

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Interview with: Terry Hershey

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 Terry Hershey, taking place on Friday, February 17, 2006, at her home at One Longbow Lane in Houston, Texas. This interview will be deposited into the Oral History of Houston Project at the University of Houston.

Tell me a little bit about your personal history in conservation and environmental organizations in Houston. How did you get started with that?

TERRY HERSEY: [Laughs.] I can give you a résumé and you can read it.

CUTLER: Okay, that would be great.

HERSEY: I'm not going to go into how I got started.

CUTLER: Can I have this copy?

HERSEY: Yes, you may.

CUTLER: Oh, great.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

HERSHEY: It was a quick thing. I can tell you about today. This isn't about me; it's about Urban Harvest, right?

CUTLER: Yes.

HERSHEY: And so the reason that I became interested in Urban Harvest was when I was on the Trust for Public Lands board. We had at least two meetings a year would be in San Francisco, where the office was, and we would have tours around, and that was one of the things that they did. The two things I learned from Urban Harvest were about conservation easements and about community gardens. And they had a lot of them in the San Francisco area, and they were wonderful. So when I came back here, the two things I brought with me that I hadn't had knowledge about when I was on Parks and Wildlife Commission was the conservation easement program and then here with the community garden program.

So I got to looking around to see what was going on in that area and found out nothing particularly in the Parks Department or any 501(c)(3) group. And so in my questioning, I found that Dr. [Robert] "Bob" Randall was running a similar program with the Houston Interfaith Ministries. So I visited with him and was really excited about what he was doing, and I had some connection with the garden clubs, and also had some connection with the Parks Department. And so I got from Gregory Paul a list of the lands that they had, small pieces of land that they weren't using as parks and that are available for disbursement or getting rid of, and I got some of the garden club ladies to go around. And we looked at some of them to see if they were possible, some of the things I had seen in San Francisco, and working with Bob Randall.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

And during that period, Wendy Kelsey, who had been head of the Planned Parenthood during four years of—when it was very hard to be head of Planned Parenthood, four years, and I was very impressed with her. I've known her a long time, so I got her interested. And so we were pursuing the idea of expanding the program under Bob Randall and Interfaith Ministries. And these are things that you must ask him about more than me, but he found that they were reluctant to expand the program, for whatever their reasons. And so he felt that it should be done under another auspice altogether.

So at that point, I turned to The Park People—I was one of the founders of The Park People, and they picked up the slack by making it a committee of The Park People.

CUTLER: A community gardening committee?

HERSHEY: Yes. They just did a committee there, and I've forgotten the exact—'94, I think it was. And so we had some meetings, and they adopted it as a committee. I think maybe—he thought that [William] Bradshaw was the chair of that. I know Bradshaw was vice president of the Bayou Preservation Association [BPA] at one point, and he gave a space to put it over there, because The Park People – I kept Park People in free space for a long time. We had to move around a lot, but finally we ended up having to hire space and move in.

So they didn't have any room for the committee, so Bill Bradshaw gave us space in his business. We began to acquire people that wanted to be involved with the program. After I think about two years, it was able to go out on its own.

CUTLER: Okay.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

HERSHEY: Part of the problem, of course, was fund-raising, because The Park People—you know, all the 501(c)(3)s have a hard time raising funds and keeping the flow, and so you couldn't exactly go into the people that were already importuning for money and say—you know, it's another group. So when it became it's own 501(c)(3), then it could do that.

CUTLER: So how was Park People supporting Urban Harvest? With money?

HERSHEY: As a committee, giving its endorsement and letting them have committee meetings and then reporting on them to the board. It became one of the many things that Park People were doing. Now, mind you, all 501(c)(3)s are circular. They go up and down, depending on who's heading them and what they want to do and which programs they want to push, so these things happen.

CUTLER: What was it that Park People was able to provide that allowed Urban Harvest to leave on its own?

HERSHEY: Park People was a 501(c)(3), so when Urban Harvest moved over there, any money that it could raise was deductible. It wasn't a 501(c)(3) on its own; it was a committee of The Park People, which gave it a legitimacy. And then when they got enough support—see, they had to form a whole new group of support because the Interfaith Ministry had its own thing going. I think they kept the program up—you'll have to ask Bob Randall about that, and he has a very good memory of dates and times and things.

