

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

**African American Texans  
Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Tommy Wyatt

**Interviewer:** Amy Steiger

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Questions developed by Erin Murphy, Summer, 2006

**Teacher Questions**

**1) Segregation in Retail, Dining and Entertainment Venues: East Austin Clubs**

**What clubs were available to African Americans in Austin in the 1960s and 1970s? Were all the clubs segregated? What happened at Charlie's Playhouse? What was the response of the African American community?**

**Running Time: 5 min 15 sec**

TW: One of the most famous ones [restaurants] was the Southern Dinette, which was right down here on East 11<sup>th</sup> Street. It was probably one of the most popular places in the city as far as restaurants. And then we had another one up on 12<sup>th</sup> Street called Pleasant Inn, and there was another one called, it was kind of a nighttime deal, what was it called? Oh, I can't think of it. Then the clubs, we had

the Palladium Club, which was a large beer hall really because Austin was dry at the time. You could serve beer and wine but you couldn't serve hard liquor. And so what you'd have to do, you'd have to go to the liquor store and get you a bottle you could take into the club, you know. And you could, you'd order what you call setups, you know ice and cokes or whatever and you'd mix your drink in there, but they couldn't sell you a drink over the bar in there. So most of those places, and the Palladium Club was one of the largest clubs, it was right there on 12<sup>th</sup> and Comal and it was a real large one. They had a lot of crowds in there. We had the Shamrock Club that used to be right across the street over here on 11<sup>th</sup> Street, another large venue. They didn't really have live music, what they had was just a big jukebox,[coughs], excuse me, just a big jukebox, you know, a big one that played music, and have fun, talk, drink, whatever, dance. They all had a little dance floor, you know, so you could dance also. Some of them had pool tables.

And then after that you just had little drinking lounges, you know, like then we had a place called, the big dance hall, was Charlie's Playhouse which is right there on 11<sup>th</sup> Street about two blocks from here, it was right down the street. They just tore the building down recently. And Charlie's Playhouse had, now he had a live band five nights a week. He had an in-house band played five nights a week. And so they'd go down there, on Friday and Saturday nights are when they had the big nights over there. And of course back in those days, Friday and

Saturday night Charlie's Playhouse was filled with U.T. students. And, I'll say it again, we had a segregated situation, and so they all could get in but you and I couldn't sit at the same table, okay? You know, he wouldn't let, he wouldn't accept mixed couples or mixed parties in there. In other words you came with your party, your party'd sit here, the Black party'd sit over there. You could both dance or whatever, but he didn't, didn't have mixed parties at tables and stuff like that.

But the thing about it was, was that because he had such a large clientele of U.T. students on Friday and Saturday nights African Americans could hardly get in the club, although it sat right in the middle of our community, you know. And so the way Mr. Gilmer, Charlie Gilmer was the name of the guy who owned and operated the club, the way Mr. Gilmer would accommodate the African Americans he had a thing on Monday nights called soul night. So that was our night [laughs] Monday night, you know. So many of the students, particularly from Huston-Tillotson and so forth, didn't think that was quite right you know. That we couldn't go into any club on the west side, but yet we couldn't go to our own clubs on the east side on Friday and Saturday night. It was the biggest club in Austin, for East Austin, was Charlie's Playhouse and we couldn't go there on Friday and Saturday night.

Now, economically you can understand that, you see, because this man was in business, that's the way he was making his money. I mean he was making huge amounts of money on Friday and Saturday nights. And so, since he had one of the most popular clubs in town in walking distance from the campus, I mean you know, he couldn't afford to turn it down, you see. But at the same time it was still offensive to the students over here. So some of the students from H-T started picketing the club on Saturday night, Friday nights and Saturday nights, and eventually they, they actually got it turned around, whereas most students stopped coming, you know. 'Cause they didn't want to walk through picket lines, stuff like that. So he was a little upset.

