UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Haroldeen Hartsfield
Interviewed by: J.R. Wilson
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Transcribed by: Suzanne Mascola

JRW: Today's date is July 23, 2006. This is J.R. Wilson with the University of Houston's Oral History Project and today, I am with Haroldeen Hartsfield. I am glad to be here. I am glad to be with you. I wanted to talk to you about the law firm that you and Zinetta, Algenita, Shelvin and Joan started in 1976 but really, I'd like to go back and just get a sense of your life path that has brought you to this point and certainly brought you through that experience so if I may, when and where were you born?

HH: Detroit, Michigan.

JRW: What year were you born in?

HH: I was born November 15, 1946.

JRW: Detroit. That explains your miracle babies. What is the word? Off the record. It explains you going back to Detroit and the miracle babies resulted in those visits that you made. Your family in Detroit and your upbringing in Detroit, what part of Detroit were you raised in?

HH: I was raised on the west side, northwest side. I went to Sacred Heart Elementary School from grades 1 through 8 and then 9th and 10th grade, I went to St. Elizabeth.

JRW: Was Sacred Heart a Catholic school?

HH: It was.

JRW: Segregated or desegregated?

HH: It was a black school with Polish nuns. Then, I went to St. Elizabeth. It was an integrated school for 9th and 10th grade.

JRW: Was it Catholic also?

HH: It was Catholic also. And then I transferred to Central High School, public school for the 11th and 12th grade. I graduated in 1964.

JRW: Was Central desegregated or integrated?

HH: It was a majority black school. It had maybe 5% Caucasians.

JRW: Were those the same kids who perhaps lived in your general vicinity that went to school at Central?

HH: It was.

JRW: Would those Caucasian kids have been working class or how would you describe them socioeconomically or ethnically or whatever?

HH: I really don't know. I would think that they were from working class parents.

JRW: Were Detroit schools segregated up until that time, particularly because of housing patterns, I guess.

HH: They were basically, I'd say, segregated, yes.

JRW: What did your family do?

HH: My father worked . . . initially, he drove the bus for the City of Detroit public transportation. And then, he was employed at Ford Motor Company, the assembly plant in _____, Michigan. He retired from there.

JRW: Did mom work?

HH: My mother worked when my youngest brother . . .

JRW: I guess I should say outside of the home, as if being at home raising a family is not work.

HH: When my youngest brother was in the first grade . . .

JRW: What is his name?

HH: Rodderick Hartsfield . . . she began to work as a teacher's aid in the Detroit public school system.

JRW: How many of you Hartsfield children are there?

HH: There are a total of 7. I am the oldest.

JRW: Is that right? So, you are the big sister of all?

HH: I am.

JRW: What was that like? Did you have those traditional big sister kind of expectations and responsibilities and burdens – I guess I will even go as far to say, being the oldest and being a female both.

HH: We had responsibilities. I was in charge of the family after my mother and father. It was understood that everyone fell in line behind the oldest.

JRW: Pecking order?

HH: Yes, that is the way it went. We grew up in a very jovial home. I had a very wonderful time.

JRW: How do you mean jovial?

HH: It was fun. It was a lot of activity, a lot of friends, and we spent our entire growth pattern in Detroit. We graduated all from the Detroit public school systems.

JRW: What was your family expectation as far as college was concerned?

HH: It was understood that we would go.

JRW: Period?

HH: Yes.

JRW: And did all of you at least go even if not finishing?

HH: Yes, we all went except for my oldest brother. Six of us went.

JRW: Did either of your parents go to school beyond high school?

HH: No, they did not. They graduated from high school: my mother, from Northern High School in Detroit and my father from Dunbar in Mayfield, Kentucky.

JRW: What were your father's parents names?

HH: Mary Todd Hartsfield and John Wesley Hartsfield.

JRW: Recognizable names there.

HH: Yes.

JRW: And your mom's?

HH: My mother's parents names were Mary Griffin Murphy and John Murphy, Sr.

JRW: Did you know your grandparents?