But anyway, we felt that it was a viable thing for the community, so it struck out on its own, with the blessing of The Park People, and became its own 501(c)(3). It's very

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

hard to get things going, but once they're going, well, you're in the fund-raising mode and all the rest.

CUTLER: when they left, is that what you meant: You weren't as involved with Urban Harvest when they moved on?

HERSHEY: No, I was involved with Urban Harvest, but after it became larger. You see, I was on the board for a while, but then it got its own space over there finally, and its own board, and I attended as an adviser and that sort of thing, but pulled back.

CUTLER: Right.

Do you know anything about the obstacles or any challenges with land use in creating community gardens in this city?

HERSHEY: No. There's the Spark Program that you're familiar with.

CUTLER: I've heard about it.

HERSHEY: Yes, and that's something you should certainly investigate. Eleanor Tinsley had been on the City Council member [sic], and it's her daughter that started the Spark Program of having the gardens within schools. And that worked pretty well because they're monitored there and they're somewhat protected. That's part of the difficulty with the Urban Harvest gardens: You had to have them in a place where they had protection. In the city Parks Department, they had several off and on over the years, but there again, you have park directors that come and go, and some of them are more interested in, you know, different things.

I found out recently that they've had a hard time because of vandalism, and so

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

possibly the ones in the Parks Department have dwindled, but that doesn't mean they can't be rekindled, but the vandalism can be a problem. And whether we're more vandal prone than we used to be, I can't say. It seems like our species comes and goes, and it seems to me we're in a very contentious mode at the moment. They've had several that—I know there were some trees and fruit trees that were vandalized. I can understand that. But that's been a problem within the Parks Department, but we have a new park director, and whether he will be able to take an interest in the—we're all time shy and money shy.

But those are the three places, and the ones that are in neighborhoods where the neighborhoods support them and are there looking at them, do well.

CUTLER: Right.

HERSHEY: And they're a very good thing to bring harmony also in the neighborhoods. When people are worried about their plots in the garden, well, they mingle with each other.

Have you investigated some of the actual gardens?

CUTLER: I have. I have, yes. And spoken with people who have been involved in different ones.

HERSHEY: Basically, I just thought it was a very good idea, and we didn't have one here, and I tried to find out how we could get one going, and I did find somebody to head it, and I found Wendy, who, bless her heart, took over this one, and they formed a board, and they've carried on, and they have over 140 gardens now.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

CUTLER: The pieces of land that you went out with garden club members

investigating—were these just random parcels of land or what?

HERSHEY: No, these were parks that the Park Department owned. We found two acres—it might be under a freeway somewhere. But Gregory Paul was very helpful, and he's still with the Parks Department, and he formed a list of the small portions that they had, and we got the garden club ladies, and we went around and looked at all of them, and the ones that we thought might have some merit, we turned over to...

CUTLER: There were some?

HERSHEY: There were some that we thought possibly could be used. But they produced what they had for us to look at. I'm sure it wasn't everything. And we didn't go and look at parks and say, "Aha! We can have one in a corner here." That wasn't it. I would say we spent several days looking. It wasn't a year-long thing...

CUTLER: Right. Okay. I'm also interested, in this history, with—well, first of all, with Urban Harvest, I'm looking at this partly as more of a history of a movement and leading up to the organizational history, so I'm looking at what came before that, and I'm very interested in the role that women have played, from volunteers to leaders, and looking at the history, do you see that as an important component?

HERSHEY: The role the women played—

CUTLER: Right.

HERSHEY: —in the community garden.

CUTLER: Right, on all levels.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

HERSHEY: I would not say that the board, as they finally got it constructed, was a female board. I mean, there were plenty of men, and there still are, involved with it. The garden clubs, of course, were women. But they did not play a role after their original going around with us and looking for things. They were not involved.

CUTLER: In the communities.

