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Interview with

CAROL RIDDLESPERGER

February 5, 1988

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

Interviewer: Richard Byrd

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Approved: Carol J. Riddlesperger
(Signature)

Date: February 5, 1988

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Oral History Collection

Carol Riddlesperger

Interviewer: Richard Byrd Date of Interview: February 5, 1988

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Mr. Byrd: This is Richard Byrd interviewing Ms. Carol Riddlesperger for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on February 5, 1988, in Denton, Texas. I'm interviewing Ms. Riddlesperger in order to obtain her recollections concerning the Denton Women's Christian Interracial Fellowship.

Ms. Riddlesperger, could you tell me a little about your background--where you were born, raised, education, occupational background?

Ms. Riddlesperger: Well, I'm a native of Minnesota. My parents lived in Hazel Run, Minnesota, which is in the southwestern part of the state, a small village. My father was a banker, and prior to her marriage my mother was a teacher. But in those days, when you got married, that was the end of any kind of career. So she became a full-time homemaker. She was very active in the community with the activities there. She was the church organist and pianist and active in the Ladies Aid Society at the church and formed a study group. My father was, as I indicated, a banker. He was on the

board of education and played in our community band. Our family consisted of two girls. I have one sister. We lived there until after my father's death.

The crash of 1929 made a big impact on our family in that our bank was closed. It was rough, rough times. I'm a product of the Depression, and that stays with you forever. That has a real profound influence on your life and your thinking.

We lived in Minnesota until I was ready for college. We did not have a high school in our small community, so I went to Clarkfield High School. I drove to Clarkfield with other Hazel Run kids who also enrolled there. I stayed with my father's sister and her family during the week and then went back home to Hazel Run, nine miles away, with those who commuted from Hazel Run. I remained in Minnesota to complete my senior year of high school. By that time, my sister had finished eighth grade in our little community.

Then we decided to make a change. My mother had attended a normal school in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She was educated beyond the ordinary woman in her day, and from the time we were little kids, we knew that we were going to Augustana College. The normal school had become a four-year college. So we moved to Sioux Falls in the summer that my sister completed eighth grade, but it was

decided that I should remain in Minnesota for my senior year because I was established there. There was a good chance that I would become valedictorian of my graduating class which would entail perhaps scholarship advantages at Augustana College. So my mother and sister moved to Sioux Falls, and my sister enrolled in school there, and I stayed in Minnesota until I finished high school. Then I became a full-time resident at Augustana College, which is one of the colleges in the Lutheran church family of colleges.

Then I taught high school English and was school librarian for a couple of years. After completion of my work there, I went to the University of Minnesota to do some graduate work in library science.

After having taught a couple of years, they opened a radio technical school in Sioux Falls, and the plea went out for teachers for this technical school. I didn't think I had any ability in that line, but when I found some people I knew who hadn't gone to college and who were out there as instructors, a friend and I decided we'd give it a try because it was something new and the pay was better than the $100 a month I was getting as a high school teacher. My friend was getting $85 in her school situation. So we took the training that was offered, along with the G.I.s.

In the class that I was enrolled in, I met my future husband. He was there as a G.I.--Class Number Five--at the

airbase there. Prior to his being enlisted or drafted into the Air Force, he was a high school principal in Texas. So I met him there, along with a lot of other interesting folks. Our community went all-out to welcome these Air Force people to our community. It was a new experience. Well, I continued to work there, and Jim went on to his continued service. Several years later, he went to officers training school. Several years later, he was sent back to Lincoln, Nebraska, where we had an opportunity to renew our friendship and all, which bolossomed into a subsequent marriage several years later.

Of course, I came to Texas, then, as a bride forty-three years ago, I guess. Jim was a student at the University of Texas at the time, and my only skills were in the field of teaching, so I applied for an application for a job in the Austin public schools. There, as in university communities, teachers were a dime a dozen. But I had qualifications for school librarian work, so I got a job on that basis, as a school librarian, in an elementary school in Austin. Then later I enrolled in graduate school during the summer in library science and got a master's degree in library science, except for completing the thesis. I didn't finish that because in the meantime, Jim had accepted a job here at North Texas.

We had been here only a short time when he was recalled

to the service during the Korean crisis. Of course, our family, which then consisted of one little girl, was on the move for a while. Jim was stationed in Shreveport at Barksdale Air Force Base and then subsequently to Puerto Rico. Of course, that took me a long way from my scholastic endeavors and writing a thesis, which at that point didn't seem very important (chuckle).