Then he had another, he had a second place called, an after hours place called Ernie's Chicken Shack. And so he would close that, and we had that, that Saturday Blue Law that all clubs had to close at 12:00 you know, and any other night, on Friday nights you could stay open 'til one, I think. But once they closed up you know, people didn't want to go home at that time of night. It's too early, you know. So he'd open up Ernie's Chicken Shack about 11:00 and he'd stay open most of the night up there. He called it Chicken Shack because he sold fried chicken. At night, you know, you'd go out to get your fried chicken basket and that same band would move from the Playhouse to the Chicken Shack and they'd keep on playing, all night, yeah.

**2) Media – African American Community Newspapers: Starting *The Villager***

**Why did Mr. Wyatt begin his newspaper, *The Villager* in 1973? How did he go about establishing the newspaper? What was the purpose of Mr. Wyatt's column? How has the meaning of the word rappin' changed?**

**Running Time: 4 min 57 sec**

TW: When I first came to Austin there was a paper here that was, that I learned a lot about the city by reading that paper. It was the Capitol City Argus. It's still here. But what had happened with the Capitol City Argus was that the editor of that paper died suddenly. So the paper had kind of gone, you know, down a lot and it was not being effective and wasn't providing the kind of service the community needed. So there was a lot of talk about we needed another paper. So myself and a couple friends of mine went over to the Capitol City Argus, it was still operating but it was under new management, went over to the Capitol City Argus and offered our services, you know, to help them generate, you know, readership back and provide information and write stories or whatever we needed to do in order to keep the paper functioning and active in the community. The gentleman who was running it at the time was not interested in our services. So then we offered to buy the paper from him and operate it and he was not interested in selling it. So the only other thing to do then was somebody start their own paper. And after talking to several people who said they wanted to, I mean it just kept, it wasn't working, you know, so I started to do it myself.

The first paper we put out was on a manual typewriter [laughs] that I borrowed. And I borrowed it from the, from the insurance office where I worked the first time, because he had a lot of typewriters up in the building. They had moved, they had a lot of old manual typewriters they weren't using anymore and they put them upstairs in the attic, for the most part. And so I didn't have a typewriter at the time, and so when I got ready to start my paper I asked the manager over there if I could borrow one of those typewriters. He let me have it. And I started the paper off with a manual typewriter.

I started off, I had a, the person who was the managing editor of my paper was a lady by the name of Lisa – anyway I can come back to that later. But she was a graduate of the University of Texas and she had, her father Dean Riddick, Dean Riddick was the Dean of Journalism at U.T. And so she came in as my managing editor to show me how to get the, help me get the paper off the ground and she ran it and so forth and so on. So at the time I was just the, I was just the money behind the paper, you know really, paying the bills and so forth to get it out, and she did all the technical work on it. She stayed with me for a while and then she 'course, moved on and I had to take over, so I became editor and publisher.

Later on I brought in another managing editor, but for the most part I kept my hand in as the editor and publisher because the only thing permanent about the paper is me.

My column's called Rappin', it still is. It came back from the old days, when people, it's not the same rappin' we have today. It's not the same--rappin' was people talkin', back in the 60s and they called it rappin'. And so my column was created around that and we've been running it ever since each week. And that column there, the idea for that column came behind a column they had in the Austin American Statesman. The Statesman, at that time, put out two papers a day. The morning paper was called the Austin American, and the afternoon paper was called The Statesman. They later combined into one paper called the Austin American Statesman. But they had two papers, you know. In the Statesman, in the afternoon paper, they had a guy wrote a column that was called Ray Waddell, his name was Ray Waddell, and his column was called Ray Waddell. Basically what he did was just talked about things that were going on in the city, you know, anything and everything. I mean he just, his column, he could put in there what he wanted to. And he had one of the most popular columns that the Statesman had in the paper, and everybody said, "If you want to get the information out in Austin, make sure you get Ray Waddell," talking about his column. And so [when] we started our paper, we started that column, because it was to be an answer to what Ray Waddell was doing there, do it here. If anybody felt that they really wanted something out and something to be read in this paper, get it in my column. And so we've been doing Rappin' ever since.

