

Historical Growth of African Americans in Odessa, Texas

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Abstract

This study involves longitudinal research conducted in Odessa and Midland, Texas. The investigator examined the social history of the African American community as told by the people themselves through the collection of oral histories. Participant views were shared about their participation in the creation, preservation and perpetuation of their community and wider society as a whole. The African Americans who arrived early in West Texas discussed the minimal economic opportunities available to them and their struggles to support their families. They offered suggestions on issues of development and leadership for younger generations.

Keywords: social, economic history of African Americans in Odessa and Midland, Texas, job opportunities, gender relations, families, uniqueness, civil rights, political issues, social organizations, younger generations.

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The purpose of this study was to offer a topical analysis of information that was collected in the form of oral histories. It is based on the analysis of 31 in-depth interviews with people who participated in a study conducted from January 1998 to July 2000. The initial objective was to increase knowledge of the early development of Odessa's African American community, to preserve its history, and to use the analysis of this history as a tool for empowerment for the younger generations.

Diversity in the Permian Basin

“Diversity” and “multiculturalism” have become the buzzwords of the last decade and “minority” integration in the economic development of the United States. In the Permian Basin specifically, it has been reported that the population make-up will change dramatically by the year 2020, with the Latino (referred to as Hispanic in West Texas) population rising to more than 60% of the entire population. Affirmative action, diversity training, minority programs and multicultural education are only a few of the ways people have expressed their interest in bridging the gap of understanding of socioeconomic conditions and policymaking. Many

programs have been created to allow for the "integration" of minority people into the social, economic and political fabric of the Permian Basin, which emphasized community interests and thus opened these programs to public scrutiny. It has been confirmed that programs today, whether educational, political or economic, need to include knowledge about the diverse communities that reside in the area in order to better serve all individuals.

Shortly after I arrived in Odessa, I started trying to understand the social fabric of the society in the town where I had accepted a job at the university, and where I would be bringing up my two young children. My previous research included global division of labor issues, with a concentration on inequalities, especially racial and gender relations. I began looking and soon discovered that there was very little information in the library about the "minority" communities in the area. I also soon discovered that what I had read in the book, *"Friday Night Lights,"* the one and only published account on race relations in Odessa, was not far from the truth. Indeed there was a physical separation of the communities. Shortly after that I attended the funeral of one of the most respected doctors from the South Side, and indeed one of the most respected doctors in the entire community. He was the doctor about whom every black person can tell stories about visiting. He, with the dauntless assistance of his wife served as the only doctor for the entire Black community during the difficult era of segregation. Many noteworthy events were forever gone with the loss of the doctor, like many more people before him. It was then that I saw the urgency of collecting the history of the early development of the community from the mouths of the people who really could tell it best, its members; thus, this study was born.

The little that has been written about the African American community, which represents about 5% of the total population of Odessa and 8.9 % of Midland respectively, indicates a very slow but steady rate of change. According to Bissinger (1990), the Black Community has undergone an interesting development within the changes that occurred as a result of the nationwide struggles of the civil rights movement. He continues,

in the sixties and seventies, during the social upheaval of freedom rides and cafeteria sit-ins and boycotts in Birmingham and marches on Selma, Odessa stood locked in time. When sporadic pushes came from the federal government to change the status quo, to break down the boundary of the railroad tracks, they were met with swift and well organized resistance. (Bissinger, p. 98)

For example, no black family lived north of the railroad tracks until 1968. Furthermore, official school desegregation in Odessa was not achieved until 1982, and only then after tremendous struggle, while in Midland it took place almost two decades earlier. Many changes came about as a result of desegregation. Reports and opinions on the value of high school desegregation vary. The views are conflicting. Jim Moore, the last principal of Ector High School, the last minority high school in Odessa, claimed, "there is no integration. There is desegregation. There is no integration in this community, the same as any community in America" (Bissinger, p. 98). Ector High School was closed down as a means of achieving desegregation; yet, many community members were of the opinion that closing down Ector High was harmful to the community's integrity and unity.

For a period of time between 1940 and 1960, Odessa's population was expanding beyond its ability to provide adequate housing, sewer services, paved roads or schools. Odessa's population slowly grew over the years following the discovery of oil producing sites, especially

during the most notable oil boom dates of 1926, 1929 and 1930, which established the town as an oil center. The subsequent migration of majority and minority populations to West Texas oil towns like Odessa follows similar patterns. According to historians the majority of African Americans coming to Odessa migrated from the river valley land of rural East Texas and Central Texas. This forms a rough rectangle of land extending east from Waxahachie to Tyler, south to Houston, west to San Marcos and returning north Waxahachie to complete the rectangle. On their arrival as residents of Odessa, African Americans were restricted to a narrow geographical boundary for housing which was south of the railroad tracks on Muskingum and South Tom Green streets, including Pearl, Myrtle, and Hancock streets (Olien & Olien, 1982; Klepper, 1996; Henderson, 1998).

