

*ORAL HISTORY PROJECT*

PROFESSOR: *JOE PRAIT, PhD.*

THEME: MIGRATING TO HOUSTON

INTERVIEWEE: VELMA Dickey

INTERVIEWER: GERTRUDIS CABRERA

DATE: 11/3/2004

Cabrera: This is Trudy Cabrera. Today is October 18, 2004. I am at Franklin Elementary, and I am here with Mrs. Dickey. This is a project for my "Oral History" class at Houston University, and my theme is "Migrating to Houston." Hi Ms. Dickey, and thank you for your help.

Dickey: You are welcome.

Cabrera: First I want you to tell me about your family and your background, where are you coming from?

Dickey: I am Velma Dickey, I am originally Velma Reese, and I am married now. I am 56 years old. I grew up in Louisiana, and at the time that I grew up in Louisiana it was a small, very small town the only jobs available for people were at the lumber mill company. The community that I grew up in everybody knew everybody, because on one side of the tracks lived the black people on the other side of the track lived the white people. The people that owned the community that I lived in, were the people that own the lumber mill, so our fathers worked at the lumber mill. They owned the grocery store; they owned the service station and the houses that we lived in. If you lived in a four bedroom house you pay four dollars for rent. If you lived in a five bedrooms house you paid five. In other words, you paid a dollar a room.

At the little grocery store, well it was a big grocery store, the mothers could go and shop during the week and buy things. They put it in what you call a ticket, so when the fathers got paid, whatever the mothers had gone and bought and charged, then they would take it that amount of money out of the father's pay check and the father would get the balance.

They even had a delivery truck that the mothers go shop and buy a lot of things and they could not bring them back, the delivery truck would deliver to the house.

My father would get up and go to work at six o'clock in the morning. The whistle would blow and they would go, at twelve o'clock the whistle would blow and they would come home to eat. At one o'clock the whistle would blow for the fathers to go back to work. So it was just a community that was run by the "Wooders" and the "Walkers." That was the name of the family. The Wooders and the Walkers own this community. Our fathers work, the mothers stayed home and cook.

Cabrera: Can you tell me about going to school?

Dickey: We had to get up, catched a bus. We had to get up around maybe at five, five thirty. We had to walk for about maybe a mile, that was where the bus stop was, and the bus would take us ten miles to school, bring us back in the afternoon. It was two loads. The first load was for the older children and the next load was for the younger children. The school that I attended

was first grade through twelve, on the same campus. So it wasn't a very big school, it wasn't a very big community, but when we went the ten miles, then we would be combining with another community called Gibsland, Louisiana. That's where I am from, Taylor, Louisiana. We would be combined with the kids from Gibsland, Taylor and Shreveport, Louisiana, and we all went to the same school.

So then we got to socialize and communicate with the children from Gibsland Louisiana, who did not live the same way we lived. Because the way we lived, we had water in a well from the ground, that we had to draw with a bucket. We had three tubs that we had to wash in, and we had to fill the number three, they called them number three tubs. We had to carry them and put them on a bench behind the house so our mothers could wash, where the kids in Gibsland, Louisiana had running water. For a long time we did not have running water, we got our water from a well and a bucket. To take a bath we had to carry the water, we had to bathe in a round tub, and then empty the water so somebody else could put water in, and the Moms had to heat the water on a stove. We had wooden heaters and wooden stoves; where}S the people in Gibsland, Louisiana they had gas. We had electricity; we just did not have gas. In other words, so that is the way I grew up. Until I would visit my grandmother who lived in Gibsland, Louisiana, who had gas and electricity and her house was much better than my parent's house and much bigger than my parent's house.

We even had outdoors bathroom, we didn't have indoors bathrooms, so they finally put us indoor bathrooms and we got very excited about that.

Cabrera: Can you tell me about your school?

Dickey: I attended the same school, Coleman High School in Gibsland, Louisiana, from first grade to twelve grades. They only like had two teachers for each grade level up into the eight grades. Then when we got to be eight graders, every body was in the same classroom trough twelve grades. And to tell you how small it was, I graduated from a class of thirty children that was only thirty seniors in my whole high school.

Cabrera: What made you migrate to Houston? Can you explain the circumstances that made you move here instead of staying back home?

Dickey: We had a happy family, a lovely family, but during my senior year my mother passed away, and I was my Mother's only child. My father had been married three times and he had out live three wives. So with his first wife he had two children and his wife passed away, and he married again and with his second wife he had three children and that one passed away, and he married my mother. I am the only child that was born to my father and my mother. I am an only child with step sisters and brothers. At the

time that I was a senior my mother passed away and she didn't get to see me graduate.

At that time that I graduated, I had an English teacher, Mrs. Mitchell that I never will forget. She took me under her wing and motivated me to go on to school. I did not have the financial money that I needed to go to school but at that time they gave what you call a Pell grant, not a Pell grant, I am sorry, it was call a "National Defense Loan."

