

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NUMBER
742

Interview with
C. SHEPHARD
July 14, 1988

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: Richard Byrd

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Approved: *Lee Lee Shepherd*
(Signature)

Date: July 14, 1988

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Oral History Collection

C. Shephard

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Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing Ms. C. Shephard for the University of North Texas Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on July 14, 1988, in Denton, Texas. I'm interviewing Ms. Shephard in order to obtain her recollections concerning the Denton Christian Women's Interracial Fellowship.

Ms. Shephard, could you tell us a little bit about your background--where you grew up and where you were born, schooling, and things of this nature.

Ms. Shephard: I'm May Shephard, and I'm originally an East Texan. I came from the area of Tyler. That's my hometown--located near Tyler-Kilgore, along in that area. I moved to Denton on July 17, 1962. Presently, I'm employed in the Denton Independent School District. I have four children. My husband is deceased. My oldest is thirty-three; my youngest is eighteen. I have three daughters, Yolanda, Sybil, Ingrid; and my

son is Leon. I have five grandchildren. The oldest one is fourteen; the youngest is six.

Byrd: Did you attend school in the Longview-Tyler or.

Shephard: Overton Industrial High School. I went to Overton Elementary, and then it was consolidated from there. I finished school, and then in 1962 I moved to Denton.

Byrd: You were about eighteen years of age when you came to Denton, or thereabouts?

Shephard: I was in my late thirties.

Byrd: When you were growing up, identify the closest community to where you were growing up?

Shephard: The closest community?

Byrd: Yes.

Shephard: Overton. It's a small town.

Byrd: What kind of contacts did you have with the whites when you were growing up, or did you have any with whites when you were growing up?

Shephard: My contacts were very good because my mother worked in what at that time we called a cafe. We basically had a good connection there. And she did washing and ironing for one of the well-known persons there, a postman. I don't remember his name. His wife was a nurse, and she had children ranging in the ages of my sisters and brothers. So my mother worked for them.

The school wasn't a lot integrated. It was more or less just all-black. They called it "colored" at the

time--the school.

Byrd: How about a child playing or whatever?

Shephard: We didn't have a lot of contact with whites, just the communication with the ones that my grandmother and my mother knew. The communications was good because the town was small, and everybody knew everybody. Everybody was helpful to one another, so basically our communications were good. But as far as just growing up as a black child, we basically didn't have much communication with whites.

Byrd: How would you compare then the relationships you had with whites growing up in Overton and that area with the experience you had in Denton? Was there a difference in working or dealing with whites?

Shephard: In moving to Denton. .in the early sixties is when the schools first integrated. I think Fred Moore School was on the brink of closing at that time, so basically my kids began their first and second grades in integrated schools. That occurred in 1962. I was active in the PTA in school, you know, being a basic parent for school activities and curriculum. I started in 1971 working for the Denton Independent School District.

Byrd: So when you first came to Denton, your children were going to an all-black school?

Shephard: The very first year, probably 1962, but from 1963 on they went to integrated schools.

Byrd: What about your perception of their feelings with white children as they were growing up? Were they similar to the ones you had?

Shephard: Different. So far as their communication with white friends, they had great contacts. Even to this day, the parents and I--some of them--still stay in touch. It's just like school, you know--no color there. I never had any interracial problems per se.

Byrd: In terms of other relationships with other whites in the Denton community, generally speaking, how would you say blacks and whites got along, let's say, the housing situation?

Shephard: Basically, I think the relationship is good, but there is always pros and cons at any given time or any given thing. But I think that basically it's good, but to a point I think there could be some improvement. It may be just a lack of communication or connection with the right person per se or whatever the particular situation is at the time, but basically I think it is good. But, you know, improvement is always good at any rate in any situation.

Byrd: How did you become involved with this women's group? It seems to me that you were a newcomer in town?