The oil booms of the early 20th century then created a great demand for labor in the Permian Basin and services related directly and indirectly to oil field work. Because of discriminatory hiring practices, the majority of African Americans and Mexican Americans newly arrived to the area were restricted to unskilled jobs such as clearing land, washing, cooking and cleaning buildings and private homes. Further, due to segregated social conditions, minorities were forced to establish themselves in enclaves within the larger community. Like so many other African American communities of America's pre-civil rights era, Odessa's African American community was restricted by physical and social boundaries. The railroad tracks marked those boundaries to the South Side of Town. Similarly, the Mexican American community was limited by discriminatory practices that reduced their job opportunities and limited the boundaries of their community to the West side of the town.

During the years of systemic segregation, Odessa's African American community was left to function as though it were a self-sufficient unit within the city. Odessa was described as a "town socially and racially divided with a fragile economy affected by boom or bust" (Bissinger, 1990). The small number of African American businesses, lacking capital to expand, could not compete economically with Odessa's larger community to provide an income base large enough to support the majority of its African American residents. Nevertheless, the community maintained a relatively self-sufficient character until desegregation opened the boundaries for education and employment outside the community (Deaver, 2000). Subsequently, most African Americans sought jobs beyond the boundaries of their own community with the hope of eventually acquiring better job opportunities.

Those so determined to stay in Odessa also had to endure the inhospitable environment of West Texas heat and the occasional blinding sandstorms. In all they proved to be a hearty people to survive such harsh conditions at a time when people did what they could to survive and care for their family's needs, often with help from other family members, friends and neighbors. Many African Americans who migrated to Odessa during the oil boom years between 1940 and 1960 were now retired citizens who witnessed unsettling changes in the progress of their community over the years. For example, the loss of community businesses and neighborhood landmarks challenged the remaining residents to function as an empowered community.

Storeowner and South Odessa community activist M. J. Matthews published a community newsletter from fall 1974 to summer 1982. Several of the articles in the newsletter illustrated the struggle South Odessans faced in the attempt to upgrade their social environment. "South Odessa Engulfed by Weeds," was the title of one article dated September 1975. In this article, the citizens of South Odessa were concerned with "runaway weed patches that came within several feet of their homes." The weeds were described as being shoulder high to a man

on horseback (Matthews, 1975).

The issues are multiple and involve many individuals and organizations. In the January 1977 issue of the newsletter, an article reported that the request for funds to pave the many unpaved streets of South Odessa was turned down. The request had been made to the Permian Basin Regional Planning Commission. The reason given by the commission for the denial was that the government required a 6.5% unemployment rate to be eligible for the program. Odessa's overall unemployment rate at the time was only 3%, but South Odessa's unemployment rate was 10% (Matthews, 1977). Why was that the case?

From the middle 70's until the newsletters were no longer published, several articles described the efforts made by citizens of the South Side toward their community's development. Some of the efforts were victorious, but many others were not. It was in this tedious manner that blacks have historically and recently strived to make a place for themselves in Odessa.

The City of Odessa's efforts to diversify the area's economy has yet to reach South Odessa. Property values remain low, resulting in few loans for either housing or business endeavors. The trend has been moving in recent years to relocate to an area more receptive to African Americans. Ironically, many of the younger members of the community have relocated and continue to do so to East and Central Texas, the same area their grandparents migrated.

This study was established to collect oral histories from long time Odessa residents of the African American community. Oral histories provided an opportunity for interviewees to tell about life from their own perspective or worldview (Baum, 1987). Four students, who were interested and committed to it, were trained as assistants. Often the interviews were conducted by two of my assistants, but more often than not, I also participated to fulfill my fascination with the intriguing stories that were being collected. The participants we interviewed shared "birthmarks" of ascribed race and ethnicity. For example, they all were born from African American families who were already established in Texas. They and their families came to Odessa with the expectation of finding work. However, their histories reveal dimensions of development, which include the influence of background, particular people and events, uniqueness and commonalties, to experiences of minority status. These interviews were not meant to be biographies, but instead were intended to get a glimpse of their values, some noteworthy life experiences/decisions, their view of their future perspectives opportunities, and place in the community. These interviews represent a period of struggle when African Americans looked to each other for hope and encouragement as they united against racial oppression (Babad, Birbaum, & Benne, 1983; Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997).

Methodology

No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative. Ordinary people living ordinary and not-so ordinary lives weave from their memories and experiences the meaning life has for them. These stories are complex, telling of worlds sometimes foreign to us, worlds that no longer exist. They express modes of thought and culture often different from our own, a challenge to easy understanding. Yet these stories are also familiar. (Silverman, 2000, p. 239)

According to Baum (1987) and Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein, (1997), history written from below represents an accurate picture of the community or of a certain part of it. This study then was born in order to attempt to present views on the African American Community of Odessa/Midland, Texas.