### 3) Race, Class, Community Displacement, and Development: Changes in East Austin

**What does Mr. Wyatt mean when he talks about dispersement of income in the Austin African American community? What impact did that have on East Austin? What does Mr. Wyatt believe is the primary reason East Austin finally started to receive money for revitalization?**

**Running Time: 5 min 9 sec**

TW: I think what you have is a dispersement, a dispersement of economic class. I think what happened is, in East Austin or Central East Austin however you put it, I think what you have now is many of the people who were in the upper income bracket of the African American community no longer live here, because they don't have to. They can, you know, get better value for their money in real estate in other parts of town, but in the early days when I came here, you know everybody lived in this community. And so whether you were an upper income physician or a lower income janitor you all lived in the same neighborhood, see? But as, as the, when the Public Accommodations came in, the people, the physicians and attorneys and, you know, dentists, all the people were able to buy houses on Cat Mountain, in far west Austin, northwest Austin and Balcones, and that's what they did. You know which they should have because that's where they could afford to live and that's where their property value was better.

But at the same time, that left this community stripped of much of its economic resources. And so what you had left over here were just the low-income families and the public housing and people in the low income housing, and us in the

lower part of the, the lower middle class. Not the upper middle class, more lower middle class. So as far as the economics it hasn't changed that much, it's just dispersed is all. And so when you take that kind of resource out of the community it leaves the community lacking in a lot of ways. That's why many of these businesses we talked about that were open are closed, because the people who had the resources to support them are no longer here.

AS: You said something about the buildings over here taking twenty years to get them to build these buildings over here. What buildings were you referring to?

TW: Just the buildings right down the street. When you go back down 11<sup>th</sup> Street you'll see they're building two new buildings right down there, large, kind of high-rise for this area, you know. And the thing that we were into was what they call the revitalization of this community. And so we, when the community started to change and the city started to change, that's when the groups went in and said we need to revitalize this area. And that's when the economic development, the Federal Government came in with all this economic development money that you could bring into a community. And what would happen is the City of Austin would apply for the economic development money. Every year they'd get it, but they wouldn't spend it here. They'd spend it somewhere else. See, once the money comes in they used it where they saw fit, although they applied for a specific area.

And so, and so now that's the problem you have now, the reason that they're really finally trying to put some money down there, is that is, we are considered where we sit now, is part of downtown, the central downtown business district. And so they don't want the blights and eyesores in the downtown business district, so they go to-- See, when they put the Marriott Hotel, right here on the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street, when you go back that way look at the east side of the Marriott. There's not a window on that side of the hotel. They didn't put windows on that side of the hotel because they didn't want their patrons to look into the blighted area of East Austin. You know, it just was not a pretty sight and they didn't want their customers to have to see that. So that's the only side of that hotel that doesn't have a window. There is no window on the East side of the Marriot Hotel and that's why they wouldn't put one there.

So that's how bad the community looked at the time, because with people moving out and business closing and then tearing it down, and stuff wasn't tearing down was falling down, and you know it just looked terrible. Now, on the east side of the expressway we had contacted a company called Business Properties to come in and they wanted to build a major shopping center right there on I-35 and 11<sup>th</sup> Street, between 11<sup>th</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Street there. And the city wouldn't permit that to happen. The city council wouldn't permit it to happen. We fought that for about, almost ten years, with a proposal on the table, and the

city would not permit it to happen. So after it went away we went back and said, “Well if you’re not going to permit private enterprise to come in, the city has to do something,” you see? And finally they agreed to put those buildings over there, so now within the next ten years there should be eight or ten buildings like that over there. They already got the plans for them, just coming off down there.

But the only problem with that is in the process of the wait, in the wait, the African American community lost all of their property through condemnation or through people who just didn’t want to be bothered with it anymore and just sold it for a little bit or nothing. You know you look up ten years from now and a property, a lot that was worth \$5,000 will be worth \$250,000, you see? Which means you just gave that property away, but the people just got tired of fighting issues, so they’d just say, “You’re not going to do anything anyway so give me my money and I’ll go,” you know?

