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Ms. Lydia Moore Oral History

- All righty.

So could you please tell me your name
and where you were born?

- My name is Lydia Ann Moore.

I was born in Oklahoma,
but we have been back here
since I was a very small child.

- And what street, not the street number,
but what street did you
grow up on in Austin?

- My young childhood was on 12th Street,
closer down to King-Tears Funeral Home,
the block right before in that area.

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

- And will you share with us
what your experiences
were like growing up?

Was it a close-knit neighborhood?

Also what schools you went
to, and did most the children
in the neighborhood go
to the same schools?

- Okay, let's start with the school

'cause that's probably the easiest thing

to do first.

- Okay.

- We all went to Blackshear
Elementary School.

Mr. Rice was the principal.

Everybody in the neighborhood
went to the same school.

There were a few people on
the other side of Rosewood

who went to Holy Cross Catholic School.

And it was right next door to Blackshear.

From Blackshear, we were
in the class of the 1960s

who had the opportunity to go

to any junior high school that we chose.

And we made the effort and went

to University Junior High School,

which was across on Red River.

By now which is called the Swim Center

or the Social Work Department.

I continued to Stephen
F. Austin high school

and graduated in 1966.

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.

- One of the things that I've been
kind of learning about when thinking
about the history of East Austin,
is that there obviously were
some disparities between
like the roads and certain resources
in East Austin versus
other parts of the city.

As a child, was any of that
kind of noticeable to you all?

What were the like the roads,
were they paved in your
particular neighborhood?

What was some of that?

- Robertson Hill is
closer to downtown area
to the interstate highway.

So growing up as a child,
our streets were paved.

We saw city workers often,
garbage was collected.

Things were always kept neat and clean.

The neighborhood was very close.

So everybody's yard was manicured
down San Bernard street.

And at one time we even
had the same yard keeper

for several blocks down the street.

When we traveled across
Austin going farther east,

I noticed you would
drive off a pave 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 never, I just thought,

"Oh, they haven't finished
the work over here."

It never occurred to me, that
was an intentional disparity.

When it rained,

you'd have some streets
that had big potholes,

San Bernard didn't.

12th street as to the
area where I was didn't.

Neither did Rosewood.

11th street either because it ran right

in front of Blackshire and
Huston-Tillotson college

at that time.

Those areas were always
well kept, well paved.

Even though there were restaurants
and clubs and things on the other end,
the streets and all of the
maintenance was always well done
compared to, as you move out farther east.

And I did notice,

I just didn't know why,

I thought I knew why 'cause
they hadn't finished as a kid.

- Will you tell me about a little bit more
about Blackshire?

Were there certain teachers that kind of
stand out to you?

What was the experience
like at that school?

- Blackshire was the best
school, greatest school ever.

A friend of mine and I
occasionally sing our school song

now who remembers their
elementary school song?

But we remember parts of it
because it was so important.
Mr. Rice had us sing it often.

So that without thinking about it,
you bonded to the school and his,

I guess his focus or the way
in which he presented himself.

He expected us to be our best.

He expected us to do our best.

And so you were always
pushing, trying to do better,
trying to out do the next kid.

And that was very important to him.

He was not a principal
that we didn't know,
the kids knew the principal.

He came around the
building, we talked to him.

And so that made an impact on me
when I became a teacher.

It was important that the kids knew you,
not just as the person in the office.

He also talked with us.

We had assemblies,
we took classes that other
kids didn't know about.

We studied music class and studied
all of the great conductors,
all the great composers.

Our music teacher Mary Elizabeth Lovelady.

I think she was a Louis.
She was a Louis before.

Was a tremendous musician,
and she made sure that we
knew different types of music.

We had just great teachers,
I thought as a kid

and as I moved on to upper school,
I learned, yeah I did have great teachers
because I knew a lot
and it wasn't just me,
it was other kids that I
knew had gone to Blackshire.
We had learned a great deal.
Mr. Laurie Jones was my fifth
and sixth grade teacher.
We were the first group of kids who looped
is what they call it now.
We had the same teacher
from the fifth grade
and he moved with the same group of kids
to the sixth grade.
And that was a whole different
idea than people had,
had back then in the fifties and sixties.
So Mr. Rice was a little ahead of his time
in doing such things.
By so doing it made us
not have to start the year
over learning people, doing it.
We started the year in the sixth grade,
we hit it running.
We went to the science fair
when I was in the sixth grade,
the class did, the school did.

Lots of kids told me they didn't even know
what the science fair was.

Didn't hear about it till they got
to junior high or high school.

We took Spanish for nine
weeks in the sixth grade.

Everybody, not just me, everybody.

Back at that time Austin
and Penna school district

used to take the kids to the symphony.

