

The John S. and Drucie R. Chase Building Archive
bda_cba009
Mr. Alfred Dotson Oral History

- My name is Alfred D. Dotson,
spelled D-O-T-S-O-N,
and I live on the street called,
(Alfred laughs)

I forgot my street.

All right, Pendleton Lane,
in Austin, Texas,
and the zip is 78723.

- [Stephanie] Right, and
how long have you lived
on Pendleton?

- Yes, the timing of it is
because of the fact that,
the day I retired from the government,
I moved into the house
the day that I retired,
and that was in 1975,
in the month of April.

- [Stephanie] Thank you.

Will you tell us where you were born,
and it could be the city,
and then as well, we'll start there?
The city you were born in?

- I was born in the city of Austin
in the state of Texas.

- [Stephanie] And will you tell us,
what year you were born?

- Yes, I was born in the month of April,
April 15, 1919.

- [Stephanie] Okay.

Speaking of schools,
let's talk a little bit about
the different schools that you went to.

- Well, I first went to,
I told you about the one.

- [Stephanie] Uh-huh. Olive Street.

- I showed the music.
Did I tell that to you?

- [Stephanie] No, I don't remember
you telling me that.

- Well, the picture that you saw,
the only time that picture,
I saw the person,
my father, was in the 10 years
that I knew him,
because he died in the twenties, '29.
I was 10 years old when he died,
but during that time,
I played music in what was called
"The Lyric Theater."
Was the only Black...

most people don't know, people of color
had "Black only."

Now, it seems that they did have it
sometime after I used,
because we had the card,
here in East Austin,
there in East Austin, down further East.

But a lady came out where we
were living on 12th Street,
and I happened to be standing
outside of a little storefront,
that had been,
it had also been a cleaning and pressing.

It had been a hamburger stand.

It had been a place to make
quilts and things, you know,

so, 'cause my grandmother did that.

And so, she drove down and she said,

"Little boy, do you think
your mother would mind

"if I put some advertising
for the theater?"

So I say, "Well, I don't imagine so."

See, but further in the
conversation, she said,

"Would you like to work for me?"

I was about seven or eight.

Well, I knew all over town,
I was a kid that had been here.
And so I said, "Doing what?"
She said, "Well, you could come
around eight or 10 o'clock,"
not eight,
"10 or 11 o'clock, and pick up things
"that are lying around,
"need to be put away,
"wash the dishes."
"Say at 12, we could go
around to the theater,
"open up the theater."
So, that sounded good to me,
'cause I'd get to see all
the Westerns, you know?
And so I said, "Yeah, I
could almost guarantee
"that my mother would let me,"
but it was during the summer, too.
And so, we did that,
and it was working out pretty good,
except that she asked
me to play some music,
because it was silent pictures,
and the way it was set up,
was right in the audience,
on the sidewalk, audience,

down about midway,
there was a draped platform there,
that held a double
turntable, and a switch.
And you started,
you could change from one to the other
without stopping the beat.
But I had no experience with choosing it,
and so many times I had, maybe,
a funeral noise,
to cowboys shooting and riding their car.
And they would stop folk ahead,
and I said, "Can't you
find something better?"
So I'd change to another record,
but I did do that.
Now, the theater set was owned
by Dr. and Mrs. Everett.
- [Stephanie] Givens?
- What was the name?
- [Stephanie] Givens.
- Givens. Givens.
And he was on the second floor next door,
so, what they did,
they put a floor in there,
and cut out the front,

and made that the projection booth,
and then just sent it down from,
like all the theaters, down to the screen.

- [Stephanie] Wow, so
you were doing the music
for the movies, then.

- [Stephanie] Wow!
- I was doing the movies,
because they were silent movies,

- [Stephanie] Okay.

- and 'cause the audio
was flashed on the screen,
so it became a readable thing, you know?

And I stayed there until
something very sad happened.

She left the house one day doing the,
and left the iron on,
and the house burned down.

And there, can only
exchange for a whole lot,

because

the theater became a
problem too, within that.

And Mrs. Givens, for years and years,
made popcorn at the park out there
on Fridays and Saturdays.