Shephard: Gosh, I guess maybe my biggest problem has always been talking (chuckle). Basically, I think it probably originated through the churches because I have always

been church-oriented. I grew up in the church. I think these women--the Interracial Group--were basically Christian women, and this organization kind of got started through church communication. I think we were trying to do something to improve streets. We had streets that were partially paved, and I think that was the first communicable thing that we did--trying to contact families or part of families so we could get streets completely paved, because we like had part of the street paved and not on the other part. Then we started. .some of us had small babies, and every Saturday, as far as I can remember, we had like a nursery with our babies so the kiddos would get so much closer acquainted. We shared the happiness of our kids growing up together and graduating--all through school together. A lot of ladies in the women's group had babies the same age. They've been to school at the same time, so we shared our experiences. Now, as they finish school, we see what they've accomplished. Some are married.

And from there we really organized as a group, and we came up with community projects, you know, something in the community that we could improve or get involved in to benefit anybody, black or white. I think we met once a month, and we would meet at various homes. Then, like, at Christmas time or special times of the year,

Thanksgiving, we would have a dinner or Thanksgiving party or whatever. It was always something that we felt like we could get accomplished, and for a lot of things that we had to do we had to work with city officials-- something like a street or whatever. Everybody was real cooperative. I don't think that not one project we ever put on that we didn't basically get 100 percent cooperation from everybody.

I was trying to think of the number of women we had. I bet we probably we had as many as sixty. It was a pretty large group, and versatile.

Byrd: How was the balance or mixture? Was it 50-50?

Shephard: No, it wasn't 50-50. I think basically in any organization blacks are going to be less in number. Probably they will be in a minority. It will be less in number than the whites. But we had a group that was willing to work, and I don't think race was a problem. It was just a group of Christian women working, and they didn't look at color. They just looked at a project we wanted to accomplish. We wanted this communication, and it just got off to a good, good start. I don't really know how it all ended, except I know it wasn't on a sour note. Everybody just kind of, like, at vacation time got involved in different things, and the kids were growing up and going in different directions. But periodically we run across one another. We still have

that communication. I ran across Pat Cheek, and we were saying we should get this thing started again. And I think a few passed away and that kind of thing. Basically, we didn't have any problems, and communication was good. Christianity at any rate will make a difference whether you are working with blacks or whites.

Byrd: I have had suggestions by some folks that I have talked to that at the outset, early on, that there was a suspicion among the black women that "What do these white women want from us?" Did you perceive that?

Shephard: No, I really didn't. I really didn't because basically the women that I knew--some of them--probably were older than I was. Maybe, like they say, they were from the "old school" in that they were curious. They never did discuss this with me. Maybe they did among themselves. We would have, like, about four or five out of one particular church and maybe one or two out of the others, and so we represented all of the different denominations.

Byrd: Was there a more dominant group, or was one church more dominant than another?

Shephard: I really didn't notice that, but, like I said, they didn't talk to me about it. I really didn't notice that. It was just pretty much cooperation because we met in white homes and in the black homes. Like, with

the children we were always at the church, and then if we had a church affair, we would exchange with the black church and the white church. It all went in rotation. The president was changed from time to time--black president and white president.

Byrd: Was that by design--rotation?

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: President?

Shephard: Yes, I think it was by design, but I guess it was more or less just the ones that were just basically regular in attendance.

Byrd: We found that the membership list was kind of scattered or sketchy. Was there anything like a formal document like a constitution or bylaws or anything like that, or was it less formal?

Shephard: I think it was less formal than that. I don't know of any bylaws or constitution. I just don't recall anything like that. It was more or less just informal. If we had a project or somebody had an idea or something that we thought that we could handle or that we could tackle or open up an avenue or be of benefit to blacks or whites or something concerning the community or the churches, the needy, whatever. .if anybody had anything that they felt like we could be of any service, they would bring it to the meeting, and we would just kind of organize ourselves and tackle it.