HH: I knew my father's mother. My father's father died in about 1950, so I was about 4 years old. I did not know my mother's parents. They died in early 1947 for my grandmother and my grandfather, about 1945.

JRW: The neighborhood and the community that you raised up was predominantly or exclusively an African-American community?

HH: Exclusively black.

JRW: That experience, and I guess one of the . . . unlike several of the other women with whom you formed your law firm in 1976 who grew up here in the south and in particular, grew up here in Texas . . . you growing up in the industrial north in Detroit and in the urban north, not necessarily the rural north in Detroit, Michigan, were you conscious of living in a segregated society – a society that was not integrated even though it may have been desegregated to some degree but that was not integrated. That is, were you conscious of segregation? Were you conscious of racism? Were you conscious of living in an African-American society, an African-American school as opposed to not?

HH: We were very conscious of it. Very conscious. When I went to St. Elizabeth, it

was an integrated school.

JRW: Junior high?

HH: 9th and 10th grade. From 1 through 10th grade, I had white teachers because they were _____ of the religious organization. They were nuns. So, they taught and Sacred Heart was all black. St. Elizabeth was an integrated school. So, I was very much aware of segregation. But it didn't bother us because we flourished anyway. It was not a point of concern for us.

JRW: Now, interestingly, for your experience where, for some others, where they may have had a similar experience that is living in an isolated community that is an exclusively African American community with African American instructors and educators, you certainly, I guess, up through 9th grade or 10th grade there at St. Elizabeth, that your experience was these European – these Polish nuns.

HH: The Polish nuns were in elementary, 1 through 8. And the Sisters of Charity, 9th and 10th grade.

JRW: O.K., were they also pretty much exclusively European nuns?

HH: They were all.

JRW: O.K., I guess my thought is, is just in terms of the experience that African Americans have in segregated schools and African American schools with African American instructors and how those African American instructors dealt with, encouraged, and even created opportunities for their African American students. And I am wondering

– your experiences with these nuns in terms of how they dealt with you as their African American students and encouragement and support in all of that. What were your observations or what are your recollections of the nuns in that respect?

HH: I don't recall any discouragement from them. I don't recall any kind of discouragement from 1 through 8. I don't think they were overly encouraging but we got our encouragement from our homes. So, I didn't feel discouraged. I didn't know the word "discourage." I know that they were very stern about learning. Everyone who came through Catholic schools learned. They did not tolerate slacking at all and they did not hesitate to use corporal punishment, whatever. You got your homework and you learned. That was understood.

JRW: O.K., with the blessings of your family with that?

HH: Yes, our parents went along with it.

JRW: With the expectation, I guess?

HH: Yes. They used corporal punishment at home, the school used corporal punishment and it was understood. There was no room for a lot of foolishness. They didn't tolerate it because if you were to the degree that you could not be self-disciplined and controlled, you could not attend these schools.

JRW: O.K. We're not going to have no discipline problems!

HH: No, they were there to teach and they didn't have any special education or things like that. That was unheard of.

JRW: That is interesting. Either, or. In your high school at Central, you had African American instructors?

HH: A blend.

JRW: Is there anybody that sticks out in your mind? Is there any instructor that sticks out in your mind from Central?

HH: My English teacher, Mrs. Rose. She was a very good teacher. My biology teacher, Mr. Dees, a good instructor. Those are the ones that stood out.

JRW: What sticks out about Ms. Rose, your English teacher?

HH: She wanted us to be aware of the King's English and learn it. Constant stressing the use of proper pronouns, nouns, conjugation of verbs – all of that.

JRW: Including be?

HH: Yes. We had to learn English.

JRW: Yes, and write English.

HH: Yes.

JRW: And read English.

HH: Yes.

JRW: And for biology? What was it about your biology instructor? What was his name again?

HH: Mr. Dees. He was a scientist and he encouraged us to explore the scientific

world. We learned about dissecting animals and things like that. It was very interesting. He was a good guy. They did not tolerate any foolishness in their classes. So, once again, it was more slack than the Catholic schools but they held students to a standard.