- [Stephanie] What park was that?

- She'd sell popcorn's. Huh?

- [Stephanie] Rosewood?

- Rosewood?

Rosewood was, has been a long time,
before I was born.

That's... and so, I used
to see her out there,

'cause...

But, "The Lyric Theater" is
the important part of this,

because very few people
know about it, even today.

And we used to go in there to see,
during the time I could go in there,
and my twin could go,
the girls didn't much care for it.

- [Stephanie] So, Olive Street
was the school that you went to,
your elementary school?

- Yeah.

- [Stephanie] Will you
tell us about Olive Street?

- Olive Street School
was an elementary school.

The teachers were,

the Principal of school
was Professor Passion,

Passon.

He was the Principal.

He never taught anything that I knew,

but he was the man who was
over the entire school.

The Passon Society area,

they do the historical sites and things

that they make up,

and that's still going strong.

- [Stephanie] Did you
interact with anybody,

like, in the neighborhood?

So, in the Robertson Hill area,

when you were at Olive Street?

- Well, for one thing,

my early life was not
dealing with Robertson Hill,

except the social part of it.

I was not a member of Evan Young Boarding

at the First Baptist,

and First Baptist was
located on the corner

of 14th and Red River,

where the Dell Hospital is now.

Olive Street School,

lot of the elementary schools

had little dining rooms,

but we didn't have that.

But what they did there,

they had one big sheet...

What do you call that, with the crumble?

They're good.

Crumble of sugar on top of these cakes,

like a coffee cake or
something, but it's little.

The sugars must be like
balls, or little clumps.

And they would sell those
to the kids for 10 cents,

whatever it was called,

but what the kids liked most
was to get the leavings,

the sugar crumbs,

and they had, you know,

there'd be a lot in there.

Yeah. Everybody was hungry
in those days, you know.

Nobody had too much.

- [Stephanie] So, we
talked about Olive Street.

- Olive Street.

- Uh-huh.

- I went there,

I think in about 1923,

when I was five years old.

And it was a school.

There was nothing really
outstanding about it.

What I told you was more
outstanding than anything,

but it was a good school.

All the teachers in Austin were good,

and they would whip your
hiney anytime they felt like.

Yeah, you never got a
whipping in school, did you?

(Stephanie and crew laughing)

Well, you wasn't at Olive Street.

I mean, all of 'em,

like you got...

Now, when I say whipping,

I mean a ruler or a strap, whatever it is.

They ask it,

"You want it in your
hand, or on your back?"

The fellas. Now, they didn't
treat the girls like that.

And my twin and I,

I have a twin brother,
I had a twin brother,

and that has to be in there, I guess.

I don't know.

That's up to you.

They would ask if you
wanted it on your hands,

or on your back,

and some would take it on the back.

Some would take it in front,
and some would take,
for me and my twin brother,
'cause we were the
littlest things in school.

And I got a whipping every,
I got a whipping the first
day I went to Olive Street.

No, it wasn't Olive Street.

It was Kealing.

- [Stephanie] Well, that's a good time.

We can move on to Kealing.
You want to talk about it?

- Well, I went to Kealing
when it first opened up.

I think it was '23.

Not '23.

I think, no, wasn't '23,
'cause I went five years in there.

It was '30, '32 when it opened.

That's right. I went
there when it opened up.

That was,

the Principal of that,
when it opened up,
was Mr. Iku Hurdle.

You ever hear of him?

You see that big house down there?

They're fixing it up after
years and years of care.

I remember, we lived
right behind him on 13th.

So, I remembered Iku.
Iku followed me up to DC.

When I went up to DC, he lived right...

He didn't live right around the corner,

he worked right around the corner

where I was living,

but he was,

we went in Prairieview together.

I was at this one summer session,

and,

but he moved to DC, got a job in DC.

And that was, the house
is still supposedly owned

by a fellow named Rockwell.

Rockwell, or something
like that, lives in it.

He's the only one, out
of all of the Hurdles,

who are still living.

That's Iku, and that's Luluvee,

and that was Rockwell.

But the house, still, is very loud.

Now, maybe the city got it,

or maybe it's a historical place.

