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University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

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Interviewer:	Emma Brown
Transcriber:	Michelle Kokes
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Abstract:

Houston Community College history professor Angela Holder discusses the Camp Logan Riot of 1917. She discusses the location of Camp Logan, and describes how the all-African American Third Battalion of the Twenty-fourth Infantry Regiment was stationed there, after serving diligently in Mexico. Holder discusses the events that preceded the riot, including an incident involving two white police officers and a black woman in a state of undress. She then discusses the theory that the men were trying to defend themselves, and discusses various forms of disrespect the men faced including verbal abuse and loss of side arms. Holder then discusses how the trial of the sixty-three men lead to a smoother transition to integration in Houston during the Civil Rights Movement. She speaks of her great-uncle Jesse Moore, who was hung for involvement in the riot, and discusses the need to prevent such a loss of life, especially after such a quick murder trial. Holder discusses reforms in the military's system for trying murder cases, and further discusses some of the more questionable deaths that occurred during or after the riot including Bryan Watson, due to friendly fire, and Vida Henry. Holder notes that no white officers were tried, and the mysterious death of Captain Bartlett James. She also discusses how Captain Haig Shekerjiaf changes from defense to the prosecution after the death of Captain James. Holder discusses the unmarked graves Vida Henry and Bryan Watson at the College Memorial Park Cemetery, how the military appears to have dumped these men, and her efforts with the College Memorial Park Cemetery Restoration Project.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Angela Holder

Interviewed by: **Emma Brown**
Date: **March 7, 2014**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Houston, Texas**

EB: Emma Brown's interview with Professor Angela Holder at the Buffalo Soldier Museum March 7, 2014.

AH: I think it's on the eastern side of the park and I think it's called Arnot. A-R-N-O-T. When you are coming into the park off of, what is that street? Oh, wait a minute. What is that street? Um. Because there is a marker there that says Camp Logan. The realtors are now referring to that area as Camp Logan again. And I'm trying to think what is that street? Hmmmm. Well, wherever, it's not Washington. Oh shoot, now I can't think of it, I'm drawing a blank. Look up the street name of A-R-N-O-T.. I think it's spelled that way, A-R-N-O-T or A-R-N-O-T-T. I think its Arnot. And that's where the marker is, on the eastern side of Memorial Park. The residential area. And that's a historical marker that talks about the riot. That there was a former military training facility that was built, in addition to Ellington Field, Camp Logan. Houston got contracts to build military training facilities to train soldiers to go over to Europe for World War I. So that's what was happening here. It got a nice princely sum of money to do that. So these men were sent here to guard the construction site and they had just come off of mission looking for Poncho Villa. And so when the 24th was divided up into 3 battalions the 1st battalion went to Waco Texas, the 2nd battalion stayed behind in Columbus, New Mexico, and the 3rd battalion was

stationed here in Houston, Texas. And a lot of the men were saying, "Oh we're going to be able to go to church, we'll be able to date girls." They had been inhaling the dust down there in Mexico so this was going to be a treat to be home. So they were looking forward to it.

EB: So what do you know about the events proceeding the riot, with, I know there was the two police officers I think Spark and…

AH: Sparks and Daniels.

EB: Sparks and Daniels right. Have you come across anything with the arrest of the two buffalo soldiers? You know the first one for kind of questioning them molesting the woman, and then….

AH: Yes because she was a state of undress. At that time women did not wear underwear as outwear like women do today. To be in your bra, slip, panties and a blouse tied around you was just like being naked, and the only persons who saw you in your undergarments were significant other or a relative. So when you are taken out like that, it was disrespectful. So she was screaming, "Somebody help me." A soldier walks up and said, "What did she do? I will pay her fine." He gets beaten because the police felt that they were being challenged and so he didn't fight back, and he suffered a lot of wounds. He was pretty bloodied up. A couple of hours or so later, the black military police officer comes up and he asked those two the officers, "I understand one of my men had a problem, what happened?" They think he is challenging them, they start to beat him too. He runs, and as he runs they shoot at him, but they didn't hit him.

EB: Right.

AH: He hides. They do a house-to-house search. They find him, beat him, and put him in jail. But a rumor gets started that he's been killed, and that's not what happened. They were coming

to the aid of this woman. They felt that she was being disrespected, taken out in that state of undress like that.

EB: So then following that, what do you think about some of the historians' idea or theory that maybe that the riot had been planned ahead of that arrest? Because I have come across that a couple of times.