I believe it was the
first Tuesday in the month

or every so many months,

I remember us going to
the symphony on a Tuesday.

You dress up, the buses
would come to get you.

And we would have studied
the orchestra pieces

before we went.

So we knew what was going on
with different instruments

and it's so vivid in my mind,

even these years later
that I learned those things

as a child in school.

So I know that Blackshire was progressive.

They were moving us forward in
preparation for integration,

which of course we didn't have any idea,

but they knew in 1960,
when the city of Austin
opened up the schools
to allow black kids to go choose
whichever junior high
they wanted to go to.

We had been told we
would be the first group
to have that opportunity,
go anywhere we wanted to,
but then we'd be ready.

We need not be afraid. We
need not feel inferior,
but we would be ready.

And so I understood even then,
that's why they were pushing us so.

Algerene Craig was the librarian.

She was the first black
certified librarian in the state.

She was the librarian at Blackshire.

And I think she had us read
every book in the library.

(chuckles) She spent a lot
of time teaching us history,

learning how to use the
Dewey Decimal System,

understanding how the library worked,

resource books and that the
library was there to help us

in our studies.

So we knew the librarian
and how to use the library.

It was wonderful for me.

We walked home. We walked to school

except when it was
raining, we didn't walk.

My mother didn't have us
(chuckles) walk in the rain,

but we had a good group of kids,
we loved each other.

We had a good time at
school and we learned a lot.

- So this is so exciting to me.

And what's so powerful is
all the different folks

that I spoke to.

You all kind of have the same
message about this experiences

and how much you all
were loved and nurtured.

And you know, all the
things that you were taught,

it's just a wonderful experience.

I'm very envious of that, was
not my experience. (chuckles)

- I think that was a key to the success

of the school that we
were not only taught,

we were nurtured.

There was discipline as

far as you need to do this,
you should do that.

But there was also a
sense of accomplishment.

It was important that we did our best
and we knew that we were doing well,

we were succeeding and they
made a big to-do about it.

- Wow, so what were some of the things
that you all did in the neighborhood?

I remember going to the Blackshire,
the mural dedication and
people were talking about
like the maple dances.

That was connected to Ebenezer?

- We didn't do the main pole,
(indistinct) did but-
- Okay.

- We would have, we had different dances
we learned in fiscal
education under Ms. Watermark,
and we would have concerts
and programs for that.

PTA meeting was a big thing.

If you couldn't get to PTA,
somebody had to be there.

'Cause the kids were going
to be on program in some way.

That was very important.

And so I think it just
connected us to the school,

the kids in a different
way than is done now.

- And a lot of the teachers
had advanced degrees from like

Ivy league schools and-

- Mr. Rice's degree came
from Columbia University.

And as I grew older and found that out,

I said, "Oh, that was some of what,

why he was more advanced I guess,"

because he seemed to be pushing us

in a direction that some
of my friends who went

to other schools were not.

I would say from elementary
school at Blackshire,

a group of us went to
University Junior High School.

At the time we just thought the school

was named for the University of Texas

because it was near the campus.

It was not until I was in college

that I learned the
University Junior High School

was a lab school.

So I had no idea and I'm sure
other kids didn't either,

but we had teachers very much

like the teachers at Blackshire.
They looked like a teacher in the book,
the ladies were dressed a certain way.
They had on heels or real nice flats.
Lots of teachers had their,
what we call 'em Daniel
Greenhouse shoes to the side
and we'd put 'em on when they
were walking around the room.
Same thing was true at UJH.
They were always dressed like what
our image of a teacher was.
And that's real stereotypic
but that's what I'm saying is true for me.
The teachers at University of Junior High
looked just like the
teachers at Blackshire,
men and women. They had on suits,
they took their coats off,
put 'em on the back of their chair.
They unloosened their
tie, but they had a tie on
and they were very formal.
They were loving with us,
but they were still very formal in the way
in which they instruct.
And that was also true for Blackshire.

So I think it was an
advantage for the group of us

that did go because we weren't afraid.

We knew we were smart.

We knew we had been prepared
and we knew we could stand.

We were a little nervous
about what might happen to us,

but I think we were more secure

because they had really
told us, you can do this,

you're smart enough.

You might get called names, but

you're going to be able to
stand toe to toe with anybody.

And that was true for most of us.

- What were certain stores or places

that you would go in the
neighborhood or close

to the neighborhood and were
there certain community folks

that stand out for you?

- Okay, let me say most of my life,

that side of town was what
is called now a food desert.

There were no big stores, big
grocery stores in that area,

but we had lots of neighborhood stores.

And one of them was Stark store
at the corner of San Bernard

and 12th, right across from
King-Tears funeral home.