Byrd: One other thing that had been suggested to a degree. .as you rotated meetings in black homes and in white homes, beyond the group how did the non-group neighbors respond, especially the whites coming into black neighborhoods and blacks to white neighborhoods?

Shephard: Probably question marks, you know. Maybe not so much oral but maybe sight unseen, you know, question marks. I think on either side you're always going to have women that's going to be hesitant to join maybe even if it were all-black or if it was all-white. You've got active women; you've got inactive women. Some people just more community-oriented than others, and I think it would be probably the ones that were less community oriented that would maybe raise an eyebrow.

Byrd: What about the husbands? Were they supportive?

Shephard: Basically, our husbands were pretty supportive. They really were. They were pretty supportive. I think maybe some probably thought their wives spent too much time being occupied away from home, but I think all and all, when they realized the accomplishment and the fellowship, it kind of broke the ice. When we would have affairs, our husbands would be real supportive. Maybe not 100 percent, but they supported us.

Byrd: Could you spell out or identify some of the leaders at the time? Who would you say would be the leaders in the group?

Shephard: The leaders?

Byrd: The leaders of the group.

Shephard: Euline Brock, Dorothy Adkins, Othella Hill (and she is deceased), Pat Cheek, Lovie Price (my neighbor), Catherine Bell, Christine McAdams. Off the top of my head that is all I can think of. Ruby Cole. That's about all I can think of at the moment.

Byrd: You talked about one of the earlier projects--the street paving.

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: Were these streets totally unpaved? Could you describe the situation with those?

Shephard: They were bad. They were just almost to the point, like, if we had bad weather they would just be hard to travel--riding, walking. It was hard on your cars. We would have streets that maybe one side of the street would be paved. Hill Street was one. One side of it was paved, and maybe the other side belonged to another family. We would try to get families to be responsible for paving that particular side of the street so we wouldn't have a partial street and the cars would run smoother. That was really a superbig project because we had to find owners. Some had moved away, and some were deceased. We sat down and wrote letters. We would find addresses for people that owned these houses on these streets. Whoever we needed to see, we'd try and get

them to pay for this, so this was a pretty big project.

Byrd: Was it, like, a checkerboard paving?

Shephard: Yes. As far as I can remember, I think that was the very first big project that we had. There might have been one earlier, but I think that was the very first project. We did a lot of footwork with that one--a lot of footwork. We didn't ride in the cars to do that. We did a lot of footwork.

Byrd: Of this condition, would this persist all over Denton, or were the streets paved here and there?

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: City-wide?

Shephard: Yes, city-wide. We also registered people to vote. We would try to get people to vote.

Byrd: I'm not familiar with that. Could you describe that for me?

Shephard: Well, to register to vote, you just register. We worked to make sure that everybody was registered.

Byrd: Was there a poll tax?

Shephard: A poll tax at that time, yes. We worked on that. We did a lot of footwork with that, too. That was another big project that we had.

Byrd: Would the group maybe hunt up the names?

Shephard: Well, it is basically that we wanted to remind people to register, and we went door to door with it.

Byrd: To get everybody registered?

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: How were you received at those doors, particularly with the whites that weren't registered?

Shephard: Well, basically it kind of evened out. If a person had a question mark in their mind, it didn't matter what your race was. You know, "What are you doing this for?" "Basically, I'm not able to do this. "I'm not interested in it. These are the excuses you get on both sides, so it is on an even keel.

Byrd: In this kind of activity, were you suggesting candidates, or were you fielding candidates in the local elections?

Shephard: I don't think so much we were supporting candidates at that particular time. We were just wanting them to be sure. .well, sometimes if they knew of somebody that was running, they might would ask a question or something. We'd invite the candidates to community meetings at a meeting hall, and anybody would be invited to come. We tried to give people the information on the candidates and to inform them about what we needed for our particular area. The main thing was what we needed for Denton, but if it was something that was going to totally benefit southeast Denton, we would. .older people were interested in that kind of thing, and then we would assure them that we would furnish rides for them to the polls because that was another thing that

made them skeptical. They would say, "Well, I'm not registered because I don't have a way to get to the polls. So we did this. This was another big project. We would let them know the day of the voting and what time the polls opened and what time we would pick them up, and we would get them to and from the polls.