#### **4) Race and the Justice System: Police Brutality**

**Mr. Wyatt states that many of his recent articles have been about police brutality in the city of Austin. What has been the response from the public and the police department to his column? Mr. Wyatt gives details of past instances of police brutality against minorities. What groups were instrumental in speaking out against this violence? Are those groups present in the debate about police brutality today?**

**Running Time: 7 min 9 sec**

TW: What my articles have been about of late have been about the last two years we've had three African American young people who were killed at the hands of law enforcement, two of them Austin Police Department, one Travis County Sherriff. And what we found in several locations, people targeted them because they're African American. We had one young man, luckily he didn't get shot or anything, but we had one young man who got chased (and stopped?) and arrested because he was driving a car that the police don't think he should be driving. He was driving a F150 pickup truck, Ford, and the police officers stated, that: "What you doing driving that truck, that ain't the kind of truck that Black guys, uh, Black boys drive," you know. That's, that's what they call racial profiling. When you, when you assume that people are doing certain things because of their race, you know. And the guy said, "What do you mean, it's my truck, I bought it," you know, so he was, but there are certain stereotypes that the law enforcement have established, you know, as the probable cause to stop somebody and we call it racial profiling.

AS: What has been the, has been the response to your, to you column?

TW: Well, there's been a demand for it. When something happens in our community, then our community does expect me to have a statement about it, whether they agree with my statement or whatever. They expect me to say something about it. So that's, it's been one that's been a consistent column. It's

been one that, I think that, the feedback we get is that people believe we are fair in our column, whether they believe or are in opposition or not. We take an objective look at it, you know? I'm not always on the side of, the popular side, because there are some issues. In fact, I had lunch with a police officer today and we happened to be at the same restaurant sitting at the same table you know. And during the whole time we were discussing Jesse Lee Owens and Sophia King and things about these police shootings. You know the president of the association, the president of the police association would come out and you'd see it in the press. We have an African American Police Association also inside the police department. They have their own association. The Hispanic folks, they for example, they have a [Hispanic Police] Association. And so after this went on so long, I wrote a column saying, "Where does the African American Police Association stand with this issue? Why have they been so silent?" I mean, we didn't know. I understand if they support the police department on this issue or if they don't support it, whatever. But whatever it is, they ought to say something. And he told me, well they finally came out with a press statement about it, and he told me that it was specifically because of a column that I wrote. "Because you're right. We should've said something." There's no point in having an association if you're not going to take a position, you know. Even if they supported the Austin Police Association position, you need to say something because people expect you, you know. It's just like when stuff is going on and the NAACP doesn't take a position, I mean, Black folks are being brutalized and

you expect them to be there, and if they're not you ask the reason why they aren't.

Its always been a problem, but in the earlier days of my newspaper back in [19]73-'74, I mean we had a rash of killings, both in the Black community and in the Hispanic community. I mean police were just, I mean they were killing people in all kinds of ways and the Black Citizens Task Force in Austin got involved when a Black man was killed on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. He was choked to death by a police officer. What they called the old, that's illegal now, but they used to have the old, what they called a chokehold. They'd grab you around the neck you know, [and] what they'd do is they'd collapse your larynx and you would suffocate because you couldn't breathe. And many people, not just in Austin but across the country, were being killed with that process.

And so when he was killed down there, at the same time a guy by the name of Sosa, a Hispanic guy, was shot by a police officer in his front yard because he was trying to keep his son from coming in his yard. His son had been very abusive to him and so he had gotten his gun and went outside, told his wife to call the police, took his gun and went outside to keep his son from his yard. So he was standing there with his gun and the police came up there, and he just drove up and said, "Drop it." And the guy was trying to say, trying to explain to him what was going on, the police shot him point blank and killed him. Without

even ascertaining what the problem was, and he was the one who called for help. That's where the racial profiling was. What he saw was a Hispanic guy with a gun, so he was a threat. But he was inside his yard, inside his fence, and trying to keep his son who was outside his yard from coming in his yard, but he didn't want to hurt his son, so that's why he called for the police, to come in and remove this guy. And the police came and shot him. And that's the kind of thing they talk about. And that and three or four other incidents happened, and so for about a year the Black Citizens' Task Force and the Brown Berets put on protests against the police department, much like the NAACP has been doing for the last year, except they were larger.