- [Stephanie] I believe
that they are working

on renovating that,

that house.

- They are?

- [Stephanie] I think they're
going to move it, right?

- Huh?

- [Stephanie] They're
moving it, physically,

I heard.

- Oh, huh?

- [Stephanie] So, we
talked about, a little bit

about Kealing.

- About what?

- [Stephanie] We talked
about Olive Street,

and we talked about Kealing,

- Okay.

- [Stephanie] and then you went to?

- Anderson.

- [Stephanie] All right. LC Anderson.

- LC Anderson.

I went there in '36.

That's not right. Is that right?

'36?

- [Stephanie] I think

so, 'cause you said '32,

you were at Kealing.

- No, '32, I was at Kealing,

and then I went down.

- [Stephanie] Was Kealing, it was 6...

How many grades were there in Kealing?

'Cause I know you did three.

- I think it was three there,

and two in...

I don't remember, where I was.

I went to Kealing in
'32, and came out in '34.

'34, and went to, where'd I go then?

- [Stephanie] Then you
went to LC Anderson.

- Anderson,

but in Anderson,

we only went through the 11th grade.

It hadn't changed to 12 yet,

so we just, two grades then.

And then, I went until '36.

'36, I had it till, and
our friends did '39.

Liberal Loss is all they taught,

but I was on the tennis team,

number one for about 30 men.

(Stephanie giggles)

- And so, the Tillotson,
so a lot of people don't realize,
it was Houston. Was it Huston, or Houston?
Do you know how they...

- Sam Houston.

- [Stephanie] Sam Houston,
and then it was Tillotson.

- Yeah.

- [Stephanie] Tillotson,
is where Huston-Tillotson is now?

Is that the same location,
of where Tillotson was?

- It's Tillotson University.

- [Stephanie] Yeah,
and that's where Tillotson was.

- Yeah. That's where,

- [Stephanie] Okay.

- and we had a woman.

She was pretty old,
but she was good, good President.

She asked me, she didn't ask me.

I was on the tennis team,
and they must have been by.

The tennis teacher was also
the Treasurer of the school,

and so he saw that his tennis
players stayed, you know?

So he asked me, he say,

"Well, Dotson, can't
you pay 50 cents on it?"

I say, "No." I wasn't making any money.

I was just going.

Ms. Branch was it, Mary Branch,

was the President,

and she was a good President.

Then Dean Jones was Dean of men.

He became president after she did,

so that was continuation.

And that was a good school, too.

- [Stephanie] And you met
somebody special there?

(Stephanie giggling)

Maybe. Absolutely.

- She was mine for almost 80 years.

That's the way to do it.

- [Stephanie] Absolutely.

We need to learn from that.

- Yeah.

- [Stephanie] So, my last question for you
is going to be about Ebenezer.

- Okay.

- [Stephanie] Will you tell us,
how long you have been

a member of Ebenezer,
and if there's anything you want to share,
about like, the neighborhood
around Ebenezer,
or the church?

- Okay. I retired in 1977,
and the day I retired,
I moved into my house in Austin, in '77.

Although, I bought it in '75.

I got my son, who was married,
living in an apartment.

I asked him to move into
my house for a year,

til I retired,

and they considered to do.

I say, "You just have to
pay the bills you make,

with the utilities, and all."

I say, "You won't have to pay any taxes."

So, they did. They moved in,

but when I got down there,

they had bought a house.

They were saving money.

Where am I?

- [Stephanie] We're
talking about Ebenezer.

- Ebenezer.

Well, when I came from there,
I went around and to churches.
I went to David Chapel,
I went to St. James,
I went to First Baptist, downtown.
Where else did I go?
That was probably all I needed to go.
I didn't go to dine or go,
but I did go to Ebenezer.
Now, one of the choices
that I had to make,
my wife had changed from
Methodist to Baptist.
And so, the church we had in DC,
I served my letter.
I came through with my letter to Ebenezer.
I was Chairman of Trustee
Board at that time.
We had just bought a big church
that had known, it'd been White,
but the people in that church
were not going to build another.
They tried favorably to integrate,
but they wasn't getting much calls,
and so, they decided to disperse,
wherever they lived,
and joined the church.