Participants

The participants were 31 African American adults, 18 women and 13 men with an average age of 71.5 years, who have lived in Odessa for at least 25 years or more. Twenty-six of the 31 participants are retired. The snowball method (word of mouth) was used to solicit interviews among residents of Odessa's African American community. Initial contacts were arranged by phone through an informant, usually someone actively involved in the community. Usually husbands and wives were interviewed separately to ensure privacy and to ensure that no one felt coerced or inhibited. On two occasions couples were interviewed at the same time at their request.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted with the assistance of four researchers who were trained to master qualitative methodology and who gathered information in the privacy of the homes of the participating interviewees. These oral histories represent a span of 22 years of African American migration (1936-1958) and provide a wealth of information for understanding the origins, development and functioning of the African American community of Odessa, Texas. For the sake of closure in this article, the analysis was limited to the following topics, selected as questionnaire themes:

- Demographic/socioeconomic background information
- Interrelationship of job opportunities and family structure
- Gender relations within the family
- Examples of resourcefulness and unique experiences
- Opinions on local civil rights issues and political issues
- Involvement in community and social organizations
- Advice to the younger generation

Appointments were made in advance by phone to secure interviews in the homes of participants at times most convenient for them. We felt the participants would be more at ease talking about their lives in the comfort and privacy of their own homes. Some of the interviews were conducted by two people, one responsible for the videotaping and scheduling of appointments, and the other for taping and transcribing. With permission of the participants, the interviewees scanned the room to note any historical collectibles, family photos, and plaques that may be relevant to the information being shared with us.

Permission was granted by all the participants so that every interview was tape recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription. Seventy five percent of the interviews were videotaped. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were encouraged to tell the

interviewer how they felt about the most important issues of their lives. They were asked to talk about such things as family background, education, the environment when they first arrived, the problems of building a home for their families, the availability of materials and loans for such purposes, employment opportunities, community involvement and social issues specific to Odessa's Southside.

In most cases, participants seemed a little reserved at the start of the interview, especially in front of the camera, but appeared to relax more as they went on to recall events from the past. A sequence of open-ended questions was asked to prompt participants when necessary in an attempt to elicit open-ended responses. We tried to be objective in the questions we asked by not getting emotionally caught up in the participant's personal feelings about a situation, good or bad. Overall, the study was well received as participants seemed eager to answer questions and appeared to enjoy talking with no apparent objection to the use of video or audio recording.

At the end of the interview, we thanked each participant. We also asked permission, in some cases, to snap their pictures as a backup in case there was a problem with the lighting or quality of film from the video camera.

Most interviews were transcribed verbatim, which usually took 10 or more hours a week to type, proofread and correct. There was no analysis of data at that time. The invaluable information collected was finally read and reread in order to identify trends that were commonly described by the individuals. Although this wealth of information cannot be contained in a few pages, what follows is a preliminary analysis of the data, which could serve as the basis for a full-length analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Demographic/Socioeconomic Background Information

Demographic information was based on a sample of 31 African Americans who arrived in Odessa between 1936-1958 of which 18 were female and 13 were male. The average age of the participants was 71.5 years. Twenty-six of the 31 participants identified themselves as retired workers. Only one participant did not specifically state whether she was retired or currently employed. Of the four currently employed, two were male and the other two were females with an average age of 56.5 years between them.

Other demographic information was incorporated into the study. It included: place of origin and number of siblings in the original family; parents' educational level; parents' occupations; educational level of participants and spouses; and African American migration periods to Odessa between 1936-1958.

Information regarding the birthplace of the participants indicates the majority of participants were born in towns located in east and central Texas. Three of the participants were born in Austin, Texas. The average number of siblings in each family was five. Most of the towns were described by participants as small rural farm communities. The majority of participants did not volunteer information about their parents' educational levels. It was more common for their parents to live long distances from schools. Many rural schools only taught up to the 9th grade level. Therefore, with seasonal farm work, many parents received minimal education.

The majority of participants described their mothers as housewives (41%) and their fathers as farmers/sharecroppers (89%). In some cases there were no occupations listed because the parents were deceased. When children were left in the care of grandparents, they were not always aware of the parent's occupation. Most participants described their families as being "close knit." Furthermore, they described their parents as hardworking, strict individuals. Parents assigned chores and encouraged them to obtain an education when possible in order to achieve more in life, like achieve higher socioeconomic status, or gain a prestigious position in society through strong leadership, good jobs and entrepreneurship.

There were several accounts of mothers who were described as housewives, who became widows working with the cooperation of their children to provide for the family. For example, one participant describes the way the family adjusted to the untimely loss of her father. She said:

...My daddy died just about the time I was completing the jr. high curriculum, and that meant baby sister and I had to come all the way through school without a father, cause he then was dead. And, that was rather hard, cause we both had to work. And unlike children now, we didn't have the privilege of taking whatever money you earned and spending it on yourself. We had to pay water, light and gas. Cause, like I said, prior to daddy's death mother did not work away from the home. But by now she had gone into the labor market and was doing domestic work herself... (Whitaker, 1998)

Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned the need for public assistance when times were hard.