The candidates would always send out fliers, and they would like to put signs in peoples' yards. So we would try to give them the information. A lot of older people didn't read well, or maybe they didn't understand. I guess that was basically more the blacks. We would try to be as informative as we could. We would try to give them the information to get them to the polls and show them the importance of voting and let them know that they could vote for their own choices.

Byrd: What other kinds of projects can you recall or describe for me?

Shephard: Well, we would do things for the needy. I don't know who decided to call it Operation Breadbasket. I don't know if we kept that title, but we did that kind of thing. If somebody was needing something, we would try to respond.

We brought in new members to make our Fellowship grow. We didn't have totally age bearing on it. We wanted the younger women and the middle-aged women--just any age group--because we always ventured out in trying

to make our membership grow.

Byrd: Would you describe how you would recruit members?

Shephard: Well, there again it was through the churches, or maybe I would see somebody that somebody else in another section of town would not see, like, maybe in the work force. But it was mainly through the churches and through just total communication.

Byrd: We were trying to find some records--dates, times. You said that some of your meetings were held in the Legion hall.

Shephard: If it was something concerning a city-wide thing or a voter registration drive, we would have a community meeting to let them know what was coming up, and then we would let them know, like, deadlines and that kind of thing. Our group originally would meet in homes. I am thinking it was a Tuesday--the first Tuesday of every month--when we met in these homes.

Byrd: Did you advertise by word-of-mouth, or did you advertise in the paper?

Shephard: We advertised in the paper. We would send out fliers. We would kind of organize anything that we really were working on, and we would assign so many people to a certain area. Some things we did, like, in alphabetical order. We would do maybe voter registration, and so many people would handle the names from A through D or whatever.

Byrd: Was this similar to the procedure you used in trying to find maybe some absentee landlords?

Shephard: Right, right, right, right. We did. We did.

Byrd: My understanding is that a lot of the absentee landlords were not necessarily white. There were some blacks, some of whom lived as far away as California.

Shephard: Right, right. That's right. Some did live in California, some in Arizona. Some were deceased. They had just gotten scattered, and some we never did find.

We would never have any project where we would have maybe all whites working on it. Whatever we were working on, we would have maybe a black and white or two blacks and a white or whatever. We never just had all whites on a particular project. If we had to do area things, maybe the question would come up: "Who's going to take southeast Denton?" Maybe it involved the elderly or voter registration. There'd be volunteers, and somebody would say, "I will. So you would see a lot of volunteering. Everybody was just willing to work, and we would always work in groups, like, maybe four or five, six to eight or whatever.

Byrd: It's my understanding that most of the white women were in some way either a teacher or married to a faculty member. There was some concern that there would be some friction between them and black women who might not have been in the same kind of economic status or the same

kind of work area.

Shephard: I don't know. I really never got that. That never bothered me personally, and so far as the women that I knew--the black women that were in it--I really didn't get that feeling. You know, some people education-wise do feel superior to other people, but that wasn't the case in our group.

Byrd: There seemed to be some concern among the white women that there might be problems concerning the economic status of the blacks in the group.

Shephard: We had less blacks than whites in my estimation. In everything of this nature that I have been involved in, it has always been more whites than blacks. And some people are more withdrawn than others; some people are more outgoing than others. I find that even in whites. I think that was the thing that I've noticed more. It's just a difference in whether some people are more outgoing or some people are geared for just being kind of withdrawn. I think that maybe that was one of the reasons that we probably had more whites than blacks. Some people are more home-oriented, and some are not.

Byrd: How did the group stand on urban renewal? Were they unified?