And they walked out of that church,
and left food in the ice box,
left a wardrobe,
left their songbooks,
left their tables, their chairs,
enough stuff to then,
we wouldn't have to buy anything,
any furniture,
and they paid for them.
About 20 years,
they paid 5 million, \$500,000 for it,
but the people only owed \$173,
but they put a second mortgage on it,
and sold it to us for \$500,000.
And we paid, and charged us 8%,
but we had a bargain,
anyway you look at it.
But we changed a lot it the next year,
because our little,
we had a young pastor there,
and he had,
when we bought this church,
the church we came out of
had been eaten up by ants,
by roaches, by mosquitoes,

by anything that wanted a taste.
We had been in it,
and it was sitting in the middle
of a government project.
But we were able to buy a building
that the traveling people,
who went to foreign nations,
and with biblical, you know,
they were clergy,
stayed in this place about a week or so,
while they are, two weeks,
preparing to go.
It came up for sale and we bought it.
So with that little, you know,
somebody always wants a
church, don't care what.
We didn't have trouble selling that,
and selling the one where the ministers
were still living in,
before they went overseas.
And so, we bought, we
had pretty good stuff,
looking stuff to them.
Yeah, so we bought the church.
So when I came to Ebenezer,
I came by letter, as Chairman of the Board

when I joined,
because I had two sisters there,
and the last was,
it was the nearest thing
to the way our church services were,
and that's what my wife had been used to.
And so, we've been there ever since, now.
See, I never could join the Deacon board.
They would press me to
become a Deacon and rehome,
but the church I came,
but my wife would always tell me,
I'm not ready.
She wasn't talking about me.
She was talking about herself.
"I'm not ready,"
and I could never tell
that Deacon Board that.
So I came to Ebenezer, and I worked.
They came to me almost immediately.
They recognized a good temper.
But I didn't accept it the first time,
'cause I still wanted her in,
so I didn't even say it,
I just turned it down.
But the second year,

I went to my wife and I said,

"They just offered me a Deaconship.

What do you want to say about it?"

She said, "Well, I guess
I lived long enough.

I guess I could take it now."

She did!

And so, I became a Deacon,

and became a pretty good
member of that church.

- [Stephanie] That's been since '77.

- Since '77.

I started a ministry there

for the sick and (indistinct)

two weeks after I was there.

I noticed this long, listing line

that was in there every
Sunday, at that time.

They were putting it in,

and they were just ignored.

I said, "I'll question somebody."

I said, "Who's ministering to thee?"

"Nobody."

Pastor had four or five of
his favorites, you know,

but nobody else.

I was in communication,

so I took my little tape
recorder and set it up,
and I took it to the sick people,
and played it, and waited for 'em,
and talked about...
And the Pastor started to get
letters of fact, letters of fact.
And he had to announce
it, you know, in church,
who had sent letters in about it.
So one day, I said to him, I say,
"Well, Ralph, why don't you just make it
an official part of the church?"
And he said, "Well, what would you need?"
I said, "Well, I would need
about a \$4,000 budget, first,"
to change equipment,
to buy special recorders,
and to change the whole setup of the,
that would make a convenience
of recording things.
Right now, still thriving today,
we have about 19 members,
and they recognize us every year.
We've been going 36 years,
'cause we have a day, anniversary
on the day that we started, up until now.

And, he has us come down front,
and they read a little
bit of what we prepare,
and then he tells us to face the audience,
and there's a prayer for us.

So, that's Ebenezer,
that's the Ebenezer I'm in.

I'm on the Deacon Board.

I used to sing with the sanctuary choir,
used to lead songs.

I'm still singing with the male chorus,
and I was one of their singers,

but I think I'm going
to have to pull out now.

Getting too much stuff down in my throat,
at a hundred, and just, you...

What else about it? I'm on the mill.

The men, they organize like,
Men's day and Women's day,
and the women take care of everything.

They don't even allow
the Pastor in the pulpit

on woman's day,

and we don't allow women
on that, on men's Day.

That's all fun things. Any more questions?

