

THE INSTITUTE OF TEXAN CULTURES

Oral History Office

INTERVIEW WITH: Harry Burns
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PLACE: Cheri Wolfe's Office
The Institute of Texan Cultures
INTERVIEWER: Cheri Wolfe, Research Associate

TAPE ONE

CW: I'm speaking with Mr. Harry Burns about the Civil Rights' movement in San Antonio, and his role in it. And we are starting over because we had a little bit of technical difficulty, but Mr. Burns would you mind telling me where and when you were born?

HB: I was born in Seguin, Texas, November 11, 1922.

CW: And your parents' names?

HB: My father's named Harry Burns, and my mother was Estella Burns.

CW: Uh-huh. And your father, what did he do for a living?

HB: He was a carpenter, and my mother was a home economics, ... teacher.

CW: Uh-huh. And what we started to talk about just a few minutes ago, was what um what it was like for a Black child growing up in Seguin at that time.

HB: The conditions in Seguin for Blacks was a little better off than they were in some of the other Texas and southern towns. Seguin is a small town and there was a relationship that existed with the people; as long as you did "stay in your place", as they referred to it, you got along fairly well. Ah, the it was

interesting-the political situation was very interesting there at that time. The southern part of Seguin were Republicans and the northern part of Seguin were the Democrats. We who lived-I lived in the southern part of Seguin and-ah-my people and other Black adults at that time we voted with the Republican Party, although there was the Democrat they could not vote in the primary election ... with the Democratic Party because the Republican Party was real small at that time. They didn't have primaries, so the only pla-- area where which they could vote was in the general elections.

CW: Was the ah poll tax a big hardship for your family at that time?

HB: Well, it was a \$1.75, but it's just the principle of having to pay for the right to work to vote.

CW: Was there, do you remember a movement at that time to try to do something about it?

HB: Oh, yes, there was a definite movement in ah in all of Texas to try to get Blacks the right to vote in the primary elections; and then the Democratic primary election mainly because the Republican Party was very small all over Texas at that time. And so, therefore, the Democrats had the control over the elections. And when you voted in the Democratic primaries, then you were really handicapped in your exercising your right to vote. But-ah-in seven years ah back in the early '40s, ah-the Blacks acquired the right to vote in the Democratic primaries as a result of a Civil Rights' lawsuit called the Allright case. Dr. he he was a

doctor who was a plaintiff in the case, and as a results of the decision of the law case, Blacks acquired the right to vote in the Democratic primary.

CW: That's something I definitely want to come back and talk to you about. But I had a couple of questions about your childhood, first, while I'm thinking about it, if you don't mind? One is, when we had the false start while ago, you were talking about the theaters.

HB: Oh, yes, well first I might start to say to say that I actually began as an active member of the NAACP Youth Council at the age of twelve.

CW: Really?

HB: So I have actually been in the movement since I was twelve years old; which is quite a few years. Ah-as there was a legal requirement to prepare segregated public facilities with restaurants, theaters, and so on at that time. But we had had a- Blacks could go to the theaters, but they had to sit in the balcony. Through a series of years of protestations, we eventually acquired the right to vote-not vote I mean-to attend the theaters on an integrated basis. That wasn't until the late '50s early '60s.

CW: So when you were growing up as a twelve year old, what can a twelve year old do in the NAACP? I'm amazed at your political awareness at that age.

HB: Well, we had a very active youth group, and we could learn the basics of the Civil Rights' Movement. As I said, we

participated in the demonstrations against ah the segregated theaters and other public facilities, and ah-- Oh yeah, one thing we were really active in, as youths, was to get to encourage Blacks to vote, to work to do business with Black business places.

We little groceries stores and any other little business entrepreneurs that we had in our community.

CW: Buy with your people?

HB: Right.

CW: And tell me about it. What did you, what were those campaigns like?

HB: Well, I mean, say for example you had a little small grocery store that was owned by a Black, and we would try to encourage our people to do business with those businesses. And they had promote special buy days, and we would encourage the people to go to those places. And then, also, we tried to encourage those businesses to hire young youth to work in their stores.

CW: Was this a personal thing, I mean, did you go like door-to-door and talk and say this.....hand out pamphlets?

HB: Oh, yes, right.

CW: All of that.

HB: All that, yes.

CW: Well, and I guess that's something, you know, you could use the energy and the legs of a twelve year old going door-to-door.

HB: Yeah, that's true.

CW: Yeah. What other stuff did you do at that age?

HB: At the age of twelve?

CW: Yeah, I mean within the movement, within the NAACP?

HB: Well, we had movements to try to encourage youth to develop their talents and work toward getting an education; and promote-to get scholarships for young people who were finishing high school and going to college. Those were some basics.

CW: How did that work? Did you try to raise money locally or--

HB: There were scholarships funds that we had access to.

CW: Uh-huh. And-ah-in terms of encouraging students to go on to college,-how did you do that or try to do that?

HB: Well, we start with them in the high school and have them to discover their talents and what they would like study at the colleges that they could go to. I mean, they were limited in curriculums that they could go to. That's why most of Black professors were teachers, preachers, and but then-later on in the years, it tried to improve after we had changed the laws governing the requirement of segregated schools.

CW: Were your parents very active?

HB: Well, they weren't as active as I was. I mean they were always members; they spoke out and worked with us, but they weren't out boycotting and demonstrating like we were.

CW: How come?

HB: Well, it's just that old days that they came through -and ah- But they would encourage us to do it. You know.

CW: Um that's interesting.

HB: Yeah.

CW: Did they, do you think they worried about the ramifications

that your mother might lose her job because here's her son out--

HB: There were many of them that did have that fear, but my mother never did have that fear. She was militant woman. My daddy was kind of quiet, but not my mother.

CW: What do you mean militant? Can you think of ah an example for me?

HB: No, I-I didn't say she was militant, I said she was active in the movement; but we were militant because we would speak out and demonstrate against the conditions.

CW: A few minutes ago you said that ah Seguin was a pretty good place to live because ah, you said something about people knowing their place or knowing--

HB: Well, and another thing the the Black population was small. That was one thing that influenced it. And many places-you take for example, one of the areas that had real bigots were East Texas, where you also had a large population of Blacks. And there were some real demonstrations in those areas.