On the "National Defense Loan," the government will loan you money. You had to have an "A" or "B" average to get it but as long as you kept a "C" average, they will give you the money every semester and that is how I went to school. I kept my grades up and I graduated with honors. In fact I was in the honor roll. I attended Grambling State University and I stayed on the honor roll with a major in Physical Education and Recreation, and I graduated with honors.

The thing of it is, I had a kind of hard time. My mother died the Saturday after I graduated from high school. I had decided that I was not going (to college) because she was sick and I felt that she needed me to be there for her. All the kids that wanted to go, we had taken the entrance exam, we had fill out our applications, we had been accepted and I had been accepted. I decided that I was not going because my mother needed me more.

My mother passed away the Saturday after I graduated from high school. They had her funeral the next Saturday. Then on Sunday, that Sunday it

was time for me to go to Grambling. My uncle dropped me off and left me and I had never been away from my family before. I had never been anywhere before besides the little community I grew up in and surroundings small towns, and it was a big adjustment been out there by myself, no family.

The most awful thing happened to me. My Mom had started ordering little things for me to have at college, when she passed away, one of her sisters came in and took all the stuff away. So I went to Grambling with just the things that I had, clothes to wear, the things that I had as a senior in high school, was the only things that I had to wear at Grambling. But I ended up with three good roommates and one of my roommates, she had a lot of things. She would tell me to wear her clothes.

So I just feel that I am blessed. I came from a long way and it was a big adjustment not having my mother, but I made it. My teacher Mrs. Mitchell kept me focused. Every time that I felt that I was getting off track, that I could not make it in a class, she told me to call her. She would give me words of encouragement. I started Grambling in 1966, and I graduated January of 1970.

There was time when I would not come home. I would stay there with the out-of-state children, because I felt that I did not have a home to go to. Because one weekend I came home to visit my father, and he had moved, and I did not know where he had moved. There was a big age difference between them. My mother was 35 years old (when she died) and my

father was 70. I would stay there on weekends; I would stay there on holidays (college). I went year round to school. I went summer, fall, and winter school. My whole focus was in school. So that is why I came out in January (graduated).

I had my step sister that lived out here (Houston) and she and her husband helped me by sending me a little money and buying me things during the holidays. They told me, when I graduated to move out here. So that is how I got here. I moved out here to live with them.

I subbed (substitute teacher) for about two years. That was when I met my husband, my first husband, married and I got a job with HISD. That is how I ended up teaching at Franklin Elementary, the school that I started with, 30 years served, and retired from.

Cabrera: Can you tell me about when you first moved to Houston? Was it easy or difficult for you to adjust to live in Houston compare to your old community.

Dickey: I first started coming to Houston when I was in Grambling, because I would come some weekends; no – no weekends holidays. My step sister did not want me to stay there so I would come to visit like on Christmas. In my home town, the way I grew up, crime was not something that we experienced. We would sleep with our windows up, we did not have air conditioned, but we would sleep with the windows raised, we would sleep

with the door, just only had like a screen door, and it would hook it, and that is how we were. The whole community was like that, you might left you house with the door closed but unlocked and nobody went in. That was the king of life I was used to. When I came here my brother in law told me, you cannot be that free here, because people would bother you. People would come in your house. You had to lock the door.

There we walk up and down the street. We were friendly with each other. You never passed anybody's house, where I grew up, without speaking, saying good morning, good evening. When I came here, people did not do that, and that was a big adjustment for me, because I had this friendly attitude, and I thought that everybody would speak back or respond back, and they did not, so that was adjustment for me.

Cabrera: Was it easy for you to get your first job when you moved here to Houston?

Dickey: It was not hard, but because I was from Louisiana I had to go back and get certified for Texas. That is why I "subbed" first. Then after I got married, I had my first child, and I wanted to stay home with her. But then after the first year, I decided to work. I went back to subbing, and I went back to finish getting certified for Texas. While I was getting my certification, they had a program where they give you so many years to get your certification with the job. So, that is how I got hired with HISD.

Cabrera: Can you tell me about your social life in Houston? How was that different or not from back home?

Dickey: Well back home, if you believe or not, I never dated, because my mother was very strict. I got to go to the prom my junior year, but my mother went. The senior year, my mother's friend took me, because my mother was too sick to take me. I was very active. I was on the high school basketball team. I was captain of the team for four years, from my freshman year to my senior year. My mother told the coach, I could only go if I ride on the front seat with the coach. We took the bus and we went to different places to play but the coach had to promise my Mom that he or she would take care of me. The two coaches, the boys' coach and the girls coach, we all rode the same bus when we went to play games. I went to church every Sunday. My mother was a very religious lady. I grew up in a strict atmosphere for social life.