JRW: Did the school expect you and your classmates to go to college? At Central High School, did your instructors expect for you guys to go to college which, this would have been in 1964?

HH: 1963, 1964. Well, I was in a college prep curriculum and so they encouraged this – those who were in the college prep. Yes, they expected it.

JRW: Where did you end up going to school?

HH: Wayne State University.

JRW: O.K. My sister had been a librarian there at one point at Wayne State. And so, what was your major at Wayne State?

HH: Sociology.

JRW: Why sociology? What was it that attracted you or how did you come to that?

HH: I don't know. I have no idea.

JRW: Did you like social studies in high school?

HH: I liked social studies but that wasn't really the reason for my selecting it. I didn't know anything about the selection of courses and curriculum. And so, I had a sociology degree, and then I got a masters in social work.

JRW: Your MSW?

HH: Yes.

JRW: And then, I pressed on from there immediately and got my law degree.

JRW: Upon getting your MSW, what was the realization for you or what was the impetus for you to go ahead and pursue law rather than being a social worker? What did you realize about social work or about what you wanted to do?

HH: I didn't feel it was challenging enough. I wanted something that I could carve out a profession and work as long as I wanted. At that time, that was my idea. And I liked the idea of being able to understand the various rights, etc., that an individual had, and really understanding it for myself.

JRW: Do you still, in general, feel that way and have you been able to achieve that sense of what you wanted to accomplish in terms of carving out and the challenge and all of those elements that drew you in to pursuing _____?

HH: Yes. It has been a difficult field but yes.

JRW: Difficult? How so?

HH: Earning money. Developing a clientele. This was not my home. Building clients. But ultimately, it comes into fruition.

JRW: Unlike on television where it is . . .

HH: Oh, no, it is not like that because, once again, you encounter segregation. They do not hire black lawyers.

JRW: Who is "they?"

HH: The world. So, we had no firms to go into. So, we did the public service, legal aid, etc., and then we went off into private practice.

JRW: At Wayne State, was that a part of your orientation and by that, I mean . . . I know, for instance, at Howard, that that notion of activism and mitigating civil rights and all of that was very much integral to that particular law school since the time of Charles Houston training Thurgood Marshall and that generation. You were in law school in the late 1960s?

HH: The 1970s, early 1970s.

JRW: Do you feel that the law school itself was training you for some particular mission in the law or was it more simply teaching you the law and you kind of go and do whatever you were led to do?

HH: I think the latter. You had to have your ideas into what you wanted to pursue, but they didn't give any direction, at least not to black students.

JRW: Right. When did you graduate law school?

HH: 1974.

JRW: 1974? Did you stay in Detroit for a while after graduating law school?

HH: No, I was in Des Moines, Iowa.

JRW: So, when you graduated . . .

HH: In 1971, I came to TSU's law school my first year.

JRW: Why did you come to TSU?

HH: Because a fellow came to St. Louis where I was in a summer program _____. It was called Cleo.

JRW: The program was called Cleo?

HH: Yes, it is still in existence. He was a recruiter for Texas Southern and he was recruiting students, and he caught my eye and my attention. So, I thought it would be nice to go to a black law school. So, I put in an application.

JRW: This was after you did one year of law at Wayne State?

HH: No. I got by bachelors from Wayne State and my masters.

JRW: And so then, you were . . .

HH: I was in Cleo in the summer.

JRW: After your masters?

HH: After my masters and that was a program that gave you a head start in your interest law. And, at that point in time, this guy came in – he was recruiting various people to come to the law school, Texas Southern, and I was interested. And I applied. And, as a result, I got accepted to Texas Southern, so I came here my first year.

JRW: O.K. You were speaking of Des Moines also, Des Moines, Iowa.

HH: After my first year, I left Texas Southern and went to Des Moines, Iowa, where I

finished my second and third year.

JRW: Why did you leave and go to . . . you finished law school in Des Moines?

HH: Yes, I did.

JRW: Why was that?