CW: Did your parents give you any advice about how to get along when you were growing up?

HB: Well, some but really I had a mentor--

CW: Oh.

HB: Who was our family doctor. Who really gave me my guidance, he was-at one time he was-the local person in NAACP. I used to attend many of the meetings both not only and on a local level but on a national level with him.

CW: Really? As a teenager?

HB: Oh, yeah. Up until I was out of high school, and then even after I was out of high school and went off to college whenever I'd come back home I was involved in--

CW: What was his name?

HB: Dr. C. B. Friday.

CW: Friday?

HB: Right.

CW: And how what were you thinking at that age? I mean most kids are out worrying about making the football team or something and here you are going to state and national NAACP meetings.

HB: Well, it was just the way my life was being directed.

CW: How did the other kids perceive you?

HB: Well, there were certain ones of them who were involved in our movement. I mean it wasn't a one-person movement. There were some -they were encouraged by their parents to participate. And after I went to college in Austin, at Tillotson College, and I organized the first college chapter of NAACP in Texas there. I served in that the ... organization until I graduated in 1943. Then I immediately went into the military and that was where it was real challenge---in the military. The military was segregated, and we were treated very rudely in many places, both in this country and overseas too. And-ah-one thing we used to do in military, we could not actually promote NAACP membership in the service directly. We would encourage all service..... to take out membership in NAACP and, since the mail was censored ah, we encouraged each person to take out their own individual membership

and mail so it would have to go through the censoring officer. And they would kind of get bad with us sometimes because of that type of action.

CW: Did they ever take any recourse against you?

HB: Well, not against me, but because they really wasn't nothing they could do. I mean they would censor our mail; but they really would concern themselves abouttrying and-ah-over here in the country and overseas, too we were treated both very bad and in both areas. I mean we come-for example-I went to Europe for World War II and when we came back from overseas we came back to Virginia, and they also had German POWs in that same area; and the POWs the German POWs-were treated better than we were.

CW: How so?

HB: Well, I mean where our living quarters and our privileges in this community, and in the same old ways it was before.

CW: Were you in the army?

HB: Yes.

CW: Uh-huh. What position did you have and what ranking?

HB: It was it was interesting thing. Let me give you the whole background of it.

CW: Okay.

HB: Ah in the high school I attended in Seguin, they didn't offer any clerical courses like typing and things like that; so we had a principal who had an old beat-up typewriter and he used to just let us hunt and peck on his typewriter. I always wanted to type and-ah,- before I finished high school, that there was a lady who

came from California to Seguin to take care of her grandmother and ah she was very good clerk steno and she took some of us in and gave us the basics of typing while she was there in Seguin. Then when I graduated from high school, I went to college in Austin and I got a job working at the college because I was able to type. Then I graduated out high school and went immediately into the Army and I got me a job-my position-in the military was as a typist, clerk typist. And ah I advanced in other areas of the clerical field as a results of my background in clerk-in typing. When ah I got out of the Army, I-was-able to get me a job in federal civil service as a clerk typist. So typing has really been a background of mine all my life.

CW: And why were you interested in that at an early age?

HB: Well, because it was something I hadn't been able to do and lots of our people hadn't been able to do. Its just these doors were opening to me, I tried to use them. Then, after I came out of the Army, I took this exam for clerk typist and got this job in federal civil service. Now I had my-had accrued my-GI eligibility to an education while as a results of my military career, but it was limited as far as schools that we could attend, the colleges especially. So I took the job as a clerk typist in federal civil service then I began to try to exercise my rights with the GI Bill for education. And ah so while I was working in federal civil service, I wanted to be an accountant, but there was no school in this area that I could attend that would admit me to the school of accounting. So I kept on fighting the issue and I would apply to

the local- I began to apply at the local colleges-St. Mary's, Trinity, and so on and they wouldn't accept me. Then, after-when the Sweat case against the University of Texas was rendered, the colleges that were members of the Association of Law Schools said we will accept Black students in our law school. But I I wasn't interested in law at all; but I said if-so they told me that we will accept you if you want to go to law school. So I-I said I will go to law school just because that was the only area they would accept me. So then after-I get-after St. Mary's going to pay me for two years, they finally decided to admit me to the Business School. That's how I got into Business School, graduated--

CW: Were you the first one?

HB: Oh, yeah, yeah. From St. Mary's, right. And-ah-I got into school, the School of Accounting, then the Law School a couple of years and showed that I really didn't want it. But then I went on I-I finished in accounting; I got me a position in federal civil service as an accountant. But I never was able to become a certified public accountant because the CPA before you had to have a year's experience at a CPA firm and the CPAs wouldn't accept us in their offices. So I worked-tried for federal civil service as an accountant-but I never-see it's not accounting in the government is not the same as accounting in public sector. So I got I retired as an accountant, but I never was a CPA.

CW: Tell me about your experience being the first Black in the St. Mary's Law and Business School.

HB: Well, it was an interesting thing; reasons why they had said, in the beginning, why they wouldn't accept me was because they were afraid they would have a direct affect on their white students, that they would withdraw and not keep up the enrollment.

So I kept on coming; I said they weren't being really true. So when they accepted me into the Law School, and the Business School, they decid-- and saw that this adverse condition would not really exist then they began to open the doors to other Black students. So, as a result of that, several Blacks are graduates of Law School and several Blacks are accountants from St. Mary's, and they're in all parts of the school now.

CW: So we're talking here, ah, early '50s?

HB: Early '52.

CW: And the way you're characterizing it, it sounds like the St. Mary's -ah- administrators were sort of logical and not obstructionists. Is that true? That was---

HB: Interesting thing. They were Catholic brothers too. That was what really concerned me; although some of the local Catholic laymen went to bat for me too, except the lay people....

CW: So it sounds like it wasn't that much of a struggle?

HB: Well, it was a delaying tactic though.

CW: Yeah.

HB: Yeah.

CW: Which is a different different way to do that. Weren't there a couple of demonstrations by St. Mary's students. I think I have some photos---

HB: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

CW: Was that during your time there?

HB: Right, right.

CW: Can you talk about that?