So after that stint in the service, we came back to Denton, and we've been here ever since. We came here in 1950 and were gone until the summer or fall of 1952, and we've been here ever since. In addition to having three more children--our family consists of three daughters and a son--I did all the things that mothers of a growing family do, including homeroom mother, Girls Scouts and Boy Scouts, walking the block for leukemia, and all those kinds of things. Then when the children got old enough, I taught Sunday school and vacation church school, and I worked with the women's organization at the First United Methodist Church here in Denton. When the children got way up in years, and I wasn't needed in the same capacity here, I decided to get back into substitute teaching, thinking it might be something I'd like to do.

But then some friends suggested I ought to run for the school board, which was a remote thought, but upon considering it for a while, I decided, "Why not?" So I ran for the

school board successfully and served three three-year terms on the Denton Independent School Board.

Then during the time while I was still on the school board, the program that Action supports, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, came to Denton through an application for a grant that North Texas made. I became the first director of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program in the summer of 1973, a position I continued in until I retired in the fall of 1983.

From that time on I've been retired, but I have been rediscovered in the community (chuckle), so there's no shortage of things to do. I've enjoyed having more opportunity to be kind of a spare tire for our children and our grandchildren. When the ox is in the ditch, I can be available to help. That kind of brings us up to the present. That's probably more than you wanted to know (chuckle).

Byrd: Let me ask you a question about your growing-up days in Minnesota. When you went to school in your elementary and secondary years, were the schools in Minnesota desegregated or integrated?

Riddlesperger: Well, of course, there were no black people and no Hispanic people in Minnesota. We lived in Hazel Run, which was District Number Twenty. Our school consisted of two buildings. There was a two-story white frame building that housed kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, and seventh

and eighth grade on the second floor. Then alongside that building was a small building which housed the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. It was in that setting that I went to school. We did have kindergarten, which, I think, was a forward thing in that time. I know kindergarten wasn't in all the schools here in Texas when I came here as a bride. Then there was no high school in our community, so we had the choice of going to neighboring schools. Some went to Clarkfield, where I went, and some to Hanley Falls, and some to Granite Falls.

The community, from today's standpoint, didn't have a great deal to offer, but we had a community band. The church was the center of social activities. We had a community building where there were gatherings for suppers and socials, concerts and home talent plays, school events, and things of that nature. Memorial Day was an important day observed in the North, which is a little different from the South. It was a big, big event in our community. The Fourth of July was a big event. Then there were various contests that the band participated in. The marching band went to area communities and all that kind of stuff. Picnics were common. We didn't have a movie theater in our community, so we didn't know about that. But we didn't know the difference. Granite Falls and Montevideo had theaters which occasionally we were able to go to, but we didn't have them

available easily. We went to Granite Falls, where the Yellow Medicine River was, for swimming and fishing and picnics and things of that nature.

Byrd: You said you didn't have blacks in your community when you were growing up and going through elementary and secondary school. How about when you went to college at Augustana?

Riddlesperger: Well, yes, in Sioux Falls there were four black families. I did my practice teaching in Washington High School, and, of course, there were just a sprinkling of black people. But they were accepted, and it didn't make any difference to us one way or the other. We were aware that there were a few black families. In fact, when I came to Texas as a bride, it was a cultural shock to come to another part of the United States and to see all the black people here. Jim's home was in Malakoff, so that's where we went to visit his family. We frequently went to Athens, which was the county seat town. I remember going there on a Saturday afternoon and being really surprised at the number of black people and the way they leaned on cars and stood around talking and the assortment of clothing they wore colorwise and all that sort of thing.

But the thing that was kind of interesting about my impression of the area and of the blacks and whatnot, I mentioned to them that the hairdresser whom I went to in Sioux Falls was a black person. That was a surprise to

the folks in Malakoff. It didn't make any difference to me; I mean, he was reported to be a good hairdresser. I had a permanent once in a while and had my hair fixed for my wedding, and it was at the hands of a black person.

Byrd: When did you start at Augustana?

Riddlesperger: I was there from 1936 to 1940.

Byrd: Were there black students enrolled there at that time?

Riddlesperger: I don't remember a black student. I remember an Indian girl whose father was with the federal government in some capacity--Yvette Jones. She sat beside me in the college orchestra; we played in the college orchestra. I don't remember a single black person at college, so I just didn't have any experience until I came to Texas with another race or a minority.

Byrd: When you were here during the 1950s, you stipulated earlier that it was kind of a cultural shock. Did you notice when your husband was teaching here with the absence of blacks, how the reaction in the community was when Abner Haynes came to school?

