

Interviewee: Holman, Erma

Interview: February 20, 2006

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

Interview with: Erma Holman

Interviewed by: Leigh Cutler

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[Begin Tape 1, Side A.]

LEIGH CUTLER: This is Side 1 of an interview by Leigh Cutler with Erma Holman. The interview is taking place on Monday, February 20th, 2006, at Ms. Holman's in Fresno, Texas. This interview will be deposited into the Oral History of Houston Project at the University of Houston.

Alright, first would you give me a little brief background about you? So where and when were you born, and did you grow up here, or where did you grow up?

ERMA HOLMAN: My name is Erma L. Bass Holman. I was born in Rosharon [?], Texas. My parents moved to Arcola when I was about eight years old. We started out with a two-bedroom house, and it later grew to three bedrooms and one bath. I went to elementary school in Arcola. I graduated from elementary in Arcola and went to Jack Yates High in Third Ward, whom I stayed with my aunt during the week and come home on Fridays because it was too far for me to commute to get to school on time, so this was my reasons for living with my aunt during the week.

I started to do domestic work when I was about thirteen, because it was a need

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that we needed a little more money in our budget. I forgot what year I got married, but my first child was born in January 15th, 1948. My second child was born December 10th in 1950. At my age of twenty, I moved to California with my dad, and I spent most of my adult life in first San Francisco; secondly Holbrook, Arizona; back to Redwood City, where I raised my children until 1984. I met my childhood sweetheart. Moved back to Houston, and in 1988 he passed away, and after being a pastor's wife for a few years and my deceased husband was gone, so I kind of went to something else.

And Ruth Brussard introduced me to the gardening world.

CUTLER: And who is she?

HOLMAN: I beg your pardon?

CUTLER: Who is she?

HOLMAN: Ruth Brussard, B-r-u-s-s-a-r-d, who she is now unable to garden, but I have some cabbage from the garden out there. I do wish to give her one before they're all gone. I retired in aerospace, quality technician in the year of 1984. Prior to that I traveled to the Cape [Cape Canaveral, Florida]. I was the first black woman to work at the Cape, for Ford Aerospace, and to be a part of InterSat Five, weather satellite.

Then doing my gardening business, which I enjoyed very, very much—it was just a fun thing to do. I worked as chair person for the garden, Urban Harvest. That was after the split from Interfaith Ministries, to Urban Harvest. And then I worked on the board of directors for three years, I think. And somewhere on the line, we made an agreement that you volunteer your time for three years, and then after that you would move on and let

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someone else come in and do share whatever stuff that they had towards the garden. But during my time with Urban Harvest, it come up when the split was done, and we were trying to decide how we were going to do, to get the people together, because I went with [Robert] “Bob” Randall, and they later named it Urban Harvest, because I had much respect for his ability to be a director.

We needed a place for our first social event, and that’s where I stepped in. I said, “Well, I’m in the country. If you all would like to come to the country, be my guests.” And we proceeded to get that together, and I hope you have the dates and everything for which we did it in because it’s been so long, I have forgotten. And we just had one roaring good time out here. I can’t even remember all of the people. I know Mary Cotham [pronounced COT-um], who is now deceased—one of her sons—I forgot his first name—Mark Cotham. And Susan Fisher and, of course, Bob Randall, Lola Daniel, and I really can’t remember right now who else, but those are the people that were quite active in the building of Urban Harvest.

CUTLER: So that it was the first official meeting was here, of the organization?

HOLMAN: I think it was really the first official social meeting. It was socially—and it was also a meeting also.

CUTLER: And it was all volunteers and directors?

HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: About how many people?

HOLMAN: About 200 people.

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CUTLER: Oh, wow.

HOLMAN: Yes. And some of them, they brought their chairs and they sat out under the oak trees and out in the yard and in the sun, and we just had food and paper plates. I forgot, Emma [sic; Ellen] Mitchell was also very instrumental in doing that, because I think she brought a smoked turkey.

CUTLER: Oh, yes? I spoke with her.

HOLMAN: Did you?

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: Okay, wonderful! So my memory is kind of foggy a little bit because having to think about all of this, when you don't plan on this, you go, *Hey, now, what did I miss that I forgot?* Yes, Emma [sic; Ellen] Mitchell brought a smoked turkey and helped set the tables. And there was some others that I really can't bring up the names on, but everybody just pitched in, and you saw people coming in with coolers of sodas. You know, we never served any hard liquor for any of the functions. There never was anything like that. And you look around, there was somebody coming in that I didn't even know. [Telephone rings musically.]

CUTLER: Do you need to get that?

HOLMAN: Just let it ring. I'll get it later.

CUTLER: Okay.

HOLMAN: Could you cut that off and let me get it?

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CUTLER: Sure.

[Recording interruption.]

CUTLER: Alright. So the meeting that was here—was there a program of some kind?