HB: Oh, yeah. Yes. It really didn't, cause I was primarily the Guinea pig at that time the; what happened, the demonstrations were later on, when the St. Mary's students had joined us against public facility like theaters and things of that nature, and lunch counters. That's why they were-like we were going to demonstrate at a restaurant, they would go with us and sit down with us.

CW:

HB: Right.

CW: Because it was a Catholic school, you think?

HB: Well, no. It was no lawsuit because it was there own young convictions. I don't think the school had too much to do with it.

CW: So how were you--which led me to the other question. How were you treated? I mean you were the only Black in the classroom. You said they didn't leave school, the other students.

But how did they treat you personally?

HB: Well, I-I it was all right cause see I was I first entered Law School and I was the only Black student in the Law School at first. But then, a couple of years later, more came in; and some have practiced long enough to retire now.

CW: So they were pretty much open and it wasn't--

HB: Oh, yeah. Once it was opened, it was opened. And the other colleges--Trinity and Our Lady of the Lake and all the other

colleges began to open up. I-I after I left St. Mary's, I went to graduate school at Trinity in urban studies. Ah ah urban studies program was really, the head of the urban studies program was Black, Dr. Earl Lewis. He still lives. He's retired, still lives here in San Antonio. And ah lots of students from other cities in the urban studies program.

CW: And this was mid '50s?

HB: Let's see. Entrance to St. Mary's was in mid '50s, but ah the entrance to St.--Trinity was early '60s.

CW: And already there was a Black head of the department? That's---

HB: Oh, yeah. When urban when the..... he came in and started the urban studies program.

CW: What do you think the role of the returning World War II veterans really was, in terms of the Civil Rights' Movement?

HB: Well, that's when you really had the demonstrations, and I think they had real-ah-help in changing the conditions. Because it was very difficult for Black military servicemen to accept the treatment that they were receiving, after they had gone through the experience that they had been in actually, while overseas in war, especially in combat. But they still have that attitude.

CW: Were there-ah-veteran's organizations that were pretty politically active or any kind of formal----

HB: O-only, no they only worked-the real military-only worked with ah an organization like the NAACP. They had to do that way cause you had a basic veteran's organization, with the Veteran's

of Foreign Wars, American Legions, see. But but they even had separate Black; units they didn't have ... integrated. I think the VFW was a little more integrated than the American Legion though.

CW: And I'm sure you were active in the NAACP during your college years.

HB: Oh, yeah. I-I organized the first college chapter at Houston Tillotson. And then then I graduated from college and went to the Army, I continued to promote the NAACP through membership in the Army.

CW: ...

HB: And, after I came out of the Army, I came back to Seguin, and I ah worked with as a youth director of the NAACP Youth Council. And then I left Seguin, when I got married, cause my wife said Seguin was too small for her to live in. I came to San Antonio and immediately began working with the San Antonio branch. I was the secretary of the NAACP when I came to San Antonio. And then, in four years, I-ah-became the vice president and the next year I was the president.

CW: And I want to hear about that whole career beginning with your duties as a youth director in Seguin.

HB: Well, as a youth director, my primary interest was trying to stimulate the young people and show them that they had a role in the program; and how they should go about doing it; and to ... train them for the movement.

CW: How did you go about doing that?

HB: By getting them involved in different programs and activities of the organization.

CW: Uh-huh. Like, like what?

HB: Well, ah they were part of the theater movement in Seguin, against the local Well, what I mean is they participated in the trade with Black businesses. They were would encourage their parents; they'd pass out books, handbills, and things

CW: So really the same things you had done as a boy--

HB: That's right.

CW: were still you know valid goals for the movement.

HB: Right.

CW: And then when you moved to San Antonio and took over as secretary, what kind of duties did you have?

HB: Well, my main position was secretary, but I did go ... and serve as secretary because we were all actively involved in the program at that time. And one of the hot issues at that time was the right to vote in the primary elections, and we worked with that. Because the-ah-doctor, that was the plaintiff in the case, was from Houston because the whole state of Texas was supporting him because it was affecting all Black's right to vote in the primary election.

CW: Would you like some water?

HB: No, thanks. I don't think water I know--still picking up ...

CW: Yeah. Yeah, you're fine. That's why I check this every now and then to make sure I can hear you. What ah what were the other major objectives of the NAACP when you were serving as secretary?

CW:membership drives ... that were important?

HB: Oh, yeah. ... leave it up to me was school desegregation. We started our movement in school desegregation; and they still seemed like the Sweat case was the was the case that really broke down the barriers of the University of Texas Law School. That's what got me into Law School, because ah the results of the Sweat case-these schools that were members of the University of Texas,-not University, of University Law Schools-said that they didn't want to open their doors for law students accept that's why St. Mary's because of the Sweat case.

CW: After that case what kinds of things were the NAACP working towards?

HB: NAACP is-is primarily a legal organization in the early days. They worked on-ah-desegregation in public schools, law school, and public accommodations, and down the line.

CW: And it sounds like there were, or I'm imagining, I mean, statewide strategies sessions where everybody got together and talked about maybe....

HB: Oh, yeah. We had a state organization. We still do have. We have ah a state organization; a regional organization, and we have a national organization. So all those others coordinated and worked together on the issues.

CW: Ah, and I mean did you literally, and I'm asking this because nobody's really written a history of the NAACP. And this, you know, we don't have a sense,-I want to preserve for history what your goals were, what your setbacks were; what you thought you

could accomplish; what proved to be too difficult; ah any of those kinds of issues-I'm really interested in. Ah, so you started at the university level or well the law school-and then; why do you think the desegregation case came at UT Austin and came in the Law School as opposed to anywhere else in the state, in any other school?

HB: Because of the the Sweat case legal case. That's one that they had the-national organization had been working on for many years, and ah as ah encouraged that. Thurgood Marshall was the legal council at the national level; and the NAACP, at that time-and basically it still is-basically a legal organization. And as they break down the different barriers, the right to vote in the Democratic primary election that came even before the Sweat case.

CW: Tell me school desegregation in San Antonio.

HB: Well, school desegregation in San Antonio had st-started with the with the Supreme Court case on school desegregation. And ah San Antonio-we had after after had the Supreme Court case was decided,-then we here in San Antonio filed a case against the San Antonio Independent School District. And they battled a few years out of court. And then they decided, after after the Supreme Court case was rendered, they decided that they wouldn't that they would admit Blacks into the public schools of San Antonio.