With that, even when my mother passed away and I went to Grambling, the whole time I was at Grambling, I think I went to a movie twice. My focus was on the books, because I had never socialized. I was the first one to go to college in my family. I had to keep my grades up, so most of the time I was at the library with my friend. I did not go to no party; I went to movies, no parties. That was just me, it was my choice to do that. My mother used to discipline me when I was growing up, so it just seems that she was there with me to telling me what to do. I knew right from wrong,

and I just wanted to do right. After I graduated and got all that freedom , an adult, it was a whole different change. My sister and my brother in law kept on me, so that my chances was me and dating, my brother in law would go because he was from here, Houston, he would go: no, that is not the one, that is not the one, you do not need to go with that one. Then he would question them to the extend that they did not wanted to come back and take me any place. I had a sheltered lit. But even with the freedom that I got after being an adult; it helped me make better choices.

Cabrera: Did you have girlfriends? Did you go out with your girlfriends here, in Houston? Did you still needed a chaperon, like to go to the movies?

Dickey: No, I could go, I went on my own. After I got my job and met other teachers, we planned and we did things together.

Cabrera: Could you go to any place, when you were going out with your teacher friends or there were places that were segregated here in Houston?

Dickey: Here in Houston, no. We went just about...when I first came here. Now in Louisiana it was segregated, everything was segregated. I grew up in a time when I rode in the back of the bus, I sat in the balcony at the movies, if we went, we sat in the balcony. Going to the restaurants and happened to go in the back door to order your food. I grew up on those

circumstances, so I know all about that. After I got here, they had "drive in" movies, where you go in your car, and you sit in your car, and watch the movies. You were in your car but everyday went to the same place. That was a big adjustment for me because, like there was places like Sonic, where you park your car and you order your food, and everyday was there. When I first came here, I had big eyes looking at all; every thing that was so different and I knew nothing about.

Cabrera: What year was that?

Dickey: I started coming here in 1966. I kept coming until I graduated and then I moved here January 1970. So it was like in the seventies.

Cabrera: How was it different at school (Franklin Elementary) in those days, here working as a teacher?

Dickey: When I was in Louisiana, like I said, we went to a predominant black school. The white kids went to a predominant white school. I did not know anything about but two races back them, my community was black and white. Then, when I came here and in my job. The first job I got was at Franklin Elementary and it was predominant Mexican Americans, with teachers Mexican Americans, blacks, whites, but all the children were

Mexican American. So it was an adjustment, you know for me, but it was a welcome adjustment.

I remember the first week that I worked. I got my job as a physical education teacher and I was talking to the kids. I told them that we were going to run to the fence, touch the fence, and run back. I asked them if they understood, and they said "si." I said; ok everybody knows what we are going to do, and they said "si." Then I took off running and when I got to the fence I was down there by myself. That was really cute because they told me "si," and they did not understand but I had to learn to adjust. Now 30 years at one school with just predominant Mexican American. But I had subbed where they were white children, black children, all kinds, and the mixture of all the races.

That is how I felt that the world should be. I used to tell the children that I wished that we were flowers, that everybody was a different color, purple, pink, orange, and then we combine and be one, because that is how life is supposed to be, that is how the world is supposed to be. You accept people like they are, the way they are and do not be judgmental.

ORAL IDSTORY: METHODS AND USES  
Project's proposal  
Trudy Cabrera

My project will be based on interviews with two African American ladies who migrated to Houston.

Doris Foreman migrated to Houston in 1965. She was born in Bryan, Texas. At the age of 16 Doris decided to leave home and moved to Houston. Her sister was working as a nurse in 'The Big City.' Doris had no working skills and did not finish high school. I want to learn about her reasons for migrating to Houston. How was life for an African American teenager in a small town, and how her life changed in her new setting? Were her experiences with segregation in a small town different from the big city? What kind of jobs and other opportunities were open to her in Houston in 1965.

Thelma Dickey was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1948. She migrated to Houston after finishing high school. She graduated third of her class. Thelma's mother died two weeks before the end of the school year. Thelma moved to Houston to live with her half-sister and her husband. She attended college in Grambling, Louisiana, a college for African Americans. Sometimes during the summer and school holidays she will come to Houston, but she preferred to stay in Louisiana. After graduating from college in 1970, she came back to live in Houston permanently.

Thelma remembers seating on the back of the bus, and going to demonstrations during the Civil Rights Movement. I want her to share her personal experiences of the Civil Right Movement and her feelings and insights about moving from an African American community in Louisiana to a racially mix community in Houston.

The purpose of my project is to compare and contrast these two ladies life experiences before and after moving to Houston. How their working and social experiences in Houston differ from each other in a time lapse of five years. And the changes, if there were any, in working opportunities for African American women between 1965 and 1970. How the social changes that were taking place at that time in Houston impacted their lives.



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