Fathers, who were farmers, provided economically for the family while mothers cared for the household needs of the family; everyone helped. One participant recalled her father's work. She said:

...we stayed on this farm. Well, he farmed for this man. At that time if you had your own mule, then you could farm half. You'd farm and get half of what you make. But my dad always farmed $\frac{3}{4}$...the man owned everything. And all he did was work the land. But see if you did half you made more money right? But $\frac{3}{4}$, I can remember the times...it would look like we made all this cotton you know...then he would be talking about 'I didn't clear nothing'...he couldn't even read. But he could add faster than them computers... (Miller, 1998)

A demographic breakdown of four five-year periods classified participants by the periods of arrival to Odessa, gender, average age at this time, parents' occupations and educational backgrounds and the reasons participants gave for moving to Odessa. The first arrival period from 1936-1941 involved two participants, who were females with an average age of 89 years. There were no statements regarding their parents' work and educational backgrounds. One woman came because of her husband's job offer, and the other came to teach elementary school.

The second five-year period of arrivals from 1942-1947 involved eight individuals who happened to be females. Their combined ages averaged 77 years. Parental work and educational backgrounds included two mothers who were housewives, one father who farmed, and one father who worked at a feed store. One of the participants made no reference to her parents. Reasons participants gave for moving to Odessa include one female whose husband got a job at a hotel;

another female whose husband accepted a job as a principal of an elementary school; and one female who did not state a reason for moving to Odessa.

The third five-year period of arrivals from 1948-1953 involved 16 participants. Parental work and educational backgrounds varied widely from mothers who, with only an 8th grade education, to running a tavern, to picking cotton, to domestic work outside the home; to fathers who were rancher/farmers, trained Methodist minister, or the participants were raised by grandparents with no mention of their work backgrounds. The reasons participants gave for moving to Odessa also were varied, including one female who assisted in her husband's medical practice, females who accepted teaching positions, males and females who came to Odessa as children in the care of their grandmothers often to attend school and finally several males came to get a job.

Five participants arrived in Odessa during the last five-year period from 1954-1958. Four were female and 1 male, with an age average of 68 years. Parental work and educational backgrounds included two mothers, who were farm workers, one of whom had a 4th grade education; however, three of the four mothers were described as housewives and two of them as housewives with a 7th/8th grade education. Of the five respondents' fathers' occupation, three were farmers; one was a plumber and one was a traveling musician. The plumber was said to have had an 8th grade education. The reasons participants gave for coming to Odessa included two females who accepted teaching jobs; two females who came with their husbands, who had accepted jobs in the area; and one male who came with the hope of getting oil field work.

Interrelationship of Job Opportunities and Family Structure

Most participants (28 of 31) talked about being involved in some type of work as residents in Odessa. To highlight their visibility in the community, job types were classified as either in the community or outside the community. The majority of jobs held in the community were teaching. All of the teachers interviewed taught at some time exclusively in the African American community before school desegregation policies were enacted in Ector County School District.

Interestingly, jobs in the community appeared to allow parents considerably more options for summer activities with their children. One retired teacher explained how he and his family managed to travel extensively every summer. He said:

...On holidays, I hook up my trailer and we'd be down on the lake and going fishing. In summer months we'd be going somewhere.... When a holiday came, we were gone. There were about six families of us who traveled together and it was a lot of fun. Went to Seattle, Washington and come down the coast of California and came back to Texas. (Deaver, 2000)

One divorced mother chose to drive a school bus in order to have summers off with her children. She said:

...in 1970 I started driving the school bus and I drove the bus for about 23 years...till I got sick and I couldn't work anymore. And I really enjoyed that. When I first started driving the school bus we was making \$2.59 an hour. And when I retired I was making

\$9 almost \$10 an hour...and I liked driving the bus because when school was out 'd be out with my kids...because I had so many kids you know. At that time I'd be off with my kids cause when my kids was off I'd be off, that's one reason I stayed a long time... (Miller, 1998)

Some parents were very deliberate in their arrangements to be with their children as much as possible and still earn a living. The majority of the participants had working spouses before retirement that shared in the economic support of the family. In some cases, the choice of profession was at the encouragement of a parent who wanted their children to aspire to do a particular work such as teaching or nursing.