(On this side of the cassette tape Cheri is talking to someone named Ernie.)

CW: You were saying that the experience--

E: That experience stayed with me, and ah I observed all through the rest of my life. That in certain situations there would be a very cordial ah relationship between me and some of my Anglo friends.

CW: White liberals?

E: White liberals until we got into a situation where there were a majority of Whites, who may not approve of this person. And if I might use the term, they wanted to avoid the possibility of being called in those days "a nigger lover." I'm sure you've heard that term.

CW: Yes.

E: And so ah when I was with a friend as long as we were, you know, in a setting ah that was not intimate, but more or less intimate, we had best kind of relationship. I guess the illustration of that, just one that comes to mind, ah this was after oh I was in the ministry, and ah went to a ah meeting of our Board of Education of the Methodist in Grand Rapids, Michigan. And ah a school superintendent from Phoenix City, Alabama, was at the meeting also. I was on the staff of our Board of Education in Nashville. We went to ah we were there, and this school superintendent for some reason or another felt that he was ostracized. You know, you could tell he was a southerner--

CW: A White man ...?

E: And a White man. And he sought me out and ah, of course, I was sort of floating around, you know, with no close relationship and a staff person too. And we developed a friendship during that the week's meeting. And ah in our free time we visited with each other, and I think shared two or three meals. And ah I'm trying to recall his name, but I can't. But anyway, at the end of the third day thereabouts after we, you know, came to know each other and loosen up and free up any ... I remember him saying, "Ernie, you know, I couldn't do this with you in Phoenix City, Alabama." He says, "If I did, you know, I would be fired from my job." And he says, "You know, I I-I feel deeply about my Colored, those were the terms ..., my Colored principals." And he said, "I'd just wish I could be freer, you know, in terms of my association with them." He says, "When they come in to see in my office, we sit down and talk just like I'm talking to you." But he said, "If I treated those ah ah Colored principals like I treat my White principals, the city would be against me and I-I learned that." At least that was a lesson that stayed with me through my growing up that when you are in an intimate situation, you know, ah you can be cordial and friendly. But once you get out there in the public where there are a large number of White persons, you have to be a bit careful.

CW: Didn't you see that as the way to get along or did it frustrate you as a deacon?

E: Well, it I must say that it frustrated me and it and it and it and I had a feeling of being hypocritical. Ah--

CW: I meant did you think the Whites were being hypocritical for being friends with you in one situation and essentially turning their back in another?

E: Well, yes hypocritical but I just felt that they were trying to save their own skin, you know, to keep from being labeled and ah ah ah I-I can remember the reaction of some persons who wanted to be opened, and what I'm trying, but I had read about so many ah Black men in particular being beaten or sometimes killed in terms of their relationship with White women. And I had another friend, I know one in particular, ah oh I believe it was with Virginia Henry. She was on the staff of the Board of Education, and ah ah she was genuine, you know. I was Ernie, and she was Virginia. And wherever I saw Virginia, she would always come up, "Oh, Ernie" and greet me, you know, with a hug. Ah I happened to have been oh in an airport somewhere and ah Virginia approached me, but I avoided having her embrace me.

CW: In public?

E: In public like that, yes. Ah I don't--

CW: ... I'm sorry. Is this the early '50s we're talking about here or--

E: Yes, this is this is early '50s, this is early '50s.

CW: In Tennessee?

E: Ah yes, uh-huh. And that's, you know, when ah oh when the move-- after the after the war. But again, I ah, if you're speaking of experiences, when it really dawned on me, and I began to have some strong feelings about it about the whole matter of

segregation ah-- Another outstanding ah ah experience that ah has, you know, has lived with me is ah the experience I had when I went to seminary. I was in ah I went to a theological seminary in Madison, New Jersey. Ah the seminary and the college, it was related to a Brothers' College, the ah the Navy had established a B12 program--

CW: What's that?

E: That was a training program for naval officers.

CW: And this was the post World War II era?

E: No, this was 1943, 1943 to 45, when we were in, you know, we were at war. We were at war.

CW: You were drafted or uh?

E: No, see I was deferred. I got a--

CW: Okay.

E: I got a 4D deferment. Ah I was in my, let's see sophomore 1943 ah yes, I was in my sophomore year because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in '41, yes. And this was in '40, well in '41 I got the deferment and I was, yes, I was a sophomore in college. And I had already declared for the ministry, and so--

CW: This was in Houston or ...

E: At Samuel Houston in Austin.

CW: Yeah, ...

E: At Samuel Houston College in Austin. At Samuel Houston College in Austin, Texas. And ah so they the government was deferring all of the young men ah who had declared for the ministry; had indicated their intent to be ministers ah were

deferred. And ah that's way I got a 4D classification rather than 1A. And ah so I finished ah in 1943, and went to Drew and ah, why I had married. I married that summer after I finished college, and ah well things were where I needed funds and ah I was looking to the future, what am I going to do? And ah the ah money was not, you know, was not available. My parents did not have any. And ah I was receiving some scholarships, but with a wife and a young baby, a boy, ah there was more money needed, you know, for books and ah just to support the family and that sort of thing. So I decided I talked with some of the ah Anglo fellows on campus who were walking around in their Navy garb--

CW: This was an integrated school?

E: Yes, uh-huh. This was in '43. They were accepting the Blacks students and that's another story about how I got to Drew ah. But anyway, when and I can come back to that if we need to. But I went into New York City to the recruiting office, the Navy Recruiting Office, and here I was in the same seminary as my Anglo colleagues. I was passing all of my grades, student in good standing, and ah had been granted my local preacher's license in the Methodist Church. So that everything was just positive so far as qualifications were concerned, I thought. And I went to the Naval Recruiting Office there in New York City, and they just politely told me that they weren't accepting the Blacks, recruiting Blacks, for the Navy chaplains.

CW: What kind of impact do you think that the World War II veterans really had on the Civil Rights Movement?

E: Well, you see that was in forty, see ah, the cessation of hostilities I remember going into New York City at times where for, let's see, I believe VJ Day was in eight--

CW: ...

E: And well not VJ, VE Day I get them but they both happened in 1945, I believe VJ Day VJ Day and that's Japanese. That was in August of '45 and VE Day was in that in April?