HH: I could not get my financial aid straight at Texas Southern so I had been accepted my first year with Des Moines and I wrote them seeking admission again and they said, yes, I could.

JRW: And all your business was taken care of, no problems? Was that disappointing?

HH: What was that?

JRW: To have to leave TSU.

HH: No, it wasn't. I took it as par for the course of what I had to do.

JRW: Life just is what it is.

HH: It is.

JRW: What did you do when you finished up, up at Des Moines?

HH: I came back to Texas.

JRW: Was that University of Iowa or Iowa State?

HH: Drake University, in Des Moines, Iowa.

JRW: O.K., when you finished up at Drake, what did you do?

HH: I returned to Texas to take the bar.

JRW: Were you successful the first time taking the bar?

HH: My first time taking it in Texas, I was. My first time taking the bar in Des Moines, Iowa, I was not.

JRW: Do you know why?

HH: Yes, I did not know taxes. At that time, we used to take the bar in 3 days and on the third day, they would tell you if you had completed the results. I remember very clearly, I did not pass two questions and those were on taxation. So, I left. It was my intent to leave anyway.

I got busy. Made my application for the bar in Texas and I took it in 1974. I passed it in 1974.

JRW: Did they have taxation questions on their also? O.K., so you passed the Texas bar without the burden of a bunch of questions on taxation and everything.

HH: Halleluia!

JRW: And so, you come in to the Texas Bar, was that 1974?

HH: 1974.

JRW: Once you passed the bar here in Texas . . . where did you live when you were here in Texas? What neighborhood? What community?

HH: South Park.

JRW: Out off of?

HH: Selensky.

JRW: Right off of Selensky/Martin Luther King area up there?

HH: Exactly.

JRW: And so, you passed the bar in 1974. What is the first opportunity that you took advantage of to practice law after that?

HH: I got hired at Gulf Coast Legal Aid.

JRW: Was that a good fit? Did you feel at the time that that was a good fit with your MSW, with your law degree in particular?

HH: It was all right because it gave me an opportunity to practice immediately, because it was very, very crowded with work. So, I got my feet wet instantly.

JRW: What kind of law did you deal with primarily at Gulf Coast? It is Gulf Coast Community Services, right?

HH: Gulf Coast Legal Foundation.

JRW: O.K., is that what we refer to as legal aid?

HH: As legal aid. The name has changed several times.

JRW: What kind of law did you find yourself practicing?

HH: I did domestic, meaning divorces, child custody, etc.

JRW: Is that the same thing that is now generally referred to as family law?

HH: Correct.

JRW: At the time though, the term would have been domestic?

HH: The courts were called the domestic courts and then they changed them by legislative change to . . . they were all called civil district courts and they became family law. District courts.

JRW: How long were you with Gulf Coast?

HH: About 8 months.

JRW: Oh, really? O.K. What happened? What came your way?

HH: Nothing came my way. I decided I wanted to pursue private practice.

JRW: Wow! Did you have a full understanding of that you were in for in private practice as a sole practitioner and getting out here, hanging your shingles, so to speak, drumming up the whole . . . everything that you now look back and know you went through?

HH: I had no idea . The totality of what was involved, no, but I learned. I learned very rapidly.

JRW: I had the opportunity myself, my first office here in Houston was with Ben, Durant and Kirby, and Kenneth Ball et. al., over on Caroline. And so, it gave me an opportunity to see the practice of law even though I was a contractor but to see the practice of law from the inside, especially that of sole practitioners and really how difficult . . . again, it ain't television, you know, it is really a very difficult lifestyle to

collect – above all, I think, to collect, unless you are doing commercial law and litigation and stuff, but just how challenging it would be. O.K., so after 8 months, you decided to hang your own shingle. What did you do?

HH: Well, we were in a building called 609 Fannin. We were on the 19th floor. Legal Aid. Zinetta was on the 5th floor in that same building. And I would see her going and coming in the building. And then, we began to talk and we struck up on the name of a person that we both knew mutually and so she said, come down and see her,' and I did.

RJ: Who was that?

HH: Zinetta Burney. And we began to talk. She had some space in her office and I joined her. She was very gracious and made a way for me to come into her office. I will always be grateful for that. And that is how it started.

JRW: That is one of her hallmarks, I believe.

HH: Yes.

JRW: Yes, a very generous person. So, at that time then, we are roughly 1975 and so you join with Zinetta. Was she already . . .was it just you and she?

HH: It was Zinetta, it was a guy named Charlie Williams, and she had some spaces because there were some public guys who had initially joined with her but they were no longer there. So, that was how the space was available. And Don Cagins came later in the year, 1975, because he finished school in 1975, and joined with Zinetta and Charlie Williams. So, that made the 4 of us, at 609 Fannin. And we stayed there from 1975 until

about 1980. And then, we moved over on Calumet and Almeida and we stayed there until about 1990.

JRW: Right. Something like that.

HH: Something in that neighborhood. Then, after we left Calumet, Don Cagins and I went over on Waugh Drive and we stayed on Waugh Drive for about 4 years. Then, after Waugh Drive, we went _____.

JRW: And you have been there since?

HH: Yes.

JRW: Is there any period . . . we'll come back to the sisters-in-law . . . excluding the sister-in-law, is there any period where you have been in partnership or officers with _____ that just kind of brings a smile to your face?

HH: What do you mean?

JRW: I think just that whether there was a particular location where the experiences at that particular location in that particular office that there is just something about the energy there or the synergy there or the camaraderie there or whatever that just kind of . . .

HH: There was a lot of camaraderie all the while we were together up until we moved in 1990, I think it was. A very fun time. We learned a lot.

JRW: Yes. What area of practice have you come to focus on?

HH: Domestic. Probate. Immigration. Additionally, I used to do criminal law also.

And I do some civil.

JRW: Do you still enjoy the practice of law?

HH: Not as much as I did but I enjoy it from the sense that it is challenging. It is also taxing. In the same amount of energy that it took when I was in my 20s, it takes the same amount of energy now. But I don't have that zest for it after 30 some odd years.

JRW: That scene has come up in several conversations that I . . .

HH: Well, you are getting older and it is time for someone else to take the mantle.

JRW: Were you ever a member of . . . I guess, speaking of passing the torch, were you ever a member of the Houston Lawyer's Association?

HH: I was.

JRW: I think it is kind of interesting, looking at that organization and seeing the generational shift, you know, and that the young attorneys are really young attorneys, you know, in that organization now, that they are literally in their 20s and their early 30s.

HH: Right. You are usually about 24, 25, when you get out of law school. It is very early if you go from undergrad at about 22, into law school. About 25, 26 when you finish.

JRW: If we go back to 1975-1976 and at the time that you and Zinetta Burney and others were located at 609 Fannin, that you also, I think, started a new experiment, shall we say, in response to what you young women saw as a need. Can you tell us about that?

HH: Zinetta Burney, Joan Edwards, Algenita Scott, Shelvin Hall and myself, we

decided to form a law firm with the emphasis of trying to assist in the Acres Home area. So, we had a little small office in Acres Home. Zinetta Burney, I, and Shelvin Hall, we worked it full-time. We also, Zinetta and I, were in the downtown office, 609 Fannin. So, we would go there in the evening. Shelvin would work from the Wheatley office which was in Acres Home full time and then we came out and worked the evening shift. So, that worked for a while, to give services to that area.

JRW: Why Acres Home? What was the need or what was lacking or what drew you there?

HH: We thought that Acres Home was an area that could use legal services. No one ever stays in Acres Home per se, with a law office at that time. So, we thought that would be a good spot to render services.

JRW: There weren't any attorneys practicing in Acres Home?

HH: To my knowledge, it wasn't.

JRW: And so, how did that project go? How did that experience go? How were you received by the community in Acres Home?

HH: I think we were received lukewarm, medium warm. The Acres Home area had a lot of breaking in and stealing things, you know. It just didn't make it plausible for us to stay there.

JRW: In terms of security or yourselves . . .

HH: The building. I was never afraid but the building – things would be stolen

constantly.

JRW: Out of your firm?

HH: Yes. It is something that is very disturbing. But we rose the occasion and gave services where we could. Now, Algenita was always at Shell and Joan Edwards was with the City of Houston. So, it made it interesting in terms of we could rotate time, service.

JRW: Did that work out amongst you, the rotating duty and the responsibilities as it were? Were you able to pretty much work that out amongst yourselves?

HH: I think we did. It is very difficult to run 2 offices but we did the best that we could and it was challenging.

JRW: But you are tolerant of one another's . . .

HH: Yes, we were tolerant.

JRW: The success of that office – how do you rate the success of that office or how do you see in terms of the number of clients that you are able to serve in terms of to save the community's use of you, welcome of you, all of that? How did that go?

HH: I think it was successful but there is something about the neighborhood. They preferred to go downtown to their lawyers. So, that was challenging. So, ultimately, we closed the office.

JRW: Well, is that part of that whole . . .

HH: Slave mentality.

JRW: Yes . . . the white doctor and a white warrior in order to get proper service . . .

HH: And that still is a prevalent feature.

JRW: And a Jewish accountant in order to get _____.

HH: That is the fallacy that exists and it weakens our professions because of that idea that services can be better rendered by members of a different race ,which is not so but it is a long-term running idea. But with the new lawyers, we have challenged that and we will overcome it.

JRW: In 1976, did you also have the challenge of gender as well? As I was saying, with the office up in Acres Home, because you were 5 African American women, not 5 African American men, do you think that that also entered into the equation in terms of how you were perceived by that community and how welcome you were and how many clients you were able to generate out of the community?

HH: There is an idea that men are supposed to be certain professions but I never approached it. Zinetta and I never did approach it with that – we just did our work and people would come. And there are those that prefer men and they would go to men. But most people want you to do a good job for them and once they are satisfied that you are working for them, then we began to build up clientele based on that. So, I never worried about men being the dominant feature in the practice of law but yes, it is true that the dominant feature is the male.

JRW: You have the firm for roughly about 1 year?

HH: Maybe 1-1/2 years.

JRW: What led to its demise? What were some of the central elements that led to its demise?

HH: Basically the breaking in constantly. We'd leave, they'd break in. They'd take this, they'd take the air conditioner. Just all kinds of petty theft. From the community. So, it wasn't feasible for us to continue to serve and have things constantly ripped off.

JRW: Who was your secretary there? You had a full-time secretary?

HH: We had a lady named Lula Webb. She was from the area.

JRW: Holding down the fort?

HH: Yes. She worked with us. But after consideration, it became impractical.

JRW: How did you finance that firm? How did you finance the start-up of that firm?

HH: We opened the doors and people would come. Kept our overhead low. And that is the way we _____.

JRW: With the initial capital though?

HH: We would split whatever the expenses were.

JRW: I think also that just the dynamics of a firm in itself, I think it speaks well to any group of people who are able to have a professional firm and be able to get along well enough to be able to, number one, even collectively open the doors to get to the point. I have seen others sit and have the conversations and discussions about opening a firm and

in many instances, folks are afraid to give up this and to give up that.

HH: It is very, very challenging because you have the ongoing expenses of yours, and then you have the _____. So, it is challenging.

JRW: Well, that must have been, I guess, both a relief and disheartening, you know, to leave Acres Home.

HH: It was, but the people followed us because, in a strange way, they were accustomed to coming downtown to go to their lawyers.

JRW: That is interesting. That is intriguing. That is more than interesting. That is intriguing.

HH: Yes, that is the way the thought process went.

JRW: Yes, that real lawyers have offices downtown, not here in my community but downtown.

HH: That is the sad part about it.

JRW: That is interesting. Well, listen, I think that covers it, for the most part. I want to thank you for taking your Sunday afternoon here.

HH: Thank you very much.

JRW: And allowing me to barge in and share some of your history for the record.