HOLMAN: Yes, we had a program written, and I don't have a copy of it, but we invited Judge Klauser [?], who was judge for this area down here. Grady Prestitch at that time was our commissioner. He did not come, but he did send a representative who spoke, right out on the back porch. And Johnny Washington was our pastor for that church right around the corner, which I'm a member of. He's not there anymore, but he and his wife and joined in the festive celebration that we were having. It was just a fun thing.

CUTLER: It was a big party, right?

HOLMAN: It was just a big yard party, and people from—various ones of the neighborhood came, because they were used to me out there in the garden, because in the mornings I would get up. As soon as I got up, and that was like as soon as it was daylight good, and I would do the personal things and then I would get a cup of coffee and my telephone and go to the garden, and I sat out there and worked my garden in the summertime until it got too hot. Then I would come in and take my meds and eat my breakfast. And in the evening, when it cooled down enough for me to go back out there, I would, and stayed out there until dark. And it was just a fun thing to do.

And I have raised all kind of stuff. I have raised cabbage, fifteen or twenty

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pounds out there. I learned how to spoon feed them. And it was all done with organic fertilizer. I never used the harsh chemicals. I did have a picture of a fifteen-pound cabbage whom I took to an Urban Harvest meeting one day, and I gave it to a Sister Johnson, who was a nun at that Catholic center right there on Alameda near where the old Nabisco was.

CUTLER: Oh, yes. I know what you're talking about.

HOLMAN: Okay. And that Catholic home—I gave it to her, because I said, “I just wanted to give it to somebody” because it was far too big for me to eat and start with my family eating it because it weighed fifteen pounds. She told me that she kept it as a table piece for as long as she could, and then they cooked it, and she said she served a number of forty-two people—

CUTLER: Wow.

HOLMAN: —from that one cabbage.

CUTLER: Wow.

HOLMAN: So that was a fun thing to just to even know about.

CUTLER: Right. Yes.

HOLMAN: I have pictures around here someplace where I raised cantaloupes seven and eight pounds, and right now, this year, we had a cabbage out there—my daughter, the one that just called—she took a picture of it, and that cabbage weighed eleven and a half pounds, and it was the first cabbage that we cut out of the garden.

CUTLER: Oh, wow.

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HOLMAN: So gardening is still a part of my life. I'm not exactly as I used to be, but a friend of mine who don't have cultivated property—because with the soil out there, it is so soft until you can just stir it with a fork and add some fertilizer, some cottonseed meal. I go to Rosenberg periodically and get cottonseed meal and cottonseed hulls, and that's what we use as fertilize. And it just pulverize. Just grow almost anything.

CUTLER: Yes. Now, where is Arcola?

HOLMAN: Arcola is the next stop going south on 521.

CUTLER: Oh, okay, so it's close.

HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: Did you have a garden when you were growing up?

HOLMAN: My dad worked a railroad, and he was gone a lot because they didn't have transportation, and he would go and stay down to Freeport mostly, where he worked. But my mom would raise a garden, and that consisted of okra, tomatoes, string beans and mustard greens. And that's basically what I was raised on. She tried to grow sweet potatoes, and she never was too successful because they all come out little bit of tiny strings. We didn't know how to use the bone meal and all of that to make the roots grow. But string beans, tomatoes and okra and mustard greens was our main diet.

CUTLER: And did you work in the garden when you were young?

HOLMAN: Not too much. It just really didn't interest me. But after I spent X number of years in an industrial factory and when I retired, I started—we used to have a little garden when my husband was living, right out, off the back porch there, and where we

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put onions. I just wanted to grow some onions because when I was in California, I always had onions and garlic in my flower beds, but when I moved here and had this piece of property, well, the soil was so bad, I didn't really know how to add mulch and stuff to it. I learned later, starting with Interfaith Ministries and then later most of my education come from Urban Harvest. Learned how to buy the good soil and learned how to add stuff to it in order to make it easy for you to cultivate.

But my mama used to ask me, "Why do you grow all of that stuff? Why do you plant all those trees?" I said, "Well, I eat all I can, and I give away the rest." And having the community to garden, this is what I would do. I invite people to come in and just, "If you want some greens, you want a cabbage, come over and get one." And in my going around, I got acquainted with Extension office over in Rosenberg. They would give me a lot of my seeds, because the seeds are quite expensive, and when you're on a fixed income you don't have much money to go out and pay a dollar for a package of seeds. And they would send me—it was the guy there—his first name was George, and I could call him and get some seeds because there was a seed company that gave just a whole mound of leftover seeds. They were still good, but they would give them to [Fort Bend?] Extension Service, and [Bouchet Mickey?] [pronounced boo-SHAY] was the director at that time, and George—George Stutz, I think, his name was—worked for Mickey. I could always call George, and George would pack me a box of seeds—peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, lettuce, bell peppers and just a variety—cucumbers—a variety of seeds, and then I would go, *Wow! Look what I've got!* Boy, I could plant and plant. Because I had all of the seeds that I could use.

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CUTLER: And it was all donated.

HOLMAN: All donated by a seed company who would give their leftover seeds to Extension Service in Rosenberg. And they, in return, would give it to the people who wanted them that couldn't afford to buy seeds.