Riddlesperger: I remember Jim telling about the blacks who enrolled at North Texas. He tells the stories about how he handled it in his class when he had some black students. He asked the black students, who were Denton people...and I believe one of the girls...the only one I remember for sure was the daughter of a black minister in the community. He asked

her in the context of the class work if her family would have been able to send her to Bishop College or someplace, and the answer was no. They didn't have enough money to send her away to school, and it was the same with the other blacks in the class--that this was the only opportunity they would have for going to school. It seemed to be something that the white members of the class certainly understood. I think that the transition here at North Texas, from my observation and understanding, was very gradual and without incident. That's just my perception. I don't know if there were struggles that I wasn't aware of. But I know that in Jim's experience in the classroom, the way he dealt with it was to point out that this was the only opportunity that some of these young black people could have for an education, and the other kids seemed to understand that.

Byrd: How about in the community-at-large? I'm assuming you were just talking about attitudes on-campus.

Riddlesperger: Well, there were some of the students that demonstrated or marched in opposition to the fact that blacks were not allowed to enter the theater. Some of our friends at church...their daughter was among those who marched or demonstrated, and that was not a popular occupation for the parents of this young woman. Jim and some of the other college professors were kind of chastised for being so liberal in their

interpretation and influencing these kids to participate in demonstrations. Well, of course, now it seems so logical that we can't understand that black people couldn't be served in restaurants or couldn't go into the theater except in the balcony. I can think of one girl whom we know well, and whose parents we know well, who participated in that, and the father of that girl was not too happy with her sticking her neck out like that. It was not a very safe thing to do.

I remember when Abner Haynes was working in the Boston Store, selling men's clothing. Our son was in need of some shirts and trousers and whatnot. I took him to the Boston Store, and he met Abner Haynes, and that was kind of a highlight for a young boy who played Pee Wee football or whatever. I think Abner was in one of my husband's classes. His performance on the football field did a great deal to integrate and accept those blacks who could make scores and run (chuckle). I think he helped the integration a great deal.

Byrd: Was there a similar relationship at TWU? Are you familiar with that?

Riddlesperger: No, I don't know anything about TWU. I don't know how that worked at all.

Byrd: You stipulated about some of the resistance to service in public accommodation-type things such as restaurants and

whatnot. Could you elaborate on this?

Riddlesperger: Well, I didn't experience any of it, myself. It was just that I was aware of it. To back up just a little bit, when I was teaching in Palm School in Austin, one of the souvenirs that I have hung on to and wanted to keep had listed the personnel, the teaching personnel, and then they had the "coloreds" in a separate category. That was in my teaching experience in Austin, Texas.

Byrd: When was that?

Riddlesperger: Well, let's see. We were married in 1945. We were in Austin in the late 1940s. In fact, I taught there in 1946 and 1947, 1947 and 1948. It was in that period of time. Of course, in the bus stations...we traveled by bus. We didn't have a car. Unlike kids today and married folks today, we were married five years before we had a car. So in the bus stations, there was a drinking fountain for the blacks and for the rest. Likewise, I don't know if there were restrooms for blacks, coloreds, or what. But anyway, "colored" was the preferred gentile way to speak of black people or Negroes. But I didn't have any first-hand experience, except as I saw it in the public arena.

Byrd: When you folks first came to Denton, a lot of communities had what may be an informal type of power structure. Was it noticeable that there were perhaps something like an unelected city leadership?

Riddlesperger: I wasn't in tune with the political structure then. I came from another part of the country, and it took me a long time to kind of catch on to the way things were done in Texas because it's a little different procedure. However, since Jim's field is political science, we've always listened to the news and read the editorials and kept up with the magazines and what was going on in the world. I often suggested to Jim that he knew what was going on in the world better than what was going on in the household (laughter). But I wasn't aware of it. Now, I became aware, of course, as time went on. I knew by the time I was running for the school board where the power structure was and who the influential leaders were and who kind of led the pack in terms of what would go and what wouldn't go.

Byrd: When did you run for the school board? What year?

Riddlesperger: Goodness, I don't know. I served nine years. Let's see. I believe I went off...well, my husband went on the city council the year that I went off the school board. He served six years, and he's been off one year, so it has been sixteen years prior to that. I think I went off about 1974 or 1975.

Byrd: So this would be about what?

Riddlesperger: I need my calculator (chuckle).

Byrd: About 1966.