One participant who worked in the community offers a description. She said:

...the South Side supported all the people that worked in the oil fields...the maids and the butlers and the automobile repairmen, truck repairmen, truck drivers and that kind of stuff. The service part of town. Then there was the town across the tracks on the North Side, where there was to be much later growth. But that side of town was smaller than the South Side, because the town originally was on the South Side...well Murphy House (referring to the White Pool House), on Murphy Street, that was one of the first homes that was built here... (Stewart, 1998)

Gender Relations in the Family

Most of the participants indicated some arrangement was established within the family for parenting and household responsibilities. At this time some participants had grown children, some widowed, and most retired. When both spouses worked, most husbands were said to have been very helpful in sharing childcare and housework. However, there were differences in parenting boys and girls in most cases. Commonly, children were assigned chores in the home; they were expected to be obedient to their parents, and discipline was definitely enforced. In some cases religious principles were instilled to remind children to honor their parents. For the most part, there seemed to be a close bond between parents and children.

Statements involving family relationships indicated a variety of parenting/spousal attitudes related to gender. Some relationships seemed more egalitarian, and spouses shared responsibilities. There were a few relationships that were described as authoritarian. These accounts represent a time when families were managing their affairs in a more practical, routine way. Parents asserted themselves as decision-makers. Nonetheless, cooperation within the family appears to be an important element in relationships of spouses and their children.

Parents were asked about the different roles and privileges for boys and girls. This is what one mother said:

...well, I think they have different roles to play. I don't think boys should be taught that they can stay at home all day and not work and send their wife out to work, that type of thing. I think the man should be the major breadwinner. I think if a woman wants to work, that's her privilege. I mean I'm sort of in between there. I don't have a set rule... (Stewart, 1998)

Another mother recalled her responsibility to discipline her children due to circumstances. She made no distinctions in some cases, but at times she set different rules for her girls. She said:

...because my husband was a truck driver to begin with and he was gone a lot of the time, so it fell to me. And I - - with stepchildren, you know how people are? If you discipline one of them, somebody wants to say 'okay they're just beating those kids', or whatever and it finally dawned on me one day, that I was the one that was the caregiver and I was in charge of 'em, so I was goin to make 'em mind. So I got whippin's when I grew up and it didn't hurt me. I 've never gone out and robbed anybody or killed anybody or whatever and I'm still here. So I did. I whipped my kids. And I don't think it - - I didn't kill 'em. I didn't beat 'em, but they did have discipline. And I think it's about accountability, everybody's got to be accountable...my girls - - they always wanted to follow the boys. And the baby one is - - oh boy! She was good as good as - - you know like the boys. You know they could play football. She always she could play better. Wherever they went, she wanted to go. So it was kinda hard to keep her in line to let her know that she was a lady. She needed to act like one and stop followin' the boys... (Allen, 1998)

One of the fathers felt responsible as the head of the household to establish rules of order in the family. He said:

Obedience is better than sacrifice. They had to obey. Until you got grown. I mean when you grown you do what you want to do. But, in my house you obey. Go by my rules and my regulations and we didn't have any problems. And right now when my boy comes home - he's 27 - he'll say 'dad I can't stay because you gotta be home by 12:00 p.m.' I say 'well you better find somewhere else to stay' and he'll stay with his buddies and stuff - - when he comes back he says 'dad I can't be home by no 12:00 p.m.' I say 'well - that's my rules. I don't have any problem out of the girls...uh, well I guess I'm from the old school. I feel that I'm supposed to support the family, I'm supposed to - - in fact, and I'm the breadwinner. And according to the Bible, the man is the head of the house. And that's the way it's just been in my house. The man is the head... (Ray, 1998)

Resourcefulness and Unique Experiences/Housing-Bank Loans

African Americans migrating to Odessa from East and Central Texas experienced an obvious change in climate and social conditions. Along with blowing sand and unpaved streets they faced a shortage of adequate housing and lenders reluctant to make funds available to African American residents to buy homes. Migrants, who were determined to stay despite the inhospitable conditions, were resourceful. They sought opportunities to improve their situation. One example of resourcefulness involved a teacher who was able to make a one-on-one arrangement with a seller for borrowing money to purchase a home. Three other teachers described having built their own homes slowly as they bought the material on a weekly or monthly basis from a lumber company willing to sell to minority people. Along with their daily work, they were also building their homes.

Some participants had unique experiences that defy the negatives of living in a segregated environment. Some mothers knew how to stretch their food dollars due to limited money and a limited choice of retailers. Fathers sometimes made special arrangements with relatives in order to buy a home for the family. New migrants were often willing to make do with meager goods and services until they could establish themselves as permanent residents. One mother stated how she was able to budget her grocery bill to feed eight children. She said:

...I'd go to the Village Market with \$25, \$25 a week, that's \$100 a month and you can't live off \$100 a month now. But I mean I fed eight children, I didn't feed them bread. I fed them meat, bread, beans, sweets always! Red beans, pig feet, corn bread, peach cobbler or rice pudding if I cooked rice that morning - - so they could have something sweet. I was always like that. I didn't do anything but cook - - wash, iron and clean... (Caufield, 1998)