I mean, they had a mass of people down there and what they finally ended up doing was calling for the ousting of the Police Chief, at that time it was Bob Miles, who they didn't feel was doing anything about this problem. And eventually he was fired, well he was forced to retire he wasn't fired, but you know, same thing. But he was old enough to retire, so he retired and got out. So this has been a constant problem. We had another guy who was killed in his home. He and his wife had a domestic dispute and the policeman came out and smothered him in his waterbed. They got in on him and they were trying to restrain him and he was struggling because he couldn't breathe, and the police were saying, "No, just quit, stop, stop," and were holding his head down under his waterbed and he couldn't breathe. So by the time he stopped struggling he

was dead, because they held his head down and, anyway he couldn't breathe. So he was suffocated in his home, in his own bed, by the police department. So those are things, but now the thing that makes those cases so dramatic for us is that doesn't happen in any other part of town. It doesn't happen in any other part of town.

### 5) Voting and the Voting Rights Act

**The Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. According to Mr. Wyatt what were two important results of the Act? What did Mr. Wyatt do before the passage of the Act in order to get more minorities to vote?**

**Running Time: 4 min 6 sec**

TW: One of the things that the Voting Rights Act did is eliminate the ridiculous requirements for qualifications for voting in Texas. You see we had the poll tax, and so in most states you had the exam, the test they'd give you. There were some ridiculous questions and if you could answer you could vote. So that's the one thing the Voting Rights Act did was eliminate those unnecessary barriers to voting. But the big thing the Voting Rights Act did was not just remove the barriers, but it also set up a system whereby if you felt you were discriminated against in voting, you could call for the federal people who would come in and investigate, you see? And that's why people keep talking about keeping the Voting Rights Act, renewing the Voting Rights Act.

And it's been a misnomer. Many people believe when the Voting Rights Act expires then Blacks will not have a right to vote, and that's not the case. What happens is, the Voting Rights Act as it's written now expires, it means that the federal government will no longer have a right or an option to come into your community to investigate voting irregularities, as they had to do in Florida in 2002, ah, 2000. So that's what the Voting Rights Act is there for, in case there is, if you have a charge of voting irregularities then you can call the federal government and they in turn can send the federal investigators in to investigate whether anybody's right to vote was violated. And so that's the one thing. But the other thing it did was just remove those restrictive barriers to voting. I remember, before that we used to go out before the voting deadline, before the registration deadline, we'd go around to bars and get people to pay their poll tax. Take a Saturday night, we'd spend Saturday night all night going to bars, and going from table to table, "Give me your dollar seventy-five and sign this thing and that'll get you registered to vote," see? But that's the way we got people registered. Can't do that now you know, you know [laughs], but that's the way we did it. But if you didn't pay a dollar seventy-five you wasn't going to be registered and you couldn't vote.

AS: Did most people pay the poll tax?

TW: The people we talked to did. But there were a number who didn't. There were a number who didn't. You know because a dollar seventy-five's a dollar seventy-five. I'll pay it and you pay it, that's three fifty in this household and I got a kid that's, I mean, you get people without a lot of money. And another thing about it, if you didn't plan to vote anyway I mean, why spend your money, you know? You got a lot of people today who've got voter registration cards but they don't use them, and they're getting them free. So people who paid the dollar seventy-five were people that you could pretty much count on that they would vote.

AS: When you say we would go around to bars, do you mean?

TW: Well a group of people. I mean we'd set up teams, you know. When you got close to the voter registration deadline [we'd] set up teams that go around to bars and so forth, and just take a, you know, you'd go ahead and get people to sign and collect the money. You have to collect the money and you have to turn it in to the voter registration office along with the application, the voter registration application. So we had teams that signed up to do it. Just like we have now, you have a deputy registrar who would be in charge, and they in turn would help get more people to help them to go around and collect this information, and they would collect it and turn it back in to the County Clerk's.