Mr. Stark store, there were five brothers

and they each had a store
someplace in Austin.

And that's where you went
to buy your groceries

during the week.

On the weekend, you might
go out of the neighborhood

someplace to a big store
ATD or something like that.

Safeway eventually came
to the neighborhood

where I-35 and 12th street cross.

I think they're putting
apartments there now.

But other than that, there
weren't any stores per se,

until later, the funeral
homes were all down

the street. King-Tears was
on the corner of 12th street,

Phillips and Upshaw was
down the corner at Cormell.

Fully Sheffield was up the corner across

from where the Carver
Branch Library is now.

So we always knew when there
was a funeral going on,

'cause you were right there
and could see all that.

That was important.

When I was a kid and funeral perceptions
came past our house.

If we were out, everybody
stopped, whatever you were doing,

people stopped, I
remember that so clearly.

And when we would go down 11th street,

even the people who might
not have been necessarily

church related would take off their hats

and stand, people would stand quietly

until the procession went by.

And that always moved me
to have such respect for,

for people, no matter who
you were or where you were,

that always stood in my mind as a kid.

When I grew up, every funeral
home had the ambulance.

So we heard ambulances
running all the time

up and down 12th street

'cause you had three
funeral homes in the area.

That was a big thing.

We didn't have any stores
to go to, to buy things.

So you always had to go across,

back then it was East Avenue.

It's now in a regional highway, I-35,
but you had to go across to downtown.

If you took the bus,

you went down 12th street
all the way to the end,

east end bus and you'd go downtown.

You'd get all downtown
at sixth in Congress,

take the bus and come back home

or whichever other bus you needed.

Very few times, did you
go past Congress Avenue

to go shopping?

Very, very unusual to do that.

You stayed in the same kind of area.

And I didn't know why
until I was much older,

but everything you needed,

you had to make sure
you got it in that area

and either rode the car
or the bus and came back,

(coughs) excuse me.

You didn't venture a whole lot across.

We went to West Austin
because I went to school there

at Austin high school.

But other than that,

you might drive around
and look at some of the big pretty homes,
but you didn't spend a lot
of time on that side of town.
And that I do remember,
we had neighborhood policemen.
So everybody knew Mr. Warren Jones.
He was one of the policemen in the area.
Mr, they called him Sleepy Houston,
that was Miss Alice Houston's husband.
So we knew the policeman.
You saw them often.
They were like people in the neighborhood
who just happened to work
for the police department.
I don't remember being afraid
of them or being scared
in any way, but I knew when
I crossed Congress avenue,
it was different policemen.
And so it was an attitude
of be mindful of that.
Be cautious and (coughs) excuse me,
the idea that I felt different
when I crossed over.
I didn't even think about
it until much later.
I just knew that I was

in a different world

and I had to be more alert.

Even as a kid.

- I know people mention a lot,
the Harlem theater and Hillside Pharmacy,
were those-
- And Yate's drugstore also.

The theater was down farther 12th street
before you get to Shikan.

And that was the black theater.

Most kids got to go on Saturday evening
or midday on Sundays,

but we didn't get to go on
Sundays, but lots of kids could.

And they walked past the house,
going to the movie theater.

It was clean. It was nice.

It was a good place to
go and enjoy yourself.

Had the best chili burgers in the world.

Don't know how they made them,
but they were wonderful (indistinct).

Drugstore, you had Yates drugstore
at the corner of Shikan and 12th.

And you had hillside at Rosewood,
the intersection of Rosewood and 11th

right up by well across the
street was what used to be

called Charlie's Playhouse.

One of the major clubs in town.

You couldn't get through
there on Sunday nights

when we'd come in from church

because everybody was there,
white, black, Hispanic,

lots and lots of people would be there.

But if you needed medicine,

you went to one of those two places.

(coughs) Excuse me, in rare occasions,

on rare occasions you might
send to whites pharmacy,

which was downtown.

My great-grandmother would often have

to get her 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.

Scarboroughs was a clothing
store at the corner of sixth

and Congress, it's where
the bus transferred.

Beautiful clothing, but you
couldn't go inside the store.

You had to go down the
staircase to shop in the,

what we would call the basement.

But my great grandmother
got on the elevator

and we rode upstairs to pay her bill.

We walked through the first floor

and I guess 'cause she was older

they didn't say anything to her,

but you'd always notice somebody
was following or watching.

You could always see it.

It's very obvious. Those
things I do remember.

Yeah.

- Okay.

Well thank you. And then
my last question is,

is really about what you want,
would like folks to, who
are new to the community
and people that may not know the history
of specifically East Austin to know about
like where you grew up in your experience.

And I know that's a big
question. (chuckles)

- Well, I can only answer part of that now
'cause it's something I really would need
to think more about.