Prospects of economic gains outweighed hardships of settling into a new community. In the early years of establishing Odessa's African American community, the churches served in a variety of ways as places to teach elementary classes, hold community meetings and offer worship. Some of the residents made their homes available to other African Americans visiting Odessa. In doing so, one of the participants recalls the excitement of having famous sports figures stay at her home. She said:

...In the early 50's is when we started keeping people traveling through. We had the Globetrotters; all Black people who came through. There wasn't but one hotel and they wouldn't talk to you. They wouldn't let the colored people stay up there. And they would send 'em down here to me. I kept them Globetrotters here and was 42 of 'em. And I kept Joe Louis and his boss and manager, and all that. They stayed here with me... (Penny, 1998)

This lady, who was still spending a few hours a week working at the age of 84, became one of the pioneer entrepreneurs in the community; yet she still lives in the same small but hospitable home, which has become a landmark with a marker placed outside it.

Another retired teacher recollects her experience with housing:

...And not only that you couldn't ever get any money to build a house. No credit! The credit union would allow you must so much—no more! The banks would allow you must so much—no more! And then they were so tacky... it was horrible. But, right down Dixie there was a lumber yard. And it wasn't that I thought I was rich or needed to be rich—I wasn't trying to be rich. But there's always something better. So when I came they had opened this one little place over on Carver—a few houses right there. I don't know who put those houses up, I was too mad to ask. (Campbell, 1998)

The majority of participants tell of unpleasant situations they overcame in some way with a sense of personal satisfaction. Many acknowledged that religious faith has “kept them going.”

Opinions on Local Civil Rights Issues and Local Political Issues

There were many pro/con statements regarding civil rights progress in Odessa. Most participants described some notable social changes due to the enforcement of the civil rights laws of the 1960's. Public signs indicating separate facilities for eating, drinking water and bathroom use were removed. Black and white teachers were beginning to teach in integrated classrooms across the tracks in both North and South Odessa. One teacher's association was formed to include all teachers regardless of race.

For some participants, progress seemed slow in establishing more businesses on the Southside. Most notably participants felt an important part of their community was lost when Blackshear High School was closed in the overall effort to integrate the schools.

The following comments and concerns were expressed by the participants on the topics of civil rights and local political issues. One of the retired nurses said:

...if ya got the money now you can go where ever anybody go—White, Black, Spanish or what have you, if you got the price. But back then we didn't get the price. And they wouldn't pay you what they pay white people. (Caufield, 1998)

On the subject of school integration, one of the participants had this to say about the closing of Blackshear High School:

...Anytime you close a school in the community, it hurts the community because the fact that there's so many activities centered around the school and in the so many times I looked at the school and I passed there and I see so many cars lined up there that teachers work there and I think that how many jobs this community lost. Now there are other black teachers working in other areas but they are gone. So many of them live in other areas now. They don't live in this particular area anymore. See previously most of them lived in this particular area so financially it was a benefit for this particular area. (Deaver, 2000)

Furthermore, a retired teacher commented on how the black community in general was treated by the media:

... all my work was right there at Blackshear but everybody treated you pretty nice. You just knew you weren't welcomed anywhere. Like with Odessa American, we would try to get things for our kids, like when they would win a football game, we had the devil getting it published that Blackshear won a game. Of course most people didn't consider it a school. We were just over here and when we would try to get things published in the Odessa American, they would tell you they were going to publish it and they wouldn't. They would put a rabbit having a baby, a puppy dog having puppies in the paper quicker than then would put any of our kids in there even if we won the football game or whatever, they just wouldn't publish it. (Richmond, 2000)

Involvement in Community and Social Organizations

Although the majority of participants were retired citizens, they still appeared to be quite involved in organizations to benefit their community. There were a variety of ways they involved themselves. Retirement has allowed some participants to be involved in multiple organizations.

Results indicated programs/activities involving Head Start, the community Boy's Club, the Gertrude Bruce Community Center, church attendance and voting were well supported by participants. The following was a statement from an interviewee, who was highly involved in community organizations:

...the Lions club is one of the clubs I belong to. That's the one that played bingo. I use to be President of the Lions Club and right after I retired, I ran the kitchen for them. And then another organization I belong to is the Black Chamber and I am Treasurer for the Black Chamber. Then another organization I work worth with is the Retired Teachers. I am also Treasurer to that also.... I'm on the Park and Recreation Board... and I think my wife counted it the other day, I'm on 16 different groups. (Deaver, 2000)

A retired school teacher who was extremely active in the community named among other activities belonging to the following organizations:

... member of the Alpha Kappa Mu Honor Society, White Pool House Friends, Board Member Ector County Historical Commission, Board Member Texas Alliance for Education and the Arts, Texas Agriculture Extension Service, Gertrude Bruce Historical Cultural Center, 55 Alive Mature Driving Course, Instructor, Gospel Music Workshop of America, Evangelistic Board Member, Ector County FCE Ann. (TAFCE) , Odessa Chapter American Red Cross, Volunteer Ector County Centennial Committee Board Member. (Campbell, 1998)

Advice to the Younger Generation

Much of the advice offered by participants (24 of 31) was directed to parents and children of Odessa's African American community. Some saw a lack of discipline on the part of parents as a problem in the community. Others emphasized the child's responsibility to accept parental guidance.

