

Charlton Oral History Research Grant Report

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(2013 recipients)

God Carved in Night project

Our oral history project, *"God Carved In Night' ": Black Intellectuals in Texas, The World They Lived In, and the World They Made*, recorded the stories of students and educators at historically black colleges and universities in Texas.

This is part of a larger project that will include a book, website, scholarly articles and presentations and public education events, well into the future.

While there have been previous works on the black college experience in the Lone Star State, our work seeks to answer new questions about African American collegiates. Previous scholarship on Texas black colleges provided straight historical sketches of institutions, or largely described these colleges in the context of the struggle over segregation in Texas higher education. The intellectual life of institutions — the art, literature, political and cultural philosophy created by the faculty and student body of institutions -- has been overlooked.

As well as using the Charlton equipment to audio-record each interview, we also videotaped and made still photos of each interview. We will write a book that incorporates our findings from the interviews. We are also creating a website that will contain audio and video from the interviews, plus a timeline describing major events in black education in Texas.

Already, scholarly use has been made of the interviews. Dr. Phillips quoted interviewees in his keynote address April 12, 2014, at the University of North Texas History Symposium on the theme "The 1964 Civil Rights Act: A Fifty-Year Perspective."

Public lectures also will incorporate material from the interviews. Phillips is scheduled to speak on racial issues at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas this September 2014, the East Texas Historical Association meeting this February 2015, and at a Collin College Study Grant Presentation in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year.

We interviewed 20 alumni and/or educators from Prairie View A&M University, Huston-Tillotson College, Wiley College, Paul Quinn College, and Texas Southern University. Their ages ranged from their mid-20s to about 90, and thus they recounted the worldviews, experiences, and actions of both black people and white people in Texas from the Jim Crow era through the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and into the modern era.

Education was not easily obtainable for African-Americans during much of the 20th century, and several of our interviewees came from families where high school wasn't available to their parents, much less college. However, especially among the older interviewees, an almost

universal theme was the emphasis on education in their families of origin. James C. Mays Sr., retired Dallas ISD coach, recounted how his father was the only black person in their small town near Waco with a subscription to the daily Waco newspaper. The white man who delivered the newspapers would not deliver to the home of a black family, so one of the children walked a few blocks each day to get the paper from a drop-off point. Lacking television and having only heavily biased local radio to inform them of the outside world, this newspaper was vital to their aspirations for greater opportunities outside their small town.

Mays also recounted his mother's insistence he become educated. Having been admitted to Wiley College and having his tuition paid by a white benefactor, he got cold feet but his mother took her broom to him to make him get in the family truck for the trip to Waco. Once in Waco, he balked again, and she dragged him from the truck and stood in line with him to register.

If not a family member, the subjects recalled another influential adult who urged them to become educated. For the Rev. Dr. Henry Masters, now pastor of the politically influential St. Luke Community United Methodist Church in Dallas, that person was an uncle who lived down the street and provided inspiration when his mother and father, estranged from one another, didn't know how to.

Nearly all subjects said they found supportive and caring professors at their HBCUs that would have been lacking at a traditionally white school. A few had attended both an HBCU and a traditionally white school, and said the difference was stark and unfortunate.

Nearly all said that HBCUs have an important educational role today and in the future. Many said that African American youths continue to benefit from the cultural understanding and support available at HBCUs. Several noted that HBCUs may need to appeal to a more diverse student mix in order to survive, if indeed they do survive.

All noted that while opening traditionally segregated universities to African Americans was an important step forward, this widening of students' opportunities may threaten the existence of HBCUs and the supportive environment they provide.

Many of the interviewees personified a break with black academia's quiet acceptance of discrimination against African Americans, which Carter G. Woodson described in his 1933 book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Several of our subjects not only went on from an HBCU to help break the color barrier at other institutions of higher learning, but also worked hard in the civil rights movement and were integral in educational, cultural, political and economic gains for African Americans in Texas.

Zan Wesley Holmes Jr., a graduate of Huston-Tillotson College in Austin and later a leader of the Dallas civil rights movement, recalled the horror he witnessed in that city shortly after moving there from Austin to attend the Perkins School of Theology, which had desegregated a few years before he arrived in 1951. In a March 2014 interview, Holmes remembered:

. . . When I came to Dallas in 1956, one of the major events that really changed my entire life and my ministry took place the first week I was here. I was renting a room in South Dallas, and one day when I was studying . . . I heard a crash, a lot of noise up on the freeway, and there were people running up the street. And I walked out trying to figure out what was going on, so I went up with them to Central Expressway. A black man had been hit by an automobile and he was lying down on the side of the road and he was bleeding very badly, profusely. There were two white ambulance drivers, two white policeman who were standing there . . . They

did nothing to help the man and I could not understand. I said, "Aren't you going to help this man?" Well, it turned out this was 1956 and Black & Clark Funeral Home, the black funeral home, was the funeral home that was called upon when blacks needed ambulance service. And so they were waiting for Black & Clark Funeral Home to come to help that man. And while they were waiting, that man died.

I remember looking into the eyes of those two white ambulance drivers and they were very uncomfortable. I mean, I could sense that. The two policemen, they were very uncomfortable by then. And I asked myself, "What killed that man?" [It was] racism . . . How many other times did that happen? I remember that day I said, "If the training I'm getting at SMU does not have anything to do with this disease called racism, I don't need to be part of it. And that impacts my total ministry. I've never forgotten that man. That's when I made the decision that I was going to show up in my ministry [to fight racism] in any way I could."

Some interview subjects reported that they wanted to engage in political activity at their HBCU but did not do so, because of the fears of their parents that they would be harmed or jailed. Others participated in marches and other activities but told their parents and other relatives little of what they were doing. A few, such as Marie Creal, who attended Texas Southern University in Houston and helped organize protests during the height of the civil rights struggle, reported that her parents encouraged her to demonstrate and stand up for her rights, even in potential confrontations with Houston police.

In 2013-2014 when our interviews took place, 50 years after passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, young people who are recent graduates reported that African Americans still have to be achieve more than their white peers in order to be treated equally. But at least one interviewee stated she did not feel discriminated against in society at large, yet later in the interview said she felt pressure to perform better than whites or be passed over for opportunities.

All the interviewees said they had at least one professor or other mentor at their HBCU who was instrumental in shaping their academic achievement and careers. Almost unanimously, they said they benefited from a supportive atmosphere that is missing at mainstream colleges. Dallas District Attorney Craig Watkins noted how the extensive network of fellow alumni from Prairie View A&M University greatly helped his political career.

A few of the young, recent alumni reported that tensions had developed on their campuses when students from New Orleans colleges were evacuated to their Texas campuses in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina. Overcrowding and scarcity of resources developed, sometimes creating resentment and ill will.

We are grateful to Baylor University for providing us the Charlton grant, which helped underwrite our travels across Texas amounting to more than 3,000 miles and provided us with finest-quality recording equipment. We are eager to provide presentations to Baylor and other groups upon request.

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