Riddlesperger: We had two children still in high school when I ran for the school board. I guess I thought that with my experience as a teacher and with children in school, and with an emphasis on women participating in the public arena, that those were some of the qualifications I had for running. I remember some of the issues that were current at the time. I thought I had as good a shot at it or had as much valuable input as anybody else.

Byrd: Were the schools already desegregated by that time?

Riddlesperger: Oh, yes, Denton desegregated before it was mandated, and that went smoothly.

Byrd: All in all, what would you think the...would you describe for me what you think the attitudes of whites generally were during this period of time of the desegregation of the university and the city schools, say, in the late 1950s to the early 1960s.

Riddlesperger: Well, among the people that I knew best, there was not any resistance. It seemed like a natural thing to do. When they talked about closing Fred Moore...Fred Moore was the black school, and, of course, the black people didn't much want their school to close, so there was some consideration of busing some white kids into that facility. Some of the women I knew said that they wouldn't mind having their kids bused to that school. But that never happened. So among the people we knew best, there was no particular

problem about it, but I can't speak for the more general part of the population. I wasn't in tune; I didn't have my antenna into what the community at large felt about it. I just know that in our family and with the people we socialized with, there was no problem.

Byrd: I had picked up some background reading that there might have been some resistance, say, for instance, at the Campus theatre. It seems that there was some "yahooing" or shooting in the air or whatever by a passing motorist.

Riddlesperger: I think that there was. I've heard about that, too. It was kind of a daring, risky thing to do. They were really kind of crusaders in an untrod path. They had to have some convictions in order to put their body out there, particularly this girl that I had in mind, who grew up here in a very protected and safe environment, and who certainly did this contrary to the feelings of her parents, who were, and still are, extremely conservative in their outlook. Of course, the parents of these kids, in a joking but half-serious way, too, kind of suggested that the teachers of the colleges were putting these kids up to things that their common sense should have dictated otherwise. So it was not an easy time to be on the campus, too. But on the whole, I think that we got by it pretty well in Denton in terms of acceptance without having lots of commotion and riots and that kind of thing.

Byrd: Are you familiar with the coming of Tennyson Miller to the

school?

Riddlesperger: No, it doesn't ring a bell with me. Who is he?

Byrd: He was not an athlete. He was the first totally academic black to enroll.

Riddlesperger: Oh, okay. It seems like I have heard about it, but, no, I don't know anything about it.

Byrd: We were also trying to find out some information about Mrs. Sephas, the black woman who went through the procedures and evidently was admitted but never showed up. We were trying to find out if anybody knew what became of her.

Riddlesperger: My husband might know something about that. I'll ask him if he has any remembrance of that.

Byrd: Let me maybe change directions a little bit here and ask you more about your participation in...well, were you one of the early members of the women's group?

Riddlesperger: Yes. I think they had had one meeting prior to my being invited. I remember distinctly when we and the Adkinses were on a trip going to some function, and the men were sitting in the front seat and Dorothy and I were sitting in the back seat. She told me about this organization that had met one time and invited me to the next meeting. So I think I was pretty much on the ground floor.

The rationale, which, I'm sure, you've heard from everybody you've interviewed, was that as white women we just didn't have any opportunity to see black women except

as they served as maids or in a menial position in homes and in public places. We had in common our feminity and our families and our lives, and we just felt like it would be a good opportunity to get together socially and communicate. So that's what the purpose of the things was.

Byrd: Were you and Mrs. Adkins in the same church?

Riddlesperger: No, they're Presbyterians, we're Methodists. But our paths have crossed over a period of a long, long time. Roscoe Adkins and my husband Jim were in graduate school together at the University of Texas, and that's where we met. When Jim had gone to North Texas and Sam McAllister was the head of the Political Science Department--chairman, I guess, is the right word--he invited Jim or said that he needed a teacher, and for him to come up and bring a friend with him or bring someone else. They needed two. So Jim and Roscoe came up to interview for the position. We've had a lot of fun about it because Jim's position was to be kind of already appropriated; he would be on the faculty. But Roscoe's might be temporary. Well, of course, they've been here all these years together. Jim retired before Roscoe, and Roscoe had an opportunity to say, "Look who was permanent." Jim retired ahead of Roscoe. So we've been friends for many, many years.

Byrd: I'm just trying to make the church connection here. I knew a lot of ladies were Presbyterian.

Riddlesperger: Yes, it originated in Trinity Presbyterian Church.

Byrd: So you attended the second meeting. Could you describe the atmosphere of the meeting for me?