AH: There's another historian. That's the military's offer. They want to make this thing as neat as possible to put it behind them and move on. There was another professor he is deceased now, his name was Smith, it might have been C. Calvin Smith, it might have been Calvin at Alabama State, no, Arkansas State University, Arkansas State, who did an article called "Camp Logan Revisited" ["The Houston Riot of 1917, Revisited," *The Houston Review: History and Culture of the Gulf Coast,*]. He offered that the men had been shot at in the camp and that they responded. They were going back out to defend themselves, that they had been fired upon. And that that is the reason why they left, that they were arming themselves, because people were committing mischief and shooting into the camps. So he says the men were just protecting themselves that there wasn't something they were plotted that they were going to do but that they were responding to external forces acting upon them in the camp.

EB: So do you think the riot might have been different or might have happened if the commanding officers hadn't taken away their arms?

AH: If the men would have felt that they were better protected, that the army had their back instead of saying, "Well, you know where we are, you know get over it and deal with it," then men would have responded a lot better, but to say that Corporal Baltimore did not die but that he could have died and you are saying, "Well we are in Texas, we are in Houston, you know, you

know how these things are and just deal with it." This guy got beaten up, he could have been killed and you are saying get over it…

EB: Especially having had, you know, they had members of their division killed for wearing their uniform before.

AH: Yeah men were being disrespected. These soldiers were being disrespected, called the "N" word and other assorted names, and they were wearing the uniform representing the United States. The HPD, the Houston Police Department, disrespected them by taking away their side arms. The side arms is part of the uniform, it's a military issue weapon and the police department said you cannot have your weapons. That was total disrespect. It was felt that these guys would have been "uppity." You know swaggering around town, wearing a uniform with a gun on their hip and so they had to kind of bring them down a peg or two and take their weapon and show them we still have some say in what you do. That was too much, that was a little much. And here it is, they had done well. They had served admirably in the west and to come home. Then they went to Mexico and to come home and to be disrespected like this, it was terrible, it was not good.

EB: So I've read a lot about how the trial after the riot kind of completely made the military change the way they did things, you know, adding the advocacy and the advocacy board and all of that to kind of prevent. You can't just have a trial one day and then kill everyone the next without a chance for clemency.

AH: It had thirteen sacrificial lambs to get that done, my uncle being one of them and this young man, he was twenty-four years old and my uncle was twenty-seven, he was twenty-seven years old.

EB: Do you think it helped, do you think it made any difference in Houston?

AH: Houston did well during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, that they had pretty much no pun intended, but tried by fire. So that when the Civil Rights Movement and they remembered back to what happened in 1917, Houston had one of the better transitions during that time. There was a white business man by the name of Robert or Bob Dundas who was working, as a he may have been the Vice President of Foley's, and he worked with a black business man named Hobart Taylor and between the two of them they helped to push desegregation in Houston and they did it behind the scenes. They said, "We won't bring media attention to it. Let's just go about like it's normal." This is what they did. So nobody said, "The first blacks in the swimming pool. The first blacks at the lunch counter. The first blacks at the …." They tried to do everything as low key as possible.

EB: So would you say that this scared them not straight, obviously, because it took them you know however many more years afterwards, but it kind of scared … the riot… scared them…

AH: It really did. When you think about it. Mr. Dundas was a kid, he was a child and he remembered those, that time. It was really bad, very bad. When you have seventeen civilians, four black soldiers, and among the seventeen civilians you had a white captain, a young man, who was shot to death because he was mistaken for an HPD officer. I said, "Wow" there was so much of a waste of life. Five HPD officers, among them a family man who had, he was Irish Catholic, a lot of children and the primary breadwinner and when he was killed, his sons stopped school to take care of the family. So a lot of lives were changed. It was a lot of, it was just a lot of misfortune that took place. And the idea that now you have a chance to just make this thing right. And so after having gone through that riot, Houston had, like I said, one of the better times of transitions during the Civil Rights Movement.

EB: So how would, I mean, you're obviously related to two of men who were involved in this.

AH: No, just my great uncle Jesse. No, this gentleman, Uncle John wasn't accused of being a participant. But his brother Jesse was, and this gentleman. I know his nephew. He is an attorney in New Jersey. The Sergeant for whom the child was named was William Nesbitt, I know his descent as well.

EB: How do you all want this remembered now? Because like I said, to me you know growing up, I didn't grow up in like a super diverse neighborhood in Memorial, I didn't. I knew there was a Camp Logan and that's about it. So how would you all want this to be remembered, because it is such an important part of our city's history?