CW: I thought that was in the spring ...?

E: Yeah, it was in the spring. So, but anyway, I went to ah went to Times Square for both of those. And then immediately following that ah I graduated from seminary in September of '45, and I went to ah ah Alabama. I was received an assignment to ah to ah to Tuskegee Institute.

CW: Did you want to go back south after ...?

E: Yes, I had, yes I had planned to come back to Texas, which was in the West Texas Conference, which I was remembering. And when ah I got to seminary ah I met a professor by the name of Ralph Feldon, and he was working with the ... Mission's Council of North America. And ah with the Felts-Stokes Fund and ah the ... Mission's Council of North America and the Felts-Stokes Fund were ah were working with predominately ah ah Black colleges and universities to ah establish a program to serve sharecroppers. And the Farmer ... Mission's Council they focused on they had a strong migrant program and a strong sharecropper program. And ah so I went to the went to Tuskegee for an inservice training program for the Negro rural ministry, and I worked primarily over

the state of Alabama but also in Mississippi and Georgia ...

CW: From the late '40s then until ...?

E: From the late '40s until 1951, yes.

CW: And did you get a sense that, do you have any kind of premonition that things were starting to happen? That there was going to be um, you know, a more concentrated movement toward Civil Rights?

E: Well, at that time there was a strong resistance agin it-against it.

CW: Against any kind of movement?

E: Against any kind of movement. Ah I know that one of the professor one of the professor on the campus, Mr. B...., who was active there in in the town of Tuskegee for equal rights, and his activity, well, jeopardized the kind of financial support that Tuskegee was receiving from the state of Alabama. And I can remember the late Dr. Fred Patterson, who was a who was the president of Tuskegee Institute during the time that the legislature met, going down to Montgomery, driving to Montgomery every day ah lobbying, you know, members of the legislature to support the grant that Tuskegee was receiving from the state. And ah I can remember the ah the ah the downtown Tuskegee where there was constant ah ah tension between the oh the faculty members and workers at Tuskegee and then there was the veteran's hospital there that was predominate was Black. And there was also the Tuskegee Army Air Base--

CW: I was going to say ...

E: Where the 99th Pursuit Squadron was.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

E: And ah they, you know, there was all kinds of difficulty. I remember Tuskegee was a dry, Macon County was a dry county and ah ah the sheriff there would ah confiscate the liquor that ah some of the people had purchased from Phoenix City, Alabama, or from Union Springs, Alabama, which were wet counties. And ah he would catch them coming in, and ah would ah would ah confiscate the liquor and then bring it back in and then have some of his assistants--

CW: Resell it.

E: Resell it, yeah.

CW: What does your rural, your rural parishioners think when you said there was a strong movement to make in the status quo. Did they ever?

E: Ah well, you did not have you did not have your people out in the ah, you know, out in the county those that I that I worked with ah they just moved away. They--

CW: ...

E: Yeah, Noah, I think most of the folks in that area of the country took the oh I think the Illinois Central Railroad ran right through the south. It was a straight line to ah Chicago and some went to the L&N Railroad, some went to Cincinnati. And ah so you had ah you had ah that group--

CW: So it was time of great change, if there was an out migration. I guess that might explain why people wanted, were so

anxious to have tighter control and keep the same ..?

E: Uh-huh.

CW: Does that make sense?

E: Yes, yes, yes. And ah you had your oh elections and folks were trying to register to vote, you know. That was a period when they were registering to vote. And ah there was all kinds of difficulty at the county courthouse there at Tuskegee. See Tuskegee was the county seat. And ah ah there were Mr. Chameleon was involved in that. I was not. And as I look back he was

CW: He was the president...?

E: No, he was the presi--he was a professor. And for a while he was the head of the department of education on campus. And ah I'm trying to remember, but I think that he, that he resigned his position in order not to jeopardize the kind of support that Tuskegee was receiving from the state of Alabama. Because there were legislators who said if you got that kind of fellow on your faculty ah ah training teachers who are going to be here in Alabama, ah then we had rather, rather do something about it.

CW: What kinds of ploys were they using, when you said there were all kinds of things going on with voting registration. What kinds of ploys were they using to try to keep the Black from registering? Was there a poll tax?

E: Yeah, there was was poll--course they they eliminated the poll tax--

CW: Right.

E: And so ah, my goodness--

CW: I mean right around that time--

E: I don't not--

CW: Or much later?

E: Hmm. I think it was during that time because that was a part that was a part of the effort of Blacks in the south to get the, you know, the voters' right and have the opportunity.

CW: If I can jump forward then, that's a good ten years before any thing like that, before there was any kind of success in Texas to get rid of the poll tax?

E: Yeah.

CW: Yeah, like a ten year ...?

E: Yes, yes.

CW: ...

E: So they were they were doing it, not, I don't know whether, you know, they succeeded in getting the poll tax eliminated.

CW: Oh, okay.

E: Ah I'm not sure. I only recall that they did succeed in getting ah a number of Blacks, you know, ah they'd use the ploy recite from memory The Constitution of the United States, you know. Oh, such things like that. Sometimes they'd it'd go down and think they could vote and the, you know, the office would be closed. Ah and they'd have various kinds of examinations that they would give people. And, of course, you know, who even the person who was educated couldn't recite The Constitution.

CW: Did they try anything like that you or the other educated Blacks that you knew?

E: I didn't frankly, I didn't ah I didn't try to register to vote in Alabama. I guess my ah my ah my approach to the whole situation, and that's something that ah I have thought about, is that my job in Alabama during those days was to see what I could do to help some of the people who were oppressed and denied certain opportunities to get them to the point where they could join me or some other groups in demanding their rights and privileges.

CW: Ah, and when you say--

E: and so--

CW: I'm sorry, go ahead.

E: Yeah, so I focused on, which I can I can share with you some pictures that I've got back there of the conditions in Alabama. And ah the, for example, there was one community, Harris ..., that I focused on. And the folks at Tuskegee said, "Reverend, ah those folks out there, they don't want to do nothing. And ah if you keep going out there and meddling with them, they're going to bring you out of there feet first."

CW: The White people at Tuskegee or even the Blacks ...?

