaigns were going on, you know, at all of those levels. Justice of the Peace, Richard Scott was still Justice of the Peace [chuckles], was running at that time. So we just had all kinds of elections that, you know, 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. And, you know, then it went on, went on from that, and in the '70s we had a couple, maybe only one, I guess it was '76 when Charles Maus ran for the county commissioner's race, and lost, you know. But then, in 1980 Snell left the Council and ran for county commissioner's court and won. So, that was one of those cases, where, you know. And I don't know if anyone had run for county commissioner prior to that. I don't think so. I can't remember.

But, you know, 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, you know, and try to move into, into other areas. So you had, anyone who was involved sort of, had to, 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. But that was the drive,

that, that caused a lot of people that were not really politically motivated to be involved, you know.

HT: So it was more, from the standpoint of the people involved, like you just said, it was more about just getting people in there to represent minority groups than it was specific issues?

CU: Oh, I think so...

HT: ...like community issues...

CU: I think that was, I think that was the whole, and you know, the [pauses]. There were issues of course, I mean, you know but the general issue was neglect, and so, you know, everybody had the same issues, it was sort of a, everything that came up it was the same thing. Well, you know, the streets are worse and this sort of, everything, you know, so, so it was easy to focus that on simply the issue of trying to gain representation. You know, the obvious hope at least was that representation would improve the situation for you, you know, at least would bring some insight to it, and help to, you know, to improve it, so. But, you know, as a political goal, it was simply, you know, trying to, to elect minorities in general, and so, you know [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." You know, and vice versa, you know, and the whole Progressive Coalition worked in that way. So, you sort of brought, you know, if you could, if the feeling was that the Black community was supporting a person, then, you know, everybody would, would support them, without, 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, you know. But a lot of people would say, you know, I used to go around with candidates before I ever ran myself, to those various forums, you know, and I'd talk to people and they'd say, you know, "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, you know."

HT: So, it sounds like that solidarity between groups was the crucial...

CU: [interrupts] Oh, yeah.

HT: ...factor...

CU: Yes.

HT: ...in actually making things happen.

CU: [clears throat] Yes. It was the only way you could have, you know, politically it was the only way it could've happened. You had to have a, a coalition, and of course, then you had to, you know, you had to accept the pluses and minuses. But you had the same thing on the minority side. You know, where, by and large the coalition was, pretty much liberal, especially on social issues, and this was a social issue, so you would only attract people who were considered to be pretty much, you know, pretty solid liberals. And, but then, on, on other issues that, that seemed to be, that maybe were not so much social, maybe they were in a sense, that didn't, didn't, didn't really, generate much interest in the minority community, the minority community would, would still go along, you know, with those candidates, and then, [pauses]

I remember when one candidate, in fact it was Margaret Hoffman ran, and her campaign theme was "Think Trees." And I remember sitting in a Coalition meeting saying [laughing], "Okay, we're going to support whatever candidate you support, but when they come to East Austin, tell them don't say "Think Trees," you know, [laughing] because I don't think, they're just going to get a whole bunch of folks mad at us for having them supporting somebody who says "Think Trees," you know. And, and I think, part of that was that [doors opening and shutting in background] the issues were very much superficial, in a sense, you know. You had, you know, civil rights issues, and this is what folks were interested in, and so, you know, a lot of these other things, people didn't, didn't look into those issues that much, you know, they just sort of. And a lot of this was new in the minority communities, because, you know, they

really hadn't had this, kind of campaign experience. They didn't have any, never had any campaigns, so, you know.

HT: So what kinds of things did you find yourself having to do to get the communities themselves more involved and more educated about what was going on?

CU: Well, it, it's not so hard once you [telephone rings] you get folks attention, you know. Then you can start [clears throat], let's see [telephone rings]. Excuse me just a second.

HT: Sure.

CU: [answers telephone] Hello, Urdy.

[Recording paused.]

CU: Let's see, where were we here?

[pause]

(minute 22:33)

HT: You were talking about what you had to do to educate the communities and get them involved.

CU: Oh, yeah, I, you know, that part, was, was not that difficult once you got, because people were really interested. And then you had some successes. You know, people actually got, elected. Then you had, people from other coalition members who came and each of the groups talking about issues, and people could identify, you know, with those candidates. So it just sort of, they just sort of naturally got more involved, because of, you know, they were spurred on because of their own personal interest. But at the same time then they started listening to all of these other folks, and listening to how they would help whatever it is they were trying to accomplish. So, it was a, it was a fairly easy political climate to get people to, to listen. So, then, you know, you just, in that climate then, you can distribute brochures, and whatever, you know, and have signs, and have discussion meetings, and whatever, you know. So, it was pretty much just, you know, just a, a hot bed of political activity where people were, {all ready to have} have campaign rallies, and have, you know, having campaign picnic-type activities, and we'd have speakers, and you know, we started, you started bringing in speakers of the, you know, Congressmen and state representatives [bell clanging] and folks like that, and we would bring in folks from other parts of the state, you know, just all kinds of things that could be done. And, you didn't, you didn't have to have a lot of money to do this, you know. These people were politicians themselves, they'd volunteer to do this, you know. So, it was, it was sort of easy to, to create, once you had the basic interest there, it was pretty easy to create a climate that sort of reinforced that interest, you know.

(minute 24:36)