CUTLER: Oh, wow.

HOLMAN: And so that was a fun thing, because one year I raised cucumbers, and I think somewhere in some of Urban Harvest's pictures, you will find a jar of cucumber pickles, because my grandsons were active then. They were five, six and seven. I had three little boys with me everywhere I went. They are now, sixteen, seventeen and eighteen.

CUTLER: Oh, wow.

HOLMAN: But in those days, it was just a fun thing. And somewhere they were taking pictures, and there is a quart jar with a large mouth to it that has some pickles that I made and just donated. And it was just so much fun to grow all of this stuff. And I didn't have a job. I was on retirement pension. Not that I had enough money, but I didn't have a job at that time, and I would just—you know, kept myself busy in my garden. And there were always something. One time I did some okra. You know how they do the pickled okra?

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: I did some pickled okra, and I did pickled cucumbers, and I did pickled peaches one year, and it was just a fun thing to do. Right now, hey, I got three tomato

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plants out there that I bought, and I put them in the ground because the weather was so nice, and then after the cold come, I went in and dug them up, and I got them in there in a pot because I don't want them to rot [Laughing].

CUTLER: I'm surprised. You said your mother—she didn't understand why you were planting out there, but I'm surprised that she was surprised since she used to grow food, herself.

HOLMAN: Yes. I think she thought because I lived in the city so many years and then would move back to the country and just get involved in digging in the ground. I call it digging in the ground, because this property was quite wooded when we bought it, and we had it cleared. All of the pecan trees, we planted, except that one great big one over there on the School Road side. But it was just amazing for her to see me out there digging in the ground.

And one year I had planted some string beans in the fall, and they were beautiful. And Lola Daniel was instrumental in giving me the variety. They were called 'Gator' green beans, and they grow really pretty, and the production is really heavy. It was coming up for a rain, and Mom kept saying, "You better get those string beans out of there because if it rains on them, it's gonna ruin 'em." And I kept saying, "Yeah, Mama, I know, I gotta get 'em." And she proceeded—she and my father, and he had a pacemaker at that time, and she came and it was to help me harvest those green beans, and we got two five-gallon cans out of the first picking.

CUTLER: Wow.

HOLMAN: And we set a chair in the garden for Daddy, and Mom was on a cane, but

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every time she would tie the bush back and she'd see a big clump of string beans, she says, "Oh, my God! Look at the beans!" [Laughs.] And we laughed at her because it was funny to see her get so excited over this. But what I was doing was in a much larger volume from what she had done, and it seems to me everything I did was in so much of a larger volume than from what she had done, because she was an excellent cook. You know, that's the way she helped feed us, was out of the garden. But to see me do this out there, because I had eleven garden beds at one time, and I had all of them full. And she would go, "My God, why are you doing all of this?" "Well, Mama, why not?"

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: And then I would tell her—I said, "Well, you used to do that, just not on a larger volume."

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: Because at one time my money was so low, and I asked God to please give me some money in my budget. I just needed some more money to survive on. And I got into frying turkeys and making fruitcakes. And when I was much younger, in California, I used to send my dad a fruitcake every year, and thought, *Well, you know, I can make fruitcakes and fried turkeys*. And the first year I did that, I don't know what year it was, but my taxes was \$1,200. And I proceeded to get my act together, and I bought two pots and a stove to be able to use this for frying up turkey. And would you believe—I didn't count my money until after New Year's, but Thanksgiving, Christmas and I did very little for New Year's because people are into chitlins and gumbos and so forth, you know—

CUTLER: Right.

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HOLMAN: But I made \$1,230.

CUTLER: Wow.

HOLMAN: So I had enough money, \$1,200, to pay my taxes, and then I had thirty dollars left over. I said, "God, give me that too, to go to lunch with," and somebody had enough money to go to lunch. So I've always stayed into something, because with all the money that my money has up there—and I'll say it truly—I can only get a small portion of it once a month, and that ain't enough for me to live like I want to live.

CUTLER: So it helps to grow food.

HOLMAN: It does. Not only—you're getting something that's really healthy, because the harsh chemicals—because my daughter was in Texas Southern one year, and I just want to say this, and when her instructor, her professor knew that I was a gardener, he invited me to come sit in on the class. He was teaching biology, and when he got the gardening part of it and the livestock part of it, he invited me to come sit in on the class, and it was really interesting because with the commercial fertilize, the stuff grows so fast and so big and very little flavor, and I said to the professor—I raised my hands, and I asked the question—and I said, "When you're using this and you're all shooting up the livestock with the various hormones and the calves are getting real big and fat and we've got these great big steaks and whatever, when you're putting all of this into these animals and fertilizing all of this vegetable with the fertilizer, what is that doing to the people that eat the stuff?" He said to me, he says, "Miss Holman, I'd like to talk to you after the class," and I said, "Okay."