Riddlesperger: Well, I don't have a clear picture of where we were. I guess I have a much clearer remembrance of my conversation with Dorothy about the idea, and she indicated that it was kind of on "invitation only" at the start because of the kind of risky nature of meeting. So I can't remember the first meeting I went to. Now, I remember distinctly some of the meetings in black homes and in the homes of white people. But the very first one just isn't clear in my mind, and I don't remember if there were six folks or ten or who or whatever. I don't have a clear picture of the very first meeting. I have a clear understanding of what the purpose was and the fact that it was kind of a bold gesture.

Byrd: You stipulated earlier that this was kind of a risky move. Why did you feel you were at risk?

Riddlesperger: Oh, I didn't feel it was. Dorothy was the one that said that they were kind of careful about who they invited to this because of the fact that we were so segregated. We didn't have any opportunity for talking to these folks that we really realized that we had a lot in common with. So it was only from the standpoint that it was a new organization and that we didn't have integrated clubs and opportunities that we just wanted to be sure that the people who came were open to the idea of relating to and becoming acquainted with and interact with people of another race. It was just

in that sense that they wanted to have people who were open to the idea of getting acquainted with and sharing experiences and finding out what made them tick, and they in turn finding out what made us tick. So that was the only sense in which it was risky. Of course, we could have had some problems if we had had people who were racist, but I don't think we had any of that at all.

Byrd: How about the husbands of the group? Your husband or the other husbands that you may have known?

Riddlesperger: Well, each year we had a Christmas get-together, and it was very well attended. It was very successful, as far as I'm concerned, in terms of acceptance and, you know, that this was just a great organization. I remember we met most frequently down at the Methodist church in Miller Center, and the husbands participated equally in the entertainment, such as group singing, and the programmatic aspects of it, such as setting up chairs and all that goes with having a meeting. The meal was a covered dish type of thing. It was very well attended—just a lot of folks. Again, I can't say in numbers how many were there—sixty or eighty or whatever—but there were a lot of folks.

Byrd: Generally speaking, the husbands were pretty supportive of the activities of the group?

Riddlesperger: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes.

Byrd: Was there any atmosphere...I've been led to believe, or it has been hinted at, that there may have been some suspicion

on the part of some of the black women in the earlier meetings, as to kind of like "what do these white women want to do for us."

Riddlesperger: I can't speak for that because I didn't sense that. But those who were the organizers of it and selected the few black people might have wondered why people like Euline Brock and some of those folks would want to have a meeting with them. I would think that would be a natural.

Byrd: Was Ms. Brock one of the leaders of the group?

Riddlesperger: I don't know. You mentioned that you had interviewed her, and I don't know if she was one of the very first. I know Jean Kooker and Dorothy were the ones that I knew best among the women. But it didn't take long to get acquainted with those people. Of course, our children played football with some of the black children, and we had picnics in the park. We wanted our children to get acquainted and to be friends in school and to acknowledge friendship with these black people. As far as our kids were concerned, there was no problem at all. I can't speak to any other problems that I don't know about, but with our people it's no problem.

Byrd: I've also had indications that...it's my understanding that the meetings were rotated from white homes to black homes. It has been indicated that on occasion there may have been some resistance by neighbors when the opposite race would be in their enclave, so to speak.

Riddlesperger: Well, I didn't experience that, either, so I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised, however. We also had a black and a white leader. When we had the election of officers or changed leadership roles, we always had one black and one white.

Byrd: So you had, like, co-chairs or co-presidents?

Riddlesperger: Yes.

Byrd: I see.

Riddlesperger: Co-chairs. And it was an opportunity for the black people to, oh, you know--"the meeting will now come to order"--to take charge and to lead a discussion, invite us to refreshments or whatever--play host or hostess, I guess, to the group.

Byrd: Who were the primary leaders that you recall, both white and black?

Riddlesperger: Oh, goodness, I don't do well without a list. My memory is not too good. Several of the black women that I knew best have died. Othella Hill was one that comes to mind. You mentioned that you had interviewed a woman...I can just see her, but I can't call her name. Trudy Foster and Linnie McAdams and Dorothy Adkins and Jean Kooker and Bessie Harden and her daughter (whose name doesn't come to me) and Othella Hill's daughter (whose name doesn't come to me, either--Gloria somebody). Catherine Bell is the one I've been trying to think of. Willie Frances Jones, who is now Willie Frances