Now that African American teachers were no longer exclusive to the Southside in the role of behavior watchdogs, parents no longer expected to be informed about their children's behavior as they were in the past. Some retired teachers interviewed for this study felt school integration to be a disadvantage for African American students and their parents, since it brought about a loss of control on what the children learned and how much they were challenged for their future development.

One of the retired male participants expressed fear at the thought of trying to correct the ways today's youth behave, that he feels are unlike the "ways" of the past. As some participants see it, drugs, alcohol, guns, and gangs have compounded problems in some concentrated areas of the Southside. Others express concern that younger single parents are not involved enough in teaching moral values to their children. Community leaders appear to be at a loss to involve

youth more in activities towards improving the environment of the Southside. The following are examples of advice offered to the younger generation. One female participant said:

...we have to learn to respect one another—whatever the nationality—whether it is Hispanic, White, whatever. Everybody should have the same rights but we still have to respect one another. And I tried to teach my children; you don't make a difference in your classmates or your playmates just because you have a different color skin. You accept individuals for their own worth. (Deaver, 1998)

Another female participant said:

...I would tell them that they need to work. Be willing to work. Be willing to understand. Be willing to learn about each other. That is the different races. Their cultures and so forth. And always recognize that there are differences in cultures—there are some who don't want to do that...their way is the only perfect way. Well, that may be true, but they should be able to understand that there are some other ways of looking at it. (Stewart, 1998)

One of the members who was an educator, as well as a person sitting on 16 boards of directors in the community, had the following advice for the youth:

Well I think that the main thing I would start off by talking to parents becoming involved with their children. Then it is my concept that every son should be taught how to work by his father. Whatever kind of job he has, shining shoes, janitorial, cutting grass, it doesn't make a difference what it is. He should teach his son how to do that and so when the son does go off to college, he knows how to do at least what his father does. And I think that the same thing with the mother. If she would do the same thing with her daughter. If she would teach the girl, the daughter to do the things what she does. And then, if you work out then that would mean that a certain time of the year when...whatever it is you can talk to your employer and tell them that I would like to bring my child and let him see what I do for a living. So like my grandson works now with his father. (Deaver, 2000)

Another retired teacher had this to say:

...the only thing I can say is what I did at Ector. The years that I worked over there with the students and I gave my best not just to black kids cause they isn't that many but to Anglo and Latin America kids as well as to a few blacks. It's just talk you head off. Call them in, sit down, and just over and over again, just keep trying to drive home the idea that you need to get your education. Trying to drive home to then that you need to get you an education because technology is taking over. That's about the size of it now. And hope that the parents will talk to them at home and encourage them. That's where a lot of help comes from. If you can get mom and dad and the relatives at home to encourage a kid to go to school and to do their best. (Richmond, 2000)

Furthermore, one of the most respected reverends in the Odessa area suggested:

I think the first thing that the Black youth must consider and I say this Sunday morning in my message, overall hindrance that people you want to believe today, is that there is a Black and White thing, but it's not. Its economics, you see. As long as you fight about Black and White you will never prepare yourself to be a part of the mainstream. That is the main thing, know who you are, know where you want to go, set your goals and work toward those goals. Whatever field of life you choose you will have obstacles, you will have hindrances, but main thing is to realize the main objective and the main hindrance is not Black White, its economics. I say that simply because the fact is when you if you prepare yourself, qualify yourself in any field you can find what you need. You might have to leave Odessa; you see what I'm saying. The main thing is to prepare yourself mentally. I do understand that we have a huge problem here but at the same time I do believe any child here can make it if they prepare themselves. In a lot of instances, and this is a really broad statement, and I've noticed this over the years. The integration and all that were supposed to have been a help to all children, especially Black children as far as equal education and act. That is traits we have picked up from other groups of people that are really not a part of our heritage. (Hanson, 2000)

Overall, the opinions were generally geared toward the parents as the guardians of the youth.

Opinions of University's Role in the Community

Only 6 of the 31 participants were asked to comment on the university's role in the community. This question was not asked of all participants. Most seemed pleased to be a part of the research initiated by a UTPB professor. None of the participants indicated whether they were ever students at UTPB. The following comments were offered about the university. One of the female participants said:

...I think they're doing the only thing a university can do. Open doors to all races, and all cultures. And provide the best teachers. And I don't see what more they can do. I think they will grow with time. I think they have grown. And I haven't been disappointed. I'm disappointed in the fact that I didn't get to go... (Stewart, 1998)

Another female participant said:

...I think UTPB could do a better job of selling the historical achievements of Blacks to the general public. I think they could do a better job of letting people know that Black people were not over here just for brawn. That we had brains too. And they could let the general public know that 85% of everything they use every day out of necessity like combs and refrigerators, air conditioners, sprinkler systems, typewriters and elevators were made by Blacks. Our kids would have a deeper respect for themselves if they were to become made known of this early in life. (Whitaker, 1998)

The role of the university in building bridges with the communities was one of great importance for the socioeconomic development of the region.