AH: Well it wasn't one of our finest moments and you want to think of this as, I know people say this all the time, as a teachable moment. What happens when people allow unchecked racism to fester, that people respond a lot out of fear, out of ignorance, what they don't know. I ask my students all the time, I teach across the street over at HCC, I teach history, and I would ask my students, "What do you know about Jewish people?" for example. "Well I heard blah, blah, blah." "Well what do you know?" "Well I heard…." "I'm going to ask you again, what do you know?" And a lot of times people will respond out of ignorance, not out of what is a known fact. And you just don't want to see this kind of loss of life or disrespect for humanity. You don't want to see this to the point where it's okay to be abusive towards people. You don't want to see that. And that is something that I am working on. Uncle didn't have a wife. No children. His remains were not given to the family when he was executed. So, his siblings knew that he was dead because a letter came from him that says, "When you read this I'm dead." And its just, how do you?… Oh man its kind of difficult. Sometimes I let myself go into that dark place; I imagine

him standing on that gallows with this noose around his neck that his body weight was going to snap his neck. And he didn't cry. None of the men cried. They didn't beg for mercy or anything. In fact they said, "We want to be shot."

EB: Right, a soldier's….

AH: A soldier's death. But the lowest form of execution was reserved for them, and that was pretty bad. This young man, he too was not married, no children. And he wrote a letter to his family just like Uncle Jesse did. His letter survived. My family, we don't have Jesse's letter, but the story about what Jesse's said is in the family. But you don't want to ever see this happen again. The army has now put into place measures where they will exhaust every opportunity to find out whatever happens in a case of this magnitude. If a person is accused of murder, let's check everything. Let's leave no stone unturned. Because you see how long it took the gentleman who did the shooting at Fort Hood up in Killeen. It took him a long time before he went to trial because they learned from what happened here. To make sure that you checked out everything. Because there were some innocent men that were executed.

EB: Oh, certainly.

AH: So you want to make sure that justice is carried, make sure that it is done fairly, and I think that would probably be the take away. That you want to make sure that you get the right people, that you do the right thing for all concerned. Make sure that justice is definitely adhered to. Because Uncle Jesse said that he did not participate, but he was accused and at this time there were people weren't hearing. Well, he didn't do it, he didn't do it, they just wanted to hurry up and punish people and move on.

EB: Well, you can see that with the sixty-three men, all one lawyer.

AH: Sixty-three different alibis. How do you compile sixty-three different alibis in one defense?

EB: And I know some of their defenses they tried to, for a couple men, they tried to argue like *mens rea*. Like they weren't capable of having these murderous, I don't know, mutinous actions. Even when it was defended it was to me it struck me as kind of important…

AH: Nobody is made to endure abuse day in and day out.

EB: Yeah.

AH: The best of us no matter how even tempered we might feel that we are, at some point you will get tired. And its just one of those things to where these were good soldiers. They were good soldiers. They did their job. But the times being what they were, they weren't given that respect of being these good soldiers. I… there were some men, I would say, they would have responded. Because the average age was between twenty-two, twenty-four years old.

EB: Right.

AH: You did have some older men. They understood the dynamics of the abuse and a couple of them may have responded saying, "When will this ever stop?" Like I said, human nature is just unpredictable. You just don't know. But there were some who did not do this. They were told, "You have to go." There were, how many men? There were, let's see, there was one I know that was killed by what we call today "friendly fire." There was one by friendly fire. Who was that? Bryan Watson, I think it was. It might have been Bryan Watson. Might have been Bryan Watson. But there was one that was shot by friendly fire in the camp. And he was told you have to come with us. You have to go. But there was some men that did not want to participate.

EB: I know there's, I've read accounts that Vida Henry was allegedly one of those men who didn't initially want to participate, and then when I guess he saw it was kind of an inevitable riot…

AH: If you've got to go… I gotta go. If you have to do this, I have to go with you. And even, pretty much if you go with the military account, like his career was over. "I disobeyed orders, my career is done." Yeah, even he understood. He tried to tell the officers, "Look the men are upset. One of their own could have been killed today. What are you guy going to do about it?" Nobody listened. It was sad. Some of the officers had social engagements. They had left. I'm surprised none of them were brought up and court marshaled, but none of the officers suffered any type of punishment. In fact a couple of them even went on to become generals.

EB: Yeah I know there wasn't like a single white officer that was ever convicted.

AH: Not at all. I would have thought that the ones who did not stay behind to help out, that they went about their business, that they should have been discharged. If you see that there was a problem, why didn't you stay? But they didn't and nobody punished them. Not at all. One officer that really troubles me, his death was so sad. Captain Bartlett James. And Bartlett James kept order with his men. He was there. His men held the line, they didn't leave. And he knew who was there. He and Haig Shekerjiaf, Captain Shekerjiaf. And the men when they were, yeah, the men held the line, I think they were out of company, it might have been company L, I think it was company L, and the men did not leave, he kept order. The funny part is he was the goat of his class at Westpoint. He was the goat.

EB: Really?

AH: The goat. And, the upper class, the ones who graduated at the top, they didn't do so well.,But this little fellow, the goat of the class, did an outstanding job that night. My question is

why does he come up dead the week before the court marshal? Maybe I've been watching too much CSI, I don't know. But he supposedly commits suicide. Now his career's intact he doesn't has anything to worry about, but why is he dead? And Haig Shekerjiaf switches sides, he is now the prosecution. He and Bartlett James were going to be with the defense and now there is a shift.

EB: And the shift occured after Bartlett's death?

AH: That occurred after Bartlett's death, Shekerjiaf switched sides.

EB: How do you spell Shekerjiaf?

AH: Shekerjiaf. S-H-E-R-… let me spell that out. He was Armenian. A. Shekerjiaf. S-H-E-K-E-R-J-I-A-F. Shekerjiaf. He became a general, too. And I plan on putting a book together myself, and this is one of the questions that I've often thought about, is how is it that this guy comes up dead the week before, and Shekerjiaf switches sides? So there's more questions than answers. But his family, Bartlett James' family believed that he was murdered. The men felt that he had been murdered. They don't believe that he took his life, but no one looked into that.

EB: How do you feel, because I know that, I don't know, I feel like I've read that there were with the doctors and the autopsies there was a lot of pressure to rule everything like suicide or murder, and nothing like, nothing in between. I know Vida Henry, for one especially, his death has been contested for years as to what really happened to him.

AH: Did you read the Garna Christian book?

EB: I haven't.

AH: Black Soldiers and Jim Crow Texas?

EB: I think I have it, but I haven't read it yet.

AH: There is a portion in there about the death and what could have happened to

Vida Henry. So you might want to check that out. But yeah, it's kind of questionable as to whether or not he was actually committed suicide or if he was killed. There's some questions about that. Did you see the inquest document? There's a document.

EB: No.

AH: There's a document that describes his wound. It's questionable.

EB: Do you know like where I can find that? Is it on a database online?

AH: It might be on a database now. There is an archives downtown. I'm going to have to get my stuff out. There's an archive in downtown Houston. I think it's near, it's not too far I don't think, from the courthouse.

EB: Is it the library archives?

AH: Where is that located?

EB: Oh, gosh. It's near Louisiana and something. I know it's near like One Shell Plaza and the City Hall. I just know it's really pretty library building.

AH: This is an old building. It's could have been near the police. It's on that end I think where the police are. Is it on Congress? I'll have to look at my stuff and see, but there is a document there. It's from the inquest, the coroner's inquest, as to what might have happened. But get that book, if you have a copy of Dr. Garna Christian's book. He is a professor of History at U of H Downtown and he talked about what may have happened with Vida Henry and how they wanted to make this thing go away.

EB: Right.

AH: And two of the Vida Henry and Bryan Watson are buried at buried at College Memorial Park Cemetery.

EB: I went there and its a beautiful cemetery.

AH: There is no marker. They buried them and took off. And I work with the College Memorial Park Cemetery Restoration Project. And so we marked off the area based on the cemetery lay out. We've identified the place where there are two unknowns buried side by side and I said, "Those are my guys." So what we would like to do, we've got permission to put a marker there but we don't know who's in the grave that would have been on the left and who is on the right, and we don't know. That's something that we are trying to get some support to go in there to detect to see if there is any presence of some remains after all these years, depending on what they were buried in. But we do have permission to put marker up for them, for the cemetery. And that's important. You know where your dog is buried in your back yard or your hamster or your goldfish. So how is it that these two men, there is no marker? The military just dumped them, took off. Same thing over at the Catholic cemetery. There is a black soldier buried over there. So yeah, there is three of the four that are buried here in Houston. We… I am responsible for exhibit, Camp Logan exhibit, and that was shown this past summer, about the location of these men. The 4th is buried over in San Antonio. But three of them are buried here.

EB: Wow. I'm just so…

AH: This thing is like an onion with many layers.

EB: Yeah.

AH:You peel back one there's another one. Oh you peel one, there's just so many layers on this thing. But if the word can get out. Like I said I'm working on trying to get this book, get something together to put out there. So this article is going to be really good, to get some interest that will be really great.

EB: Yeah. Thank you so much for talking to me.

AH: You're so welcome. Keep me posted as to what's going on with this.

EB: Yeah I'm excited. I think it will be… We're publishing. Not publishing. The entire class is doing a project. I chose Camp Logan, but then at the end of the semester we're making a digital edition of the *Houston History* magazine for all of our projects.

AH: That's going to be nice. I had a classmate, William Keller. Is he working with you guys? William Keller. He may not be there anymore.

EB: I don't know of him but…

AH: And Dr. Pratt, I know Dr. Pratt.

EB: He spoke to our class a couple of times.

AH: Dr. Pratt. That is good to know. This is great.

End of interview