- [Stephanie] I think that almost does it.

I want to thank you.

I have one wrap-up question, though.

For the newcomers to East Austin,

you know, the Rosewood area,

Blackshear,

Robertson Hill.

What would you want them to know?

And also for younger generations,

is there anything that you
would like for them to know

about East Austin?

About where they are,
about where they're living,

about where they're visiting?

- Well, everything looks like
a good, good place nowadays,

but can they afford?

I think the best thing
that I could tell them is

to make sure you continue your education.

You have to have some
education to get a job

that'll pay your rent and buy food,

and whatever else you need.

My granddaughter just called
me today from Prairieview,

she'll be going into junior
year, in next session,

and she doesn't have a dime. Yeah.

Ebenezer paid her.

She won scholarship there,

and I told her, I said,

her name is Jayshea.

Is that a Jay?

LaJayshea, LaJayshea. I
don't know what it means.

And I said, "Root out. Root 'em out now."

She'll go pretty good,

but she has a brother,

and she has a father,

and they're members
there, but they don't go.

And, she said, she thinks doing fine.

She's been able to stay there.

They gave her two or
\$3,000 from the church.

That's the type of

money that they give, you know?

I guess it's there from one through three,

something like that,

and I think they sent her some more money,

one other time,

but they have to borrow money.

So she's alone for schooling
when she comes out.

Everybody's young til (indistinct)

You know, otherwise, if
I go too deep in there,

you know, I like to talk
to them about church,

and some about the whole,

what I have are the blessings I've got.

They almost seem like what I ask him for.

When I actually get on
my knees and ask him for.

It seems like that's,

when I went to Washington,

I went because my home had been split up.

My wife's mother died when she was 11,

and control was turned over to her sister,

who lives in Houston.

Well, Ruth and I got there in '39,

just as I came out of school,

and we were staying in Wheatsville.

My mother was there, had moved back there,

but her brother came down from New York,

and he was on a mission to sell the house.

His name was on the deed,

and my mother's name was on it.

Well, wasn't anything she could do.

She was living there
herself, but what they did,

they moved the house to East

Darling, before she died.
And she lived in that house,
and she was, well,
we all took care of her.
She had new dresses, and ice, and other,
I took back to the store two years later.
They had registered them, you know,
and they took them back
and gave me the money for them.
So, when I went up to Dallas,
I went up because,
"Ayno," as they called
her there, was Nevada,
but they called her "Ayno," for short.
That was her mother's sister.
Ayno came down during the summer,
when I was working at the sorority hall,
it was summertime.
Think she came in without a word,
started collecting her
clothes, and took it.
Well, I didn't say anything to her,
because in my mind she
had more right than I did,
because she was left to her.
And so, I didn't say anything,
but she didn't know. Wow.

So, she took her to Houston
and she got started at school.
Well, I pondered during the summer,
and then, a light bulb lit up here.
And it said to me,
"Why don't you go to DC
and visit your uncle,
who is a postal employee?"
Everybody else did when they went there,
my Anna Fell had lived in Austin,
had met him in Austin,
but he got on at the post office,
and he was there,
so I called him.
I told him I was coming up to visit,
and I didn't get back
to Austin for 15 years,
because I was already
eligible for the draft.
This was in '41, registered for the draft.
We were technically at war with Germany.
When Germany was walking through Europe,
I mean, walking through it,
they didn't fire a shot, and took Finland.
What's the first one down, there? Low one.
I forget. They took those two,

and they were supposed to
be stopped with France.

And they walked through
France without firing a shot,

'cause they had all that
iron stuff up there,

that wouldn't shoot.

Well, anyway, that's why I went there.

And the other part is this.

Somehow or another, my wife
had one of my sperms in her,

and she discovered this about two months,
that she was expecting.

And so we relocate, I mean,

she relocated to DC with me in February.

That was down the year.

That was down,

somewhere in the latter part of the year.

So, we all got together,

and Ronnie, who's the one here,

Jordan was born in February.

So he said, now he's doing well

in real estate. I mean, he's doing well.

- [Stephanie] Thank you
so much, Mr. Dotson.