Concluding Remarks

This article was the outcome of the analysis of data collected between the years of 1998-2000. This study involved the collection of in-depth oral histories among the early African American members of the community. The objective was twofold: first, to increase knowledge of the origin, development and functioning of the African American community of Odessa; second, to serve as a pilot study for further analysis of the socioeconomic issues related to this particular community as well as other minority communities and their interconnections. Fieldwork provided the opportunity for researchers to listen to and observe the behaviors and language of the participants being interviewed. Reading and analyzing the words of participants for this study made their experiences of everyday life meaningful. It became possible to build a historical analysis of community development from the point of view of the individuals involved.

As found in this study it was not until the late 1930s, early 1940s that Blacks started migrating to Odessa in significant numbers in search of better jobs. Since the oil fields were closed to minority workers, people became involved within the service sector or small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Much of their energy and attention was focused on supplying some very basic needs, such as education and health care for their children, employment, and the acquisition of public services, which included street paving, effective drainage, water mains and sewers for their community.

Furthermore, according to a newspaper article in the *Odessa American*, no Black person ran for political office in Odessa until 1960, when thirty-three year old Lawrence Degrate ran for the office of constable of precinct four. Since then, several members of the Black community have held public office, such as Police Commissioner and City Council members.

This analysis of 31 oral histories revealed some common and unique ways migrant African Americans managed to provide for themselves and their families. This collection of oral histories covered a period of 22 years between 1936 and 1958. This period represented a time of struggle and determination to make a living when resources were limited to most minority groups in the U.S.

Results indicated the importance of family members who offered support and encouragement for others. Parents established patterns of responsibility by involving their children in chores in order to develop in them a sense of responsibility to the family unit. Work ethic, discipline and religious principles were instilled early. These oral histories represented a time when most African Americans were required to do physical work to earn a living. Employment opportunities and career choices were limited, even for those fortunate enough to receive college education. Accounts indicate parents did what they could to make it possible to send their children to college with the hope that they would achieve more as adults.

In the past, teachers and ministers were usually the most visible professionals in the African American community. There happened to be eight retired teachers among the 31 who participated in this study. Teachers of the era of segregated classrooms were in a unique position to interact with students and parents over several generations.

There were a few service businesses in the self-sufficient African American community such as cafes, groceries, barbershops and beauty shops. Because there was little money available outside the community in terms of business capital, few businesses could afford to expand significantly. Therefore, over the years the community's growth began to stagnate.

The community's esteem appears to have been affected over the years by the unfortunate closing of Ector High School. This closing occurred in the wake of school desegregation in 1982, when Black students were required to attend White schools in Odessa. This action spawned feelings about whether school and social integration was worth the cost to the African American community. Odessa's Southside leaders continued to look for ways to promote a sense of pride within the community. Most of the participants interviewed were or are still involved in some organizations to improve the quality of life in Odessa's Southside. It appears that they became more involved with community organizations, such as the Phyllis Wheatley Day Nursery, Boys Club, Head Start, the Gertrude Bruce Cultural Center, etc., after retirement. They commonly exhibit a strong sense of responsibility to maintain the cultural traditions of the community.

Overall, most participants expressed satisfaction with their lives and what their families have achieved over the years. Participants were remarkably good-natured and there were few indications of bitterness and anger for the many years of enduring overt racism and discrimination. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that although the overt nature of discrimination has changed, covert discrimination was a part of everyday life. Most participants acknowledge religious faith with the hope that conditions would someday improve. They further felt there had been social progress for African Americans in Odessa since the civil rights laws were enacted; but there were still several areas of concern. Their life perspectives extended beyond the negatives of the past. It appeared their rewards outweighed the costs of relocating to a new environment.

These few interviews represented but a sample of what there was to discover about African American experiences in Odessa, Texas. Several accounts did appear to support the descriptions of certain conditions provided by other interviewees. The collection of oral histories could be expanded in the future to include a larger cross-section of individuals who qualify as long term residents of Odessa's Mexican American and Anglo communities as well as leaders, entrepreneurs and other members of the Odessa communities.

In the meantime the following statement made by a retired teacher is the embodiment of this community's past, present, and future, "So, again we say we may have been apart from others, but we are a part of mainstream America. Because we contributed to it in a very rich manner, in a very productive manner, and as citizens we are very proud!" (Whitaker, 1998)

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