McAdams. If I had a roster I could do better, but I can't think offhand. After the organization disbanded for lack of interest and new people, and it just didn't seem as if it were as important to continue, we missed seeing each other. So a few years ago—I say a few, and I don't even know what I mean by that—six or eight years ago or ten maybe—we had a Valentine's party here at my home for just calling back those who were active initially. I have some snapshots that were taken here, and almost everyone was wearing red. It was extremely colorful, and everybody was glad to see you. Now when I see Catherine Bell to this day in the grocery store or wherever, she says, "We need to get together. We need to get together." So we said, "Oh, we need to have an ice cream party and we need to have...." Nobody takes hold of it and organizes it. We've learned when we had... Katherine McGuire and I kind of spearheaded this Valentine's party that we had here, and through the little sketchy list—the telephone list that we had and whatnot—we put together people to invite. We didn't mean to leave anybody out, but, of course, as it happened, we did. There were several people that expressed disappointment that they hadn't been included, but it was because we didn't have a comprehensive list. Some of them came and went, and they were no longer here. There still remains a bond of friendship that we wouldn't have had.

As far as I'm concerned personally, it stood me in very good stead, because when I became the project director of RSVP, I already knew a lot of black people. We had established trust, and they knew I was for real and I knew they were for real. I had good success in recruiting black people for RSVP, so that was a real boon to me in getting established with that. I credit that to my having been in this organization, so it benefited me a great deal. I didn't notice it at the time, of course, but it did.

Some of the black women who had young children and some of the white women who had young children made it a point to visit in each other's homes and bring their children so that they could play. Our children were beyond that. But we did have some park activities—family activities--where the kids came. We had one boy, so only one was in Pee Wee basketball, baseball, and stuff like that. He knew those boys well from the black community. Our daughter...my goodness, our youngest daughter did...I can't remember what it was called, but it was a program at the high school whereby they went into elementary schools and assisted teachers, I think. There was a little black girl, Rhonda, who became a very good friend of our daughter's, and she visited here many, many times. We sent postcards when we were away and so on. So we have had them visit in our home--black kids who were the ages of our children. Of course, the family's

attitude is reflected in the children, so I think this interracial women's organization really helped our kids, too,in accepting and recognizing values.

I guess someone has talked about having the fellow who wrote Black Like Me here. Have you heard about that?

Byrd: No, I haven't.

Riddlesperger: I don't remember what his name was, but he was here and spoke to our group. Are you familiar with the book?

Bryd: I'm familiar with the title, and I remember there was a movie made, I believe.

Riddlesperger: Well, I don't remember that, but it was a white man who somehow or other dyed his skin and acted. I don't even remember the name of the man. I think that we probably have the paper back here. The man was here, and we met him out at Trinity Presbyterian Church.

Byrd: What did you perceive the nature of the group to be? Was it social or what?

Riddlesberger: I think it was social to start with, but when we got to know the women in the black community, they shared experiences about how they were treated when they went to one of the nice dress shops and wanted to try on clothes. I can't remember the specifics of it, but we were appalled to know that they were treated less cordially than the rest of us. Now when they went, I'm thinking about the nicer dress shops for women. So they shared some of the ways in which they

felt hurt and left out and less than accepted. That was news to some of us. Then after a while, we felt like punch and cookies wasn't...we needed more than that, so we got in on some kind of projects. I guess the biggest one was doing something about the roads or the streets in southeast Denton. I'm sure you've heard about that.

Byrd: Could you describe that? It's my understanding that the streets were pretty deplorable.

Riddlesperger: Oh, it was terrible, terrible, terrible! We met with as many reactions as there were people that we came to. But it was a joint effort, and for some of us it was our first, kind of, experience. We knew about southeast Denton and had driven through there and so on, but walking the streets and knocking on doors was another experience.

Byrd: Were they paved at the time of the group's organization?

Riddlesperger: I'm kind of fuzzy about that. I think that that was one of the biggest, really, projects that we undertook.

Byrd: How did you go about mustering support?

Riddlesperger: Well, I was not one of the leaders in that; I mean, I was not on the forefront of saying, "This is what we need to do." I was kind of a follower after someone had already kind of laid the groundwork.

Then another project--I'm jumping from that to something else--was the map of the city. We were in favor of open housing. If people could afford to buy a house in an

area, they should be able to do so. What did we do to kind promote that or to stick our neck out on that project? Well, we had the map of the city and concentrations here and an isolated places here where black families lived and that sort of thing. So we got into some of the substantive kinds of things.

Byrd: What kind of barriers were there for property ownership?

Riddlesperger: Well, I'm sure that homeowners thought that the value of their property would diminish if they had a black neighbor.

Byrd: Did they have restrictive deeