

The John S. and Drucie R. Chase Building Archive  
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Theme 3 - Race and the City of Austin

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

I grew up on this street primarily, New York Avenue. My grandmother lived on this street, my aunt lived on this street and my parents lived on this street.

Lydia Moore:

The majority of my life was spent on San Bernard, which is just up a block and around the corner.

Volma Overton, Jr.:

I'm a third generation native Austinite, born in Austin, and I am the son of Volma Overton, Sr. and also was a relatively Richard Overton so I'm familiar with a lot of things that happened in Austin back in the day from say that I can remember from the early '50s on up. A lot of civil rights issues here in Austin, Texas and so my family was involved in many civil rights pickets and other things back in the day

Freddie Dixon, Sr.:

I specifically lived in East Austin, I have always lived in East Austin, and as things might have them I'm planning on continuing to such time as I'm not able, gone to the great beyond.

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

Next door to my grand grandmother's house Jay Leonard Farmer lived as a small child, and he was the initiator of the Freedom Riders.

Arlene Youngblood:

I grew up at 1306 Cotton Street and San Bernard is perpendicular to Cotton Street, and then Angelina's the other part of it. Very beautiful flourishing neighborhood, lots of kids during the time that I was there. Everybody looked out for each other. You had Olivet Baptist Church, which was just across the street so most of us went to vacation bible school over at Olivet, as well as going to vacation bible school at my home church Wesley United Methodist Church. But it's a fun time, we had lots of professionals, black professionals who lived there from the twenties on up through. Dr. Hammond, who was a dentist. You had Fuller Mercer Sheffield Funeral Home, which was on Angelina right across from the now Carver Museum.

Lydia Moore:

Most of the students in the neighborhood were black, there were a few Anglos who lived farther up by Oakwood Cemetery in an area called Swedish Hill, a few Hispanics out farther, but all in all Robertson Hill was predominantly African American.

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

This community was self-contained, everything for the most part that we needed was in this community. The schools were very, very important. The stores, there was almost a store on every corner here. The entertainment and everything else was right here. Either you were going to work or to pay bills, but for

entertainment and other activities very seldom did you go to town. Of course we weren't welcome in town anyway so we had what we needed here and it was quite worthwhile.

Patricia Calhoun:

The segregated east side at that time was that because of segregation we had to develop our own. We had our own businesses, theaters, all kinds of businesses. And I'm learning now through all of these different projects of many more businesses than I ever thought there were.

Edward Roby:

My mother used to be a waitress right across at a place called Tony's, it was a Chinese place. And what's kind of unique about it was they had a bar, a bar like this, it goes around like this, and on this side the white people sit, and on that side the black folks sit, but my mother and them, they were waitresses and they waited on both of them.

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

My grandmother and grandfather both were cooks, and of course they worked for prominent people. My grandmother worked at the governor's mansion for three governors. My grandfather was a cook at the Driskill Hotel primarily. I mean, we couldn't help but be aware when sitting on the buses were pretty segregated, the schools were all segregated, everything was segregated.

Arlene Youngblood:

Not just because we were segregated, but because we were segregated we depended on each other and had to create our own entities, our own businesses. You're looking at the fact that we had dry cleaner businesses, we had restaurants, we had hotel. You also had shoe repair shops. I think there was Mr. Madison who mom used to have repair our shoes when we needed to get them fixed up. You had photographers. Mr. Sullivan was our photographer for our family pictures and portraits. And beauticians. Now the thing that people don't realize is that black beauticians had to learn how to do black hair and white hair. White beauticians don't have to worry about that, they just focus on doing white folks' hair, but black beauticians had to know more so that they could be more marketable and create more opportunities, so those beauticians learned how to do black hair and white hair, and that still happens today.

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

My dad for a long while had two jobs, it was an eye opener to me. I didn't realize why they had two jobs until I was a grown man, I just assumed that they were just industrious people, which they were, but they had two jobs because the first main job didn't pay enough. I just assumed that everybody worked like that. Consequently, when I finished college a time or two I had two or three jobs, I just assumed that that was the way it was going to be.

Lydia Moore:

When we traveled across Austin going farther east I noticed you would drive off of paved street onto a dirt street. The paving would end, or you might turn a corner and the entire street was unpaved. That was always kind of strange to me. I just thought oh, they haven't finished the work over here. It never occurred to me that was an intentional disparity.

Arlene Youngblood:

We did not get really paved streets, I want to say probably maybe in the '60s, I was in elementary school at that time. And so we did get paved streets. We did have the bus routes that would come down 12th Street and also Rosewood. So I wasn't aware of the disparities, I'm busy being a kid. So you become aware of the disparities when you get older.

Beryl Wainwright:

I knew I wasn't white and that there were going to be some issues, that was made very clear to me, but we didn't discuss it, it was just something that was a given in my house.

Lydia Moore:

Only rare occasions you might send to White's Pharmacy, which was downtown, my great-grandmother would often have to get a medicine there. They didn't necessarily make me feel welcome when I went in but I knew to go straight to the back to the pharmacy counter, get my medicine, pay for it and come out of the store. Now that's something that I was taught as a teenager, don't go in the store looking at anything, go straight in, get the medicine, come straight out, don't do anything other than that. Now it wasn't until I was a mid teenager I began to realize it was because I was a Negro back then, and you could see people watching you. That was very clear, you could see people watching you.

Patricia Calhoun:

I do remember going downtown to shop and it was humiliating. You'd go into a store but you could buy but you couldn't try it on. It was never really I think about physically trying it on, it was about your being next to someone white trying it on, or the salesperson having to serve you. So when my mom would go shopping, I think at some point they did have a place where you could try it on but it might be in closet with the moths and so forth, it certainly wasn't in a dressing room. And there were no restroom facilities so you had to schedule your bathroom trips. Everywhere you went you had to make sure you could get back to that building to go to the bathroom, and that was just indignities like that.

Clifton Van Dyke, Sr.:

When you go back to the late 1920s it was sort of mandated by the decision makers that African Americans live on this side of town. And of course there was very little that could be done about that at that time so we were very, very much aware.

Freddie Dixon, Sr.:

But the reason why I said all of a sudden here comes 1928, 1929, the City of Austin through its ordinances and decrees said hey, if you want to live here in Austin African Americans, then what you have to do now is we are creating a place east for you. And that was one of the worst things that could have happened was to divide because later we came and put I-35 and I-35 really then was the death nail for the coffin because it absolutely said this is a separation between the African American community and the white community.

Volma Overton, Jr.:

And the sad thing, and I realized what happened with I say us, like in my mom and dad's case, some of my friends my age parents had passed in the neighborhood and we're trying to hang onto the house. Well, this went from \$389 a year to about \$5,000. That was back when and mother's been gone 8 years.

Speaker 9:

I think that's such an important point because I hear folks saying well why don't people just hold onto these homes?

Speaker 11:

You can't.

Volma Overton, Jr.:

Taxes.

Edward Roby:

And then every time a house goes down they build another house up, which is much larger. And then what it does is run all the taxes up.

Volma Overton, Jr.:

Once your property is taken for taxes, consider... I'm just saying everybody consider something,. A lot of people we never heard before write a redemption. That's how you can get that property back from whoever purchased it on a bid.

Freddie Dixon, Sr.:

But we still have that problem of race here in Austin. I hate to say that, but it's there, and there is still the controversy going on here in Austin right now with the issue of gentrification, and certainly what has happened to our neighborhoods because of the growth and the expansion. Austin has a long history that we really have to overcome, and here we sit now with the same kind of problem before us in that African Americans now can't afford to live in this particular area because of the rising taxes, et cetera. And I'm speaking of persons who originally owned property here prior to 2000, prior to 2017 or 2014, because people have come in and bought up property, et cetera. So we don't have the capital nor the money, and where we are now is the only thing that we have is memories.

Patricia Calhoun:

The work that African Americans did when they were brought as slaves and on the plantations, and how that really helped each area grow and prosper. But see it's never been looked at in those terms because of all the other things, the emotional scars of slavery, it was never looked at in terms of a contribution.

Freddie Dixon, Sr.:

We were not passive during that time, certainly we were very progressive, but like in any family, squabbling, disagreements, et cetera, it was just too bad that we couldn't overcome the politics and the disagreements of the day. But in spite of that we do have a history of a progressiveness of a people, who were not passive, who were not participants, and still being change agents in our community. And I want to bear proof and witness to the actual evidence that there was.

Speaker:

Thank you very much.