But I would say probably the first thing
is when I grew up the
neighborhood was just that
it was a neighborhood.

I spent a lot of my time
running errands for the ladies
in the neighborhood.

'Cause a lot of them were widows
and they didn't have children
or they didn't have children here.

So I ran errands for them.

I knew everybody, not just
me but my sister, all of us.

We knew everybody in the
neighborhood within a three to four
block area all the way around.

You knew the names of people.

They knew who you were.

I never felt afraid or
ignored or anything,

any danger in my neighborhood.

I moved from my home because
the neighborhood has changed

in a way that is unfriendly.

Most of the people on the
street where I grew up are new.

And when I say new, they're
new to the neighborhood.

Some are new to the city,

but most all of them are
new to the neighborhood.

There is a sense of, I don't know you.

I don't want to know you.

I don't want you to know me.

There is a sense that I'll put up a fence.

Matter of fact,

I'll put up a wooden fence

so you can't even see anything

and they didn't say something,

but it's the way in which you live

that makes people feel

you've come into the neighborhood,

but you're not interested
in being a neighbor.

You don't want to be a neighbor.

If I speak to you, you turn your head.

You make it clear to me you
don't want to talk to me.

Now you will talk to me
if there's a complaint.

If you have something that
you see that you don't like.

So I would say to new people coming in,

people want to feel safe and
secure in their neighborhood

where you live every day.

Yes, everybody's our neighbor,

but I'm talking immediate neighborhood.

You want to feel like you
can walk out of your house

and somebody knows your name.

If something happened
to you, somebody cares.

Somebody is checking on
you, watching the house.

If anybody came up,

you want to feel that kind
of security in your home.

And I think that's gone.

The other thing is people want to feel

that they're respected,

that my property is just as
important as your property.

And I think that's not true.

I feel that the city,

whatever the reason, whoever's doing it,

I don't know the powers that be.

But there is a feeling that
somebody's got their foot on

your neck and is intentionally
taking your property.

Whether it's through
taxes or code violations

or complaints or whatever,
people are not at home.

And I'm not just speaking for myself,

I'm speaking for other
people in the neighborhood.

I still have family and
friends in the neighborhood

and they're always looking
over their shoulder,

"What am I going to get
today? Is there another code

violation? Are my taxes
going up so I can't pay it?

Am I going to have to borrow,
how am I going to get this

paid?" And that's still going on now.

I would like the new people to understand

everybody's been new somewhere.

Try to have respect for the
people who are already there,

respect them and understand

there was a history before you got there.

Be respectful of that.

Everything doesn't have to be changed.

Brought up to date.

There are many things
that are from the past

that are important to know now.

Respect that. I have a story.

You have a story.

That's why I appreciate this so much.

Listen to the stories of the people.

Don't come in with everybody
new writing my story.

It is resentful to me.

It's disrespectful to me.
You can't write my story.

You can write what I tell you.

So be respectful of people's
heritage of their history,

of their story.

I want to hear your story.

You're coming in from some
place, I want to hear about you.

I want to learn about
you and we can only learn

to be respectful of each other
if we get to know each other.

So we have to be more loving,

more open to one another
and really mean it.

We don't have to be bill's and buddies.

You don't have to bring
me cake and cookies,

but we have to be respectful

and loving of each other as mankind.

Thank you for the opportunity to share,

what a privilege it has been.

There's so much I could say,

maybe someday a lot of us older people

will get together and maybe
talk a little bit more about,

it's very refreshing for
me to be able to talk

about the good times.

Yes, we had some bad times,
but they weren't as much.

And if I could say this recently,

I found out I never understood why,

when my friends from
Mississippi or Louisiana

or Alabama or Arkansas,

when they talk about their experiences,

they just sounded so
wretched, so horrible to me

or even East Texas.

And I would say, "We didn't
go through that in Austin."

I didn't know until this past weekend

that the union soldiers were still located

in the Austin area for a long
time after the civil war.

So although people may have wanted
to do some things, they couldn't.

And so that meant that there
were more blacks in the area

who were able to own
land, able to have stores,

able to have their own
businesses that other blacks

in other areas couldn't

because the clan couldn't
do some of the things

they would've done here.

Because those troops were here.

I didn't know that.

I just thought people were
more decent in Austin.

So there's a lot of
history that if we knew it,

we'd understand how the city developed.

The city's no longer the city
I grew up in, but nobody's is.

But I do feel that there is a disrespect

that has permeated the
air and it's very hurtful.

I feel badly that people in their old age,

a lot of people in their old
age are feeling disrespected,

trampled on and hurt

and somewhere, somehow

we have to correct some of that.

Now I can say thank you for
the opportunity. (chuckles)