So I sat very patiently, and then when class was over, I went up, and I started to

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question him. I said, "You know about all of this. What is this doing to us? When we go to the supermarket and buy all these great big pretty mustard greens and great big beautiful leaves and these plants have been fertilized with all of this," he says, "This is something we don't talk about." I said, "What is it going to do to us over the period of years that we eat this?" He says, "Well, we don't talk about it because we don't want to panic the people." I says, "How many friends do you have that have organic gardens that you go and eat out of?" He says, "Quite a few."

And so this is interesting, and this is why I like to grow all I can, then eat all I can. And it's the thing around here that whatever's in season out there in the garden, that's what we eat.

CUTLER: And your neighbors come around?

HOLMAN: My neighbors come. Yes, my neighbors come.

CUTLER: And they can pick what they want.

HOLMAN: They take what they want, and usually there's more food out there than I will ever be able to eat at one time, or even while the season is going.

CUTLER: And has that been going on since you planted it, from the beginning?

HOLMAN: That has been going on ever since I started the community garden, and I don't remember what year I did it in, but I remember I used to go around and solicit money to help buy the soil. And I had a friend who is his middle stages of Alzheimer's, but when they would give me soil—I have some pictures around here someplace where, when we started to put in the gardens—because we put in two, three beds at a time until

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finally we got to what we have out there now, and he had what they call a little tractor with a front-end loader, and he said, “Sister Holman, don’t try to do that by hand anymore. Call me when you get your soil, and I’ll come over with my tractor and dump it in the beds for you,” and this is what he did—because his wife came over about four or five weeks ago and got a cabbage.

But I got help from some of the people in the community, and along with Urban Harvest—you know, they would give me money or send me someplace where someone would donate soil, because all of the soil out there in those raised beds is special kind of soil. I’ll say it’s special because I don’t know what the real—how to really say it. But it’s soil along with—it’s soft enough that you can cultivate it without—it’s not like that hard, adobe ground that we have, you know. And so this is special soil that’s out there in those, and it allows me to be able to go out there and take a little fork and dig it up. Somebody that’s got just a few muscles to dig it up and cultivate it and grow stuff, and we’d go and take the weeds out, sprinkle some cottonseed meal over there, in proportion, and turn it over and water it, and in a couple or three days it’s ready for planting.

CUTLER: As far as donations go, like you were saying, for soil or for other things, was your church helpful, or other churches?

HOLMAN: My church was helpful. Like this man who come over and would move the dirt for me. He was a deacon at that time. Then I got some help from other people, and me and my family did quite a lot of it ourselves. The man now that made that garden out there—he was one of the ones when we had our opening day, was to come over here and get his shovel and boots and get to shoveling dirt.

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CUTLER: What was his name?

HOLMAN: Benjamin Melton.

CUTLER: Okay. Well, let's go back a little bit. When you came back to Houston in 1984, what happened? You mentioned Ruth Brussard had introduced you to the community gardening, but how did you initially get interested in the idea and get introduced to Urban Harvest or the people involved?

HOLMAN: After my husband passed away in '88, I was left here by myself, and I met Benjamin Melton a year or so later, after my husband died. He was a farmer. He was from a family of fourteen. He was number seven child. And he was raised on a farm. And he said to me one day, he says, "There's a woman down there in Arcola whose name is Ruth Brussard. Why don't you go down there and get some Swiss chard? She's just got loads of it down there." And I said, "Okay." So I got me a garbage bag, and he told me how to get to her house. He gave me her phone number, and I called her up and asked her if I could come, and she said yes. And I went down and got two big bags of Swiss chard, and I gave some to my kids and everybody else, because she had loads of it.

I got to be acquainted with her. She was a big-time gardener. Her daughter was in Purdue at that time, taking agronomy, I believe it is. Bob Randall and them had helped her put in an irrigation system.

CUTLER: At her farm?

HOLMAN: Not a farm, just a big garden spot.

CUTLER: Okay.

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HOLMAN: I said, *Ooh, that sounds interesting*, because you need an irrigation system, and I began to do some research on that. What she was growing, it was just so interesting just to see all of this food just growing, and she gave some of it—and, you know, we've never been into selling it. Just give it away. But I gave her a donation that day for the Swiss chard because I thought, *My God, let us give her some money so she can buy some more seeds*.

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: And so I proceed to do research on it, and she invited me to go to the meetings, and I just kind of shadowed her for a while, and I got acquainted with Bob Randall. We were still at Interfaith Ministries then.

CUTLER: So those were the meetings that you went to, was at Interfaith?

HOLMAN: Yes, with Interfaith Ministries. I just liked what I saw and decided, *Hey, I've got all this land here. What am I going to do with this land?* Almost two acres. *What am I going to do with it?* I was just having it cut every month. I said, *I can do that*. And so I proceed to study and do some research on it and ask all kind of questions, and Miss Brussard would take me around to the various meetings, because she is the one that introduced me to Bouchet Mickey over at the Extension Service there in Rosenberg. She also took me to the one out there in Bear Creek in Harris County, and I just kind of shadowed her for a long time, and it just went.

CUTLER: Yes. And so were you involved in that group of people that branched off from Interfaith with Bob—

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HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: And you all decided that you wanted to have your own—an organization needed to be formed on its own?

HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: Is that correct?

HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: Okay.

HOLMAN: And so I worked under Bob, and we went out to Bob's house, because we would go on tours, just to see what other people were growing in their back yards. I took a master gardening class, and—oh, that was taught by a Dr. from... Ooh, I can't remember where he come from—College Station. Bob knows his name. I can't remember. Susan Fisher would know his name. Along with this, I took this class in master gardening, and it seems to me the deeper I got into it, the more fun it was. I got pictures around here where I had huge heads of lettuce. Somebody gave me a few lettuce plants, and it was just such a fun thing to do, and I still enjoy it.

CUTLER: Did you ever go into the urban community gardens that were formed?

HOLMAN: Yes.

CUTLER: You worked in them there or just taught people how to do things?

HOLMAN: No, I didn't teach them. I just kind of went on tours. We would have tours to visit gardens and see what the other people were doing, and then that would give us

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ideas on how to come back and do things in our own garden. And I got a picture out there in the garage. I can't even remember where it was. But we went, and they just had small little places, but you can compile so much food into a little place. You don't have to have a big farm. And in the master gardening classes, there were young adults, I would say 60% young adults, who were learning how to do gardening in their own back yards. And two tomato plants, three tomato plants will supply a family of tomatoes all summer. If you want to, you can grow carrots in, say, a three by three little garden bed. You can put carrots and beets in there, and you learn how to make use of a small spot of land, and instead of putting all of the annual flowers, you can put a few seeds of string beans, and I learned how to stagger the planting, where all of them won't become mature at the same time.

A lady—she's been gone for a number of years, right in that little white house right there—she would tell me how to plant my mustard seeds. "Don't plant them all at one time. Plant them like about two, three weeks apart, and then you will continually have mustards, fresh greens, for a period of time. Even your lettuce. You don't plant it all at one time. And then you will continually have some lettuce leaves to go pinch off of and make you a fresh salad."

And these are the things that you go and you learn from other people.

CUTLER: That's true. But where would she have learned that from?

HOLMAN: Evidently—because when I met her, she was about eighty years of age, and so I say her fore-parents taught her how to do that. Now, I heard a series on the news, on the TV some years ago, and it stated that we don't teach our children enough of where we

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come from so our children will learn some of the habits of our old fore-parents and can bring it up. And I take to the kids now who have all of the big college degrees, and what we were taught were common sense, because a lot of us was not as well educated as some of the people are now. Hey, everybody has two and three degrees.

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: But you learn to do—you just learn from—my dad used to say, “Old common horse sense.” And I’m sure that’s where Miss Thomas learned how to do it, because she was telling me, “Don’t plant all your seeds at one time. Plant some today, plant some a few days later. And then you will always have”—like your string beans. You can plant—I have gone out there four or five rows of string beans, and they all mature at the same time, so you got two buckets of string beans. And then later on, you know, if you hadn’t learned how to stagger them and not plant them all at the same time, when you have string beans, you say—well, you have string beans once a week, twice a week at the most. But if you harvest them all at the same time, then you’ve got to freeze them or do something or give them all away. But if you learn how to stagger your planting, then you can feed your own family for an extended amount of time.

CUTLER: It makes sense.

HOLMAN: And so this is what—and when you talk to people, you go, “Oh, okay, that makes sense.” [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Yes. Well, when you went on these tours in the urban areas, what was the response like from the community members?

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HOLMAN: It was great, because when we went to Bob Randall's house, in his back yard I have never seen a man have so much little stuff that's edible in the back yard. And his back yard just looked so littered and cluttered, but it was always you could turn around and pick this. It was something to eat. Maybe he had two, three cucumbers over here, a couple of tomatoes over here, a little fruit tree over there, and it was always something. But it demonstrated what you can do in your back yard, and they kind of called it backyard gardening, because I understand way back in World War I or World War II where people started to have the yard gardens.

CUTLER: The Victory Gardens.

HOLMAN: The Victory Gardens, yes, yes. They called them Victory Gardens. I was a kid then. Because now I put my tomatoes in my front yard because I always to walk over there, but I got three tomato plants out there. I put them in my front flower beds, and I'll have tomatoes out there. And I haven't figured out where I'm going to put my cucumbers because I'm going to put them close to the house. Because once in a while somebody comes in and helps themselves. I had an incident where I had some beautiful tomatoes right outside that front porch right out there. You passed the area.

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: And I was working over at the church, serving lunches during the summer, and it was really hot in the summer. The summer was really hot. And I had picked my tomatoes, and they were beautiful, and there were a few left that needs to stay on a few more days and get vine ripened because they're much better when they're vine ripened. I run out there one day and I said, *Let me go get my tomatoes. They ought to be ready.* I

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went out there, and there was no tomatoes. And I thought, *Hmm*. And then I rushed back in because it was so hot outside. And I went outside a day or so later, and I decide, *Let me get my tomatoes they will rot*. And would you believe, there was not a tomato there. Someone had come in while I was not home and had taken all of the tomatoes.