HERSHEY: Very involved in the community, but they were involved more with flowers and landscaping and things like that, other than growing food in the back yard. That was not the role that they had had. They weren't antagonistic to it; that just wasn't what they were doing. And possibly if we had wanted to pursue it and hadn't found Dr. Bob and he had the background of doing this—he was able to take it over and build it. If there hadn't been a Dr. Bob, I don't know what would have happened.

CUTLER: In your work with Park People and then the community gardening, were you aware of what other cities were doing, and were you using that as a model?

HERSHEY: In San Francisco, when I looked around. That was the only time. I didn't make any effort to go around and look at community gardens in other cities, no.

CUTLER: Okay. Okay, just curious about that.

HERSHEY: No. They may have, but I doubt it. I mean, we were the local thing.

CUTLER: Yes. Okay. In terms of looking at the environmental movement, just the nationwide environment movement—do you think Houston was a latecomer in that? Because I see all of this going back to that, and I'm wondering how Houston fits in.

HERSHEY: It's hard to answer. Do you have a copy of the CEC book of all the various

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

groups?

CUTLER: I've seen that book at [the] Urban Harvest office.

HERSHEY: Yes, well, you should get it from CEC, and then it can answer one of your questions. We have—I've forgotten how many groups now. My involvement came in '66, with the fight to save Buffalo Bayou from channelization, because I didn't even get here until '60, '1958, '59, really, from Fort Worth, so I wasn't familiar [with] what Houston was doing then. I wasn't here a lot during that first ten-year period. But we did get involved, because of the channelization of Buffalo Bayou and formed the BPA, which was originally the Buffalo Bayou Coalition and we dropped "Buffalo" when we realized this was happening to all the waterways, and became the BPA in 1966, '67.

At that point, the national groups weren't here. There was no Sierra Club or Audubon or any of those groups that came in the early seventies. So in 1970 we started the CEC, Citizens Environmental Coalition, and that was a woman's group that started, called the Citizens Who Care, to try to find out who was here and when they met and what their mission was, and that was very important because otherwise, if your group was having a meeting, it might be back by the old pit somewhere, and nobody knew it was happening, and to get to document the interest. So that's my interest group from '66 on. But other people, I'm sure in Houston, who grew up here—because so many of the ladies that were the Citizens Who Care—it started with only seven and ended up only about twelve to twenty people, and they were all women, but most of them were old Houston, so they knew the community much better than did I.

CUTLER: Right.

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

HERSHEY: And so what happened before that, I don't know, other than the garden club.

CUTLER: Okay. Well, that's helpful. I don't know that I have—

HERSHEY: That's about it. [Laughs.]

CUTLER: You seem to have told me what you know, so—anything else, Terry [Terry Tomkins-Walsh, sitting in on interview], that you can think of?

TOMKINS-WALSH: One of the things Terry recommended the CEC directory, which will give you the names. I'm actually using it right now to try to put together a chapter. But it doesn't have dates of origin.

CUTLER: Oh, it doesn't?

TOMKINS-WALSH: No. And so for those of us in History, that's a problem, so you don't know when those groups started in relation to each other.

HERSHEY: You can probably call them up and ask. That would be the easy way.

[Laughs.]

TOMKINS-WALSH: Well, yes.

HERSHEY: Most groups know when they got started, and it's a phone call. And we have the phone number.

TOMKINS-WALSH: Yes, it gives the contact information, e-mail as well as phone number, so that's not a problem.

HERSHEY: I think because in the early seventies the federal legislation that came along, you see, starting the FEMA [sic; she probably means EPA] and the various federal

Interviewee: Hershey, Terry

Interview: February 17, 2006

organizations gave a great stimulus to local stuff. Somebody cared about what was happening to the planet. I'm sure people always did. You read back over—we weren't the first ones that discovered terrible things were happening. You only discover things in your lifetime. That doesn't mean somebody else wasn't working hard on it that you never heard of.

CUTLER: Right.

HERSHEY: I'll give you one of the books I have. They're about to come out with the '66 book at the CEC, so that's something you get...

CUTLER: Okay, great.

HERSHEY: That's one of our biggest triumphs, it grew out of the BPA: to find out who was here and doing what.

CUTLER: Right. Okay. I think that's all that I have.

HERSHEY: Okay. I'll go get your book.

CUTLER: Great.

[End of interview.]