Shephard: It wasn't totally unified, but it wasn't a chaotic situation. It wasn't a "knock-down-drag-out" thing. It wasn't a falling out or anything, but there was some

agreement and there was some disagreement on urban renewal. But it wasn't a big thing. That's going to happen with any given organization. You are going to have agreement and disagreement.

Byrd: It has been my understanding that whites and blacks in places that were subject to being renewed were concerned about what it might do to their property taxes.

Shephard: Homeowners probably got frustrated.

Byrd: Do you recall talking with persons outside the group who were not in favor of urban renewal?

Shephard: I couldn't give you a total figure, but it was partial on either side. You had partial blacks that were for urban renewal and partial blacks who were not for urban renewal. The same thing was true with the whites. Some were for it, and some were not. I can't do it on an individual basis because there were too many, but there were ones that did it because they feared lower property values. Some of them felt like it would be too many problems in the community. They felt like it wasn't totally equalized for maybe blacks or whites. Others didn't like the location. They also felt like, I guess, it would be overcrowded, and it would cause a lot of crime. It was just different reasons. As the cliché goes, "Different strokes for different folks."

Byrd: Was the group active in the area of achieving equal

service in areas of public accommodations such as restaurants in town? How about public accommodations generally speaking? Were they active in this?

Shephard: If we were going to have. .[the doorbell rings].

Byrd: We were talking about the activities of the group in terms of accommodations. In those kinds of activity, did you ever utilize. .I mean, this is a time when there was a lot of student activity throughout the country. Did you ever use students from the universities?

Shephard: No. On that one, I can't remember.

Byrd: I've gone back to some of the newspapers of the time, and I found that there was some student involvement-- the Campus Theatre, for example.

Shephard: Yes, there probably was.

Byrd: I'm just trying to find out what kind of activity there was for students in the integration process. I'm thinking of when they shut down Fred Moore School.

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: For the first group of blacks that, I guess, would be first semester seniors, who would be graduating from integrated schools, was there at tutoring program? Do you know the details on that?

Shephard: Well, you know, it's kind of hard for me to speak on that, too, because, you see, my kids weren't involved. I think the Interracial Group would contact these students, and they did it on a more or less volunteer

basis. I don't think there was a fee that I can recall. They did it basically to get the students ready to graduate. Some students probably were falling below grade level. I think students from the university would do some of the tutoring.

Now we got a little dissatisfaction when the schools integrated because basically the kids were so geared to Fred Moore School. The community felt like if schools were going to be integrated, why not fix Fred Moore School or build a new school in the black area instead of taking everybody completely away from this end of town to school. That caused quite a bit of confusion. It wasn't a riot situation, but it was very upsetting-- it was very upsetting. Even today they have a nursery down there. They said that the building needed repairs. Well, we felt like if it is going to be good enough to repair and use for a nursery, it could have been repaired or rebuilt and had some of the students transported over here. That had a big bearing on the students as well as the total community. It's also an historical thing because it's something that Fred Moore is remembered for.

Byrd: My understanding is that there were voluntary transfers --black schools to white schools. It's my understanding that total of six students transferred. Could you tell me more about that?

Shephard: How they transferred from the black community to the white community?

Byrd: Right.

Shephard: Voluntarily?

Byrd: My understanding is that it was voluntary. I was just kind of confused.

Shephard: That's Greek to me.

Byrd: How that worked?

Shephard: Now it could be true, but I just don't have any knowledge of that.

Byrd: I guess this occurred just before they closed the Fred Moore building. It was a voluntary transfer.

Shephard: About six students?

Byrd: It was my understanding that there were six.

Shephard: I'm still in the dark about that one.

Byrd: There were six, but I'm still kind of cloudy about how it came about.

Shephard: I am, too. I don't even know.