CUTLER: Oh!

HOLMAN: And I had another little bush just as you go inside that gate, and I said, *Well, let me go get those*. They were also gone.

CUTLER: Hmm. Did you ever find out—

HOLMAN: I never to till this day who come in and took them, but somebody came in while I was not here and took all of my tomatoes.

CUTLER: Oh!

HOLMAN: [Laughs.] So you have all kind of experiences out here.

CUTLER: Yes, sure.

HOLMAN: What can I say?

CUTLER: You were the head of the gardening committee when Urban Harvest got started? Is that right.

HOLMAN: Yes, ma'am, I was the chairperson.

CUTLER: Okay, what did you do in that position, and how were you chosen?

HOLMAN: I don't really remember how they chose me, but they chose me as chairperson. We had our meetings once a month, and Bob Randall had gotten a place.

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Somebody had loaned him office space for us to have our meetings, and if I'm not mistaken, it was on Bellaire, I think, right off of 16. I can't think of the name of the building. I might be able to go back there. And that's where we would go in. Our meetings was at least thirty minutes, and we would do our discussions and make plans for our next project.

Our first social thing was here, and then the next time we had a social, it was out off of Memorial, and I forgot the name of the building that we used to go out there, and it had begun to get larger then, and we would go in and bring our covered dishes, and then Urban Harvest had enough money to—somebody would buy a couple of hams, and we just kind of went on from there, and then we grew and grew. I worked on the board of directors. I don't know how I was chosen for that, either.

CUTLER: How long did you work?

HOLMAN: For three years. I did my volunteer for three years, for both as chairperson and on the board of directors.

CUTLER: Three years each or three years all together?

HOLMAN: Three years all together.

CUTLER: And then after that, did you continue to go in for meetings?

HOLMAN: Yes, I continued for a while to go into meetings, and then I decided—oh, I got interested in something else, but I still did my gardening here. I would go in for their—no, wait a minute—October, November—the November functions, when they would have their big dinners. I would go in to there, and then I'd get a chance to see

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everybody and mingle with everybody and buy a few seeds or just buy something or just get whatever they had to give me, because somebody always would bring in some plants to give away or some seeds to give away, and I got a chance to meet everybody there.

I later got into—well, I took piano lessons for a while. I wanted to do something else. Then that didn't work because I never was good at piano, and now I'm into foster care. I've been doing that now. I asked my daughter. She says about eight years I've been doing foster care. And so it's rather rewarding, you know, because there's so many children out there that need a good safe haven, and I'm the one. I guess God chose me to be a provider for that. I have a four-bedroom house, and I say, "I can't sleep in all of those rooms at one time, so why not share it?" And so that's what I'm doing right now.

CUTLER: When you had that first social gathering here, did Urban Harvest have a name yet?

HOLMAN: I'm not sure about that.

CUTLER: Do you know who came up with that name?

HOLMAN: I don't know, but I know one thing that came out of that: We did a cookbook, because Mark Cotham asked me one day—he said, "Erma, why don't you do a cookbook?" Because, you know, I'm a cook. I just cook everything. He says, "Why don't you do us a cookbook?" And I said, "Okay." And I said, "I'll tell you what: If you let me do it"—and I forgot what word I used—"for my husband, who is a deceased pastor of our church, if you let me let me do it in his honor," I says, "I'll do it." And so we formed a cookbook committee, and we did it, and when this is over, if you'd like to look at it, I'll show it to you.

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CUTLER: Oh, I'd like that.

HOLMAN: And Urban Harvest sold the cookbook, and it was a beautiful cookbook. I think it's gorgeous.

CUTLER: How neat.

[End Tape 1, Side A. Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

HOLMAN: I think we worked on that cookbook about a year, gathering up recipes, and we would have our meetings out here, and we would sort the recipes, because we would ask people to bring recipes and invite them to get recipes from other members of their families, and we would meet out here periodically and sort the recipes and kind of put them in order and sit across the table and talk about what we were going to do, and we did all of the sorting and the preparation right here. And then we passed the information—I think Susan Fisher was instrumental in doing the cover and helping choose the company that put this cookbook together for us.

CUTLER: And then they sold the cookbook?

HOLMAN: They sold the cookbook.

CUTLER: Through? Do you know how?

HOLMAN: Though—I don't know. I took so many cookbooks to sell, and I think everyone would take so many cookbooks to sell, and then would give the money to

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Urban Harvest, and they had a—

CUTLER: You would go, like, where? To your church and sell it?

HOLMAN: No, I just sold it among my family.

CUTLER: Oh, okay.

HOLMAN: I bought some, because I bought some and just gave to my family, because it had my name in it and my husband's name in it.

CUTLER: What was your husband's name?

HOLMAN: Willie Holman.

CUTLER: That's a neat idea, yes.

HOLMAN: Yes, and so I did it on behalf of him, and we did it, and it turned out to be a real...It was a neat thing to be able to just give as gifts, you know, because...even my grandchildren put recipes in there.

CUTLER: Oh, yes.