E: No, this is the Black leaders was telling me that--

CW: ...

E: that ah, you know, those folks, you know, you just shouldn't bother with them. You shouldn't jeopardize your life going out there. Well, this community was ah just ten miles from Tuskegee.

CW: ...

E: And the Tuskegee, well the Tuskegee ah Electric Company did

not run any electricity in that community although they had lines around to Whites. The ah co-op the electric co-op that was in Union Springs, Alabama, which oh, I don't think it was 40 miles, ah they had ah electric lines to ah White residents and farmers all around, but Harris ... was without any electrical power at all. And ah ah their homes were ah oh these shacks that I wen--shacks with ah I called it dog runs through it. I don't know whether you been through there, with two rooms upon--attached to a porch.

CW: Right, a breezeway.

E: Tha-that's it. That's it. And ah a big rock rather than steps, but a big rock to step up on the porch. The rooms were papered with pages from Sears Roebuck catalog.

CW: Sharecroppers, are we talking sharecroppers ...?

E: We're talking with, we're talking sharecroppers and some owners of land, but the land was very poor. It was in the poor ... Ah so I focused on working in this in this community. Ah I had heard about churches being propped up on every leaning side, and I went into this community and the Franklin A.M.E. Zion Church, I remember was a church ah there and it was up on a hill.

And it was actually propped up on a leaning side with--the building was leaning, and someone had gone into the forest and ah cut some ah pine saplings and sort of scotched them at each corner of that church. And I had the picture of that, the negative was ruined. But anyway--

CW: You can make another.

E: Yes.

CW: You have the picture still?

E: Well, no I don't have the picture--

CW: Oh, no! ...?

E: the negative is, but I've got a picture of the ah church that we built there. And ah so I ah began to work with the people in the community. Now, at first, they rejected me. I can remember going to Franklin Church where it was propped up and ah offering ah I was about I was 23 years old. And ah rather, I guess, well I'll say confident. So I went to tell them, I thought I was making this big pitch to this Black congregation ... young educated and been up East to school, so I told them about my being related to to a big organization in New York city and that I was also related to Tuskegee Institute and we had all the resources there

TAPE TWO

CW: This is Tape 2 of my conversation with Mr. Harry Burns and we're talking about the Civil Rights Movement in San Antonio. It's November 16th. And actually we were talking about Black businesses; and it sounds like, I guess, you know, I had sort of a hidden agenda. I was interested in what happened to Black businesses after desegregation, because I was assuming that they started going downhill because the customers were could go elsewhere. But from what you told me, it sounds like it went downhill for other reasons, right: Nobody bought tailor-made clothes anymore, and the railroad, you know, workers went elsewhere. If it so maybe, desegregation didn't play a big role.

HB: Let me ah bring out this.

CW: Okay.

HB: Lots of the customers were the Black businesses down on Commerce Street where, as I said, were railmen who worked on the railroad. They were the waiters, who worked in restaurants and hotels. There-those things are gone now. And that's the thing that concerns me-very ah-cause when the railroad men they retired, and the all the men who used to work as waiters in hotels and things, restaurants, things like that. That was a fertile field for employment, at that time. But now those people have died off, and the younger generation is coming on and are not interested in being waiters and cooks and bartenders and things like that. And the hotel-that's a fertile field, now. Even when I was coming along most of us made good money when we were in college, by

waiting tables, you know, I didn't cook ..., you know. It wasn't nothing to get out and make a \$100 a night waiting table at the ... clubs. But now you go in the hotels and restaurants, now, you don't see any Blacks working in there. And that's what we are ah that's a very immediate problem that they are beginning to work on. They had a meeting just this past week ah of the representatives of the Black organizations, who have national conventions. They had a meeting of all those representatives here just this week; and they were coming to San Antonio, along with representatives from other cities to see what San Antonio would have to offer to conventions--Black conventions, especially. Yeah, and they would work through their respective organizations; but I-even-I was one of those hosts for them when they came to town-and one thing-I-they were talking about bringing the conventions here. But they didn't talk too much about how these conventions could increase the employment for Blacks in those host convention areas. So I am going to be watching that very closely to see how-cause they had the ah the doc--The National Medical Association convention here.

CW: Right, just recently.

HB: It was here, and you didn't see very many Blacks being employed in there; and they stayed at big hotels; drank the good liquor; but didn't see too much .. stay-at-home cash coming in.

CW: Ah, so do you think I can conclude that-that in San Antonio at least the ah there really the change in the business climate for Blacks didn't have a whole lot to do with desegregation?

HB: No, I don't think so.

CW: Okay. Ah tell me about the role of ministers, in the church, in the Civil Rights' Movement.

HB: Well, there are not the real true militants. They lent some support, but on a very limited basis. And they claim that their church kept them busy and all that; but actually getting out and participating on militant basis were very limited.

CW: How come?

HB: Well, that's a good question. Ah, it's really hard to explain what is the cause; it-it's hard for me to see. But they would come in and work on a limited basis. I mean, for example, we just had what they call an Annual Freedom Fund Dinner, which is one of my big fundraisers here at our local branch. We had just had that on the 29th of October. The chairman of the dinner was it was chairman of the dinner,-he didn't really put out too much effort in promoting it. I mean the real promotion of the dinner came strictly from we who had been working--working it for years. And ah I was treasurer of the-of the dinner for years.

CW: And that was true during the Civil Rights Movement, as well; that you didn't feel you could really count on or get real active support from ...?

HB: I-I think back in those days that the-the churches were the leaders in the Civil Rights Movement.

CW: Oh! Okay.

HB: Yeah, back in those days.

CW: Why was that?

HB: Because their neck was on the chopping block just like everybody elses; and therefor they-then the people at that time weren't as influential and weren't educated and paid like the people now. And so, therefore, they looked to the ministers for real leadership, and depended on the ministers. Right now, it's most of the leadership from the NAACP and, in some small southern areas, there are there still offering some leadership. But in the, hate to say this, our president here is alone. She's been president for six years, next year, will be her last year for this term. We have two year terms. She's serving a two-year term now, which will end next year.

CW: You just made a distinction between a rural and urban areas in terms of education for church parishioners. Can you, was there a difference during the Civil Rights Movement? The movement in urban as opposed to the movement in, say, rural East Texas?