Byrd: There was another question that was generated. My understanding is that there were 157 black children in the schools who were from out of this district. They lived in outlying areas where there was no black high school. When Denton integrated, what happened to those 157? No one seems to know what happened to these people.

Shephard: All I can visualize is that maybe they moved away. All

I know is that a student who lives outside the district must pay a fee if they want to go to school in the district. Also, if they are out of a particular district and if the parents would like them to go to a particular school, they have to be responsible for getting them there. I guess basically that is how it has been, and that's about the only explanation I have for that.

Byrd: When they closed Fred Moore, what became of the instructional staff and administration?

Shephard: Now I don't know if this was by application. .some retired. A few were transferred--very few.

Byrd: Transferred?

Shephard: Into the integrated schools--the staff. Some retired. Some of those teachers that were from Fred Moore School are still working in the Denton system now, but it is very few. Fred Moore School was at least to eleventh grade, I think. I know there are a few of them that have moved away, and then there are at least six, I recall, that are still teaching. I don't know if they had to do a test or do anything in particular to get them into the system.

Byrd: Did you ever go as a member of the group to any of the school board meetings?

Shephard: I guess I went to school board meetings more in the late seventies than I did in the early 1960s. I really

didn't know a lot about the school board meetings in the early 1960s and when schools were first integrated. I know it was a little more "hush-hush. It's a little more open now, to my knowledge, than it was when the schools first integrated.

Byrd: I'm trying to get a ball park figure. A couple of women I was talking to made a point that there were several who attended the school board meetings. They gave me the impression that they didn't do a whole lot, but they made sure that their presence was noticed.

Shephard: Yes, yes, yes. Sometimes that makes a difference. That makes as much difference as anything, really. I'm sure I heard talk of the community going to the school board. I don't think they felt as if they got a fair deal with the school transportation and the uprooting of the school. That was a pretty big thing on the east side.

Byrd: You made a remark a little earlier on having run into Pat Cheek.

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: You said y'all talked maybe about getting the group back together.

Shephard: Yes.

Byrd: What eventually did happen to the group?

Shephard: I think everybody just kind of got involved with different activities. Some of the people in the group now are working. Then there were illnesses, and there

were deaths. But it wasn't any problems that caused the group to scatter.

Byrd: There is some suggestion that it may have been the age or shifting gears in black women generally.

Shephard: It's a pretty big group of black women who are still involved. The Christian Women's Fellowship still meets to this day. We don't meet as an interracial club or group, but we still have that Christian Women's Fellowship, and it meets every other Tuesday of every month. It still goes to the various churches. So basically the group is not dead. It still functions in a sense.

Byrd: So it's a lot of the same membership?

Shephard: The very same people. We do that every other Tuesday. It's called Christian Women's Fellowship.

Byrd: So you meet in church proper, not in homes?

Shephard: Yes, in the churches. It rotates to the different churches.

Byrd: What churches are involved?

Shephard: All of the churches are involved. Let's see. .do you mean individuals?

Byrd: Yes, how about like the individuals from the original group?

Shephard: From the original group?

Byrd: That you still have.

Shephard: Lovie Price, Irene Price, Leslie Miller, and myself.

Because I'm working in the schools, I don't get to meet with them until summer. There is, like I said, Lovie Price, Irene Price, Norvell Williams, Betty Kimble, and Catherine Bell. They meet mornings, so the people that work kind of miss meetings. But those are some original ones.

Byrd: It seems like so many of the women I talk to say, "Wouldn't it be nice like for a reunion or something like that, having the whole group?"

Shephard: Yes, that is what Pat and I were talking about. But, basically, like I said, they still meet. But we had quite a few deaths, you know, from the time we integrated. Some moved away. Linnie McAdams was one of the original ones.

Byrd: I certainly do thank you for participating in the interview and for your contributions. If I come on down the road and need to ask you a few more questions, I hope you'll agree to maybe talk with me some more.

Shephard: I sure will. I sure will.

Byrd: Thank you again.