HOLMAN: I think they had bologna and egg sandwiches. [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Great. That's a good way to involve a lot of people.

HOLMAN: Yes, because I know they got some recipes in there, and a lot of people's kids—you know, how they did their toasted cheese and various recipes. We had a committee for that. But Susan Fisher—she did a lot. Of course, she's a businesswoman. But she was quite instrumental in helping us out. A lot of things that I didn't know how to do, I'd call Susan and [ask], "How are we going to do this?" "Well, Erma, this is what

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we're going to do" and so forth. And she just kind of took the range [sic; reins] and helped us get it published, and it came back looking beautiful.

CUTLER: That's neat.

HOLMAN: And I know Mark Cotham had a lot to do—have you met Mark?

CUTLER: No, but I've heard his name mentioned before.

HOLMAN: Mark Cotham. He's a big-time attorney. He had a lot to do with helping us making certain decisions so we wouldn't get in trouble. We could always call Mark and ask him if it was legal. "Can we do this?" "Yes, you can do this. No, you can't do that."

CUTLER: What was it like when you were volunteering and you were on the board of directors? Did you all work well together, the group of people that was meeting?

HOLMAN: Everybody there worked well together because everybody was so excited about what we were doing, and to be able to know that you can give of yourself to somebody else, because when we'd meet, there were a lot of people in this particular area. If they come and got a bag of greens, they were really thankful about it. If I called and said, "Hey, you guys, I got some cabbage over here. Come get you one when you feel like it," and it was just a joy to be able to give this to the people and to know that you're helping to feed somebody with some good, wholesome food.

CUTLER: What about for you? Were you involved over at all in the Third Ward where—I mean, that was probably familiar territory since you had gone to high school over there, or were you involved over there?

HOLMAN: No, I did not get involved in the gardens over there, but when we would

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have our monthly meetings, I got a chance to meet the head gardener because, you know, we would all come together.

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: So I got a chance to meet the people who was there from various gardens.

What is it? SHAPE community? Over there where they built—they didn't build those little houses, but they reconditioned them, remodeled them.

CUTLER: Oh, the Project Row Houses?

HOLMAN: Yes, yes, yes. Because George—what was George's last name? A little black guy. He was in horticulture. He taught grafting. I never learned how to do grafting, and I really, really wanted to do that. I never really learned how to do grafting. Hmm, I can't think of George's last name. But he was quite helpful, and I think they did some work—they planted some trees at the Emancipation—

CUTLER: Emancipation Park.

HOLMAN: —Park, yes. But I never went over there. I always had a lot to do here.

[Laughs.]

CUTLER: Yes, I would imagine.

HOLMAN: When I got through digging in the ground here, I didn't have much time. But whenever we would come together, you got a chance to meet all of the garden heads.

CUTLER: And hear about what was going on.

HOLMAN: And hear about what was going on, and so that was always nice.

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CUTLER: Yes. Well, this is kind of a general question, but what would you say that you learned from your involvement with Urban Harvest?

HOLMAN: Ooh, have you got a couple of days? [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Or maybe something that stands out that you learned that—you know, not just little specific things about growing but maybe just in general, for your life or whatever.

HOLMAN: Let me say it this way: I learned that you can make a great impact on people when you're working with them, because not only did we learn how to garden but we learned how to teach people to garden in a small area and what you can do in your own back yard. You don't have to have an acre of land or a half an acre. You can even have a small lot, and you can plant a few greens. You can plant five plants of okra seeds, and you can have okra all summer. You can go out—because this lady right in the back of me, Miss Thomas, when she was living—when I first moved out here, she had just a tiny little garden, and she would pick up okra every other day and maybe five or six pods of okra, and by the end of the week she had enough for a nice meal. She'd pick those five or six pieces, put them on the fridge. The next couple of days, she'd pick five or six more, and before the end of the week, she had enough for a real meal. And this is what I learned. And I tell my children—none of them garden, but hopefully someday that they will choose to do this. And in your flower beds you can put out a few onion sets, and it's good to raise garlic and onions along with your roses. It keeps out the bugs.

CUTLER: Oh, wow.

HOLMAN: And I learned it doesn't have to be a big plot of ground, not like what I have out there, but just a small area on a 75 by 100 lot. You can plant tomatoes, you can plant

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collard greens, you can plant Swiss chard in your front flower beds, and if a person passes by, they won't know if that's food or if it's just a plant, because your Swiss chard is a beautiful plant to grow. And you can take five leaves of Swiss chard and make dinner, and if you pull them off and pull them off right, the smaller leaves that are left will grow, and in the next five days you can pull them again. And so these are the things that I learned, that you can feed yourself, and it might come to that, because we will have to feed ourselves on just a little small plot of land.

CUTLER: Okay. What do you think Urban Harvest's greatest benefit has been to the Houston community as a whole?

HOLMAN: What do you mean, the "greatest benefit"?

CUTLER: Just kind of what impact would you say that it's made on the Houston community?

HOLMAN: I think it's made a big impact. I don't know how to say how big an impact. A lot of your city people are from rural areas, were raised on a farm, but when they moved to the city, everybody's into landscaping with flowers, and I think—because I used to hear Bob Randall talk about all the time how you can plant just a little bit of food in a small area and feed your own personal family and have some to give away, and I think this is what it has taught people, because in my class of master gardening, when you see these young couples—and in the class I was in, I say it as 60 percent young couples were in there to learn, and they weren't the poor, the poor ghetto-type people; they were middle class and upper middle class, but they wanted to learn how to garden in their own back yard so they could plant wholesome food; they could teach this to their children,

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how to grow food. And I think it's really important, is the learning how to grow food on a little small plot of land. And I think this is what Urban Harvest has done, is to teach the city of Houston and the surrounding areas how they can grow some of their own food in a small plot of land. Does that make sense?

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: [Laughs.]

CUTLER: I don't think I have any other specific questions, but if there's anything you can think of that I haven't asked you that might be important to the history.

HOLMAN: Something else I'd like to say.

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: They used to let us go to—I think it's Whole Foods up there in Houston.

CUTLER: Oh. Yes.

HOLMAN: Is that in Montrose? Where is Whole Foods?

CUTLER: Yes, it's near Montrose, West Alabama.

HOLMAN: Yes, ma'am, West Alabama area. We used to get out early on Saturday mornings and go for carrots, for beets, whatever vegetable that we had that we wanted to sell, and they would let us sit out in the front, and it would be five or six people from all nationalities and all gardens, and we would take our food and sit there in front, and people would come and buy because they knew that they were buying real fresh vegetables.

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CUTLER: Oh, wow.

HOLMAN: This restaurant would give us—we could get it going and get a cup of ice and some water and some lemon, and I used to make me a glass of lemonade, sitting out there in the sun, just enjoying ourselves, visiting with the people that came, visiting with our co-gardeners, and we stayed there, oh, two, three, four hours until we sold all of our stuff, about ready to go, and would have a nice visit. Once in a while we had enough money to go in and buy a sandwich and divide it, and we didn't have any money, all of us, which is kind of on a fixed income, but it was such a fun thing to do. And these are some of the things that I enjoyed. It didn't cost any money, and it was benefiting the people. Because when you pull carrots right out of the ground and rinse them off, and if you scrub them, you don't even have to peel them, and eat that, you are eating some really healthy food. You are putting something really positive into your body.

CUTLER: Yes.

HOLMAN: And this is what I learned.

CUTLER: And when you were out there in front of Whole Foods, was that after Urban Harvest had already formed?

HOLMAN: Yes, that was after Urban Harvest had formed. This was one of the projects that somebody came up with.

CUTLER: Oh, okay.

HOLMAN: And people just kind of came up with ideas and brought it to the board of directors, and we voted on it and said, "Yes, it sounds good. Let's do it." And so that

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was one of the things that I remember that we did. And there was one lady—I can't remember her name. They wanted to do a fund-raiser for Urban Harvest, and they went to a restaurant in Montrose, and people brought foods that they served. I remember somebody served—figs was in season, and somebody came there and to have those figs kind of sautéed in something, and you get a little dab of salad or a half a fig, and those figs were just huge. And I can't remember exactly how it's done, but I remember I took my oldest daughter—I said, "Let's go." And this was a fund-raiser for Urban Harvest. I don't know exactly how much money they got, and at that time it really didn't matter to me. All I enjoyed was to be a part of the group.

And Urban Harvest would come up with some really neat things, and they've had some wonderful people who have worked on the various boards of directors. I don't know who's there. I have not been to a meeting in a long time, because I always keep my hands into something else, but one of these days I'm going to find out where they're meeting, and I'm going to surprise them and go. [Laughs.]

CUTLER: Oh, you should, you should

HOLMAN: But I think Urban Harvest is a wonderful organization, and the time that Bob had put into it—Susan Fisher and Mark Cotham and I can't remember who else, but these are the people's names that I can remember. They've done a beautiful job in keeping this going, because it really is a benefit to a lot of the people. And some of the gardens, I understand, they would have maybe a bucket of tomatoes, a bucket of cucumbers, and they would sit outside the garden gate, and people would just pass by there and just give whatever they want, because a lot of people really don't have the finances to just go out

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and buy this. But if you can go and get a cucumber and rinse it off and eat it, and putting some wholesome food into your body, I think that's a wonderful way to go.

CUTLER: It makes a difference.

HOLMAN: It does make a difference. And I don't think any of the gardens use that heavy commercial fertilizer. They all use organic fertilizer.

CUTLER: Right.

HOLMAN: I never really learned to compost, but a lot of people—I have a general idea how it's done. I've taken some classes on composting, but I always clean and burn my trash. But for the people who really knows how to compost—and a lot of the younger people are really into that—I'm getting kind of old to be doing all of that—but it's just a wonderful resource to get involved in. I think Urban Harvest is one of the most wonderful organizations around the city of Houston and the suburban areas.

CUTLER: All right. Well, thanks.

HOLMAN: [Laughs.]

[End of interview.]