HB: Oh, yeah, it some basis, some limited basis-because say between the rural areas and--

CW: The urban centers--

HB: Oh, yeah, I mean, for example, in some of the urban cities there was a definite increase in benefits and ... for Blacks. You take a city like Atlanta. Atlanta is fortunate. It has businesses; it has leaders; and they're active in politics, and the mayor of Atlanta is a Black fellow. And he's not the only one. He's from and before him there is a Black mayor in Chicago and the whole political spectrum; I mean, there is a definite increase in Black participation in-in politics. Ah getting-in-

elected to national offices, representatives, senators, and right on down to state offices and ah local offices. And, I mean, ... moving on to women in politics now in the Black community Black women and white women.

CW: What about during the Civil Rights Movement? I mean, do you think that things happened as quickly in the rural areas as they did in the urban ones or more quickly or ...?

HB: Yeah, ah it was all a gradual situation, but back in the day lots depended on the population of the Black. Because if there was a large Black population, in certain areas, the pressure was even worse, because the Whites feared the large numbers. But now they are beginning to ah work out some political coalitions and, as a results of that, that seems to be making conditions better.

CW: So along that line of thinking in East Texas, where there's a larger concentration of Blacks, historically-that should have been a hot bed of the Civil Rights Movement.

HB: It was. It was. We still have had some here recently.

CW: Ah, so you think things happened more quickly in the rural areas.

HB: No, no not by a long shot.

CW: The opposite, they're more conservative?

HB: No, they're not more conservative their just more outnumbered. And, therefore, they were able to control them better; but with the national movement, lots of these conditions being associated with the national movement, that has helped greatly.

CW: Speaking of that, what, how aware were people of-of Martin Luther King's work? Or Abernathy B...?

HB: He was pretty well known countrywide, and he had a tendency to be able to fire the people up. And that's one thing that has always struck Black people, both urban and rural, and they have their religious ... and get together and have their rallies and it has a tendency to stir people up at-ah-like we see in the march in Washington. Where you have thousands of people there stirred up.

CW: Was-was there ah much interest in the Black Panther movement?

HB: Not-not really.

CW: How come?

HB: They were a little too militant for the aver-average persons.

I mean, they had they a-the real basic Black movement wanted to be a little conservative, and not all that militant to the point of being ... militant and dangerous to deal with, you know.

CW: I've heard people say that there really wasn't much of Civil Rights Movement in Texas.

HB: It really was

CW: What do you think?

HB: Well, we had certain issues: that Texas was leader in the right to vote in primary elections; also in school desegregation; and ah public accommodations. And those are some of the areas that the Blacks were active in, in Texas.

CW: Why do you suppose--oh, I'm sorry.

HB: I was fixing to say, we also had very active legal program in Texas, back in those days, for the NAACP. All of the so-called ah

militant lawyers in Texas with the NAACP have all died off now. We set most of ah most of our real legal support from the national organization.

CW: Ah so so ah there was a movement. It wasn't as flashy or as confrontational maybe as, you think as

HB: There was a movement.

CW: There was a Civil Rights Movement--

HB: Oh, yeah.

CW: but it wasn't as confrontational or didn't make as many headlines maybe, would you agree with that or no?

HB: Well, it was a little more in some areas, I mean, like the big cities like Dallas and Houston. And we didn't have that much here in San Antonio, because we had a small Black population. But ah, cities like Dallas and Houston, they had their share of it.

CW: So what was it so what was it like, ah, even though you didn't have the numbers here in San Antonio. What was the struggle like? Tell me if you-you mentioned that for years you had picketed different restaurants and, you know, ah public places to get them to admit Blacks.

HB: Well, yeah. We had to show them that it was economically feasible for any color as ah I think the main thing was to show them the dollar and cents, they-they get--

CW: And how did you go about doing that?

HB: Well, ah, one of our first real targets in the restaurant area was Joske's. Do you remember Joske's? Joske's was a big department store, where Dillard's is now on Commerce and Alamo

Plaza. It was and they had three restaurants in their store. They had one in the basement; one on the first floor; and one on the third floor. The one on the third floor was an exclusive restaurant. It was restricted to the more militant-not militant but influential Whites-and Blacks-no Blacks. Ah if a Black is shopping in Joske's store and wanted to eat, they had to go down to the Balcony; no place to sit down-you had to stand up and rather than sit down to eat. And so that was the policy they were operating. They couldn't operate on the-couldn't eat on the second-street floor or in the restaurant on the third floor. So this started the movement against Joske's. I'll never forget. We started organized demonstrations at Joske's-used to walk picket lines. And wh-when we launched that movement, it was Saturday of Fiesta. And the people were all downtown, getting ready for the night parade, and we staged a big demonstration there. That was the beginning of it.

CW: How many people came to demonstrate?

HB: There were about three hundred.

CW: Really?

HB: Yeah. But all these people who were downtown getting ready for the night parade too. That's really what made it fantastic. So that was the beginning of our movement against Joske's, and it stayed on for a long time. We would picket, and then and then the Black customers from Joske's began to turn in their charge cards.

They began to feel it in the pocket, and we could still continue to demonstrate. And there were a few light colored Blacks who

actually got up into the third floor restaurant, and actually sat down and ate before they realized who they were, you know. And, ah, so then they actually started communicating with our national office; they began to feel in in the pocket.

CW: And when was that? You were talking about three hundred people and the night parade at Fiesta, what year was that?

HB: Let's see, that was that was in the early '60s I believe. I think early '60s I think that's when it was.

CW: And how oft-were all those people local San Antonio people who were demonstrating?

HB: Oh, yeah, yeah.

CW: Could you count on numbers like that, normally?

HB: Count on them?

CW: Yes, if ...

HB: Oh, yeah, we had what we called picketing shifts.

CW: Oh!

HB: Yeah. And you had leaders on shifts and they'd get their locals together and come downtown and picket so many hours; and that's the way we did we did the Majestic Theater-Theater the same way.

CW: And you said that you had to do that periodically. Did you have like a regular schedule?

HB: Ah at least three-three days out of the week. Sometimes ...

CW: All day?

HB: Well, we had shifts that started in the morning, some We carried on the same type. Handy Andy's was a big grocery store

in San Antonio, like H.E.B. is now. And, ah, we started a big picket line against Handy Andy's because they would not hire Blacks as clerks,- cashiers-in their store. And they began to feel it in the pocket book, and they came in too.

CW: How long did that take?

HB: It took about a year.

CW: You were picketing three or four, three times a week for year?

HB: Damn, right.

CW: Wow!

HB: We had certain Handy Andy's that were our main targets. One of those basically in the Black area, like the one on wha-ah corner of Houston and New Braunfels Avenue. There's no grocery store there now, but that's where Handy Andy used to be located, and that's one we used to picket. But H.E.B. was assigned to come into San Antonio at that time too. We were on them and they really started started with separate cashiers.

CW: Oh, I didn't realize that the grocery stores had separate cashiers.

HB: Oh, yeah. They did at that time. The only thing that Blacks could be would be carry out boys, and general janitors.

CW: So this was, I'm acting so surprised because I've been reading through old copies of the San Antonio Register; and it's not covered in there. There's no sense of this huge movement in San Antonio. HB: You got some of the back issues?

CW: Yes sir, we have it on microfilm.

HB: Oh, yeah. Well, the Register was pretty active at that time.

CW: Well, there's not any news stories about three hundred people, three times a week, for a year, picketing.

HB: I don't mean they were there at one time. They were there all the day.

CW: Oh, oh all day, over a whole day period.

HB: Right.

CW: Still, I mean, those that's major--

HB: And there were shifts too, see.

CW: Yeah, but for one day over a period--

HB: Oh, yeah.

CW: and so if you're talking three times a week for a year, and each day--

HB: Yeah.

CW: you had about that many total people.

HB: Right, it varied up and down.

CW: How did the White customers and White media respond?

HB: Well, the White media used to like to take it to the newspaper so, but ah they weren't necessarily favorable toward us.

CW: And did customers-White customers-stay away in sympathy?

HB: Oh, no. No, the White customers stayed away at Joske's, when we were picketing Joske's. In fact of them even turned in their charge cards.

CW: So in terms of public accommodations, you targeted specific businesses like that. Ah, wasn't there also a movement against

City Hall, to get the city ordinances changed?

HB: Oh, yeah. To get public accommodations, swimming pools, yeah. In fact ah, Henry B. Gonzalez was the one that introduced the desegregation ordinance for the city of San Antonio.

CW: Wasn't there picket lines at the City Council Chambers?

HB: Right.

CW: Can you tel-I've just seen that in the paper. Can you tell me about it?

HB: Well, we were primarily protesting against-the Blacks couldn't use certain swimming pools and certain other public accommodations, and ah and the swimming pools, I mean, some day the fellows would go out there and just jump in the swimming pool anyway.

CW: What happened?

HB: They were arrested. Because that was going against the city ordinance.

CW: Was this an organized thing through the NAACP?

HB: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

CW: So you had a strategy that you--

HB: That was primarily by our young people too. They would go and jump in the swimming pool.

CW: Is this early '60s?

HB: Right. About that time, yeah.

CW: Would people like Bill Donovan?

HB: Bill-Bill Donovan?

CW: I'm going to be interviewing him.

HB: Oh, really? Yeah, he was one of the leading n.... Is he back here back in San Antonio?

CW: No sir, he's still up in Alexandria.

HB: Oh, yeah.

CW: But I go up there when I go home for Christmas, and I'm hoping to catch him.

HB: Oh, yeah, Bill Donovan was one of our real leaders. Yeah, he was president of the youth council.

CW: So this was ah was part of the youth council's idea that they would jump in the swimming pool and get arrested.

HB: Well, that was what they would plan for us.

CW: How many--I didn't see anything like that in the paper. How many ah how long did it take to--

HB: It took about two years, I think.

CW: Of just constant ah efforts like that? Or no?

HB: Yeah, but then we also supported Henry Gonzalez as I said Ah, we had some good strong Black politicians at that time too. Like Ronald Bellinger who had the San Antonio Register papers. And you heard about G. J. Sutton?

CW: Uh-huh.

HB: Yeah, G. J. Sutton and-that was an interesting thing because I had my run-ins with the old Black politicians too.

CW: What happened?

HB: Well, I mean, some of them felt that young people were being too militant, and taking their leadership away from them. But they finally got over it, you know.

CW: And you supported the young people?

HB: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was the director of the youth program. In fact even when I was president, I still worked with the youth council. Because they were really the ones that were carrying the program for me and not the adults.

CW: So you went from, in your career, you've been an Uncle Tom and too militant at the same--

HB: I've been assumed to be an Uncle Tom--

CW: Well, I mean, you been accused of being both.

HB: Right.

CW: Ah, did the NAACP put up bail money to get the kids out, after they'd jump in the swimming pool and get arrested?

HB: No, they really didn't have to that. We just finally talked them out it. Like Henry Gonzalez would have ... with city council. CW: What other tactics did the youth organization have?

HB: What other what?

CW: What other tactics, what other things were they involved in at that time? Wh-what were they doing that was so militant?

HB: Well, we took in the whole gamut of city facilities. And they were leaders in the school desegregation program, and--

CW: They were doing the lunch counter sitins?

HB: Oh, yeah.

CW: Can you tell me about that.

HB: Well, I mean, just go in an-if you get in, and sit down and be refused service; and sometime the police would come, and

sometime they'd decide to get up and walk out themselves.

CW: Did that go on for years as well?

HB: Yeah.

CW: For years?

HB: Oh, no, it didn't last too long. It lasted about a few years.

CW: That's pret-that's a long--

HB: Cause see it was that was-part of a whole national movement.

They were doing that all over the country at that time, see, so what they were doing in Virginia, we we doing here in Texas. Actually it started in Virginia; no it was North Carolina, yeah.

CW: So when you're talking about a youth movement, are you primarily talking college, college kids, students?

HB: Well, no on the lo-local level it was primarily high school students. Because you didn't have that many college students, cause all of those who were going to college were gone to college.

And they ah we didn't have any real college movement in Texas until I organized the youth program in at Tillotson College in Austin. And ah we our activities in Austin were limited

CW: How come?

HB: Well, I don't know. It was really hard trying to get ... Young people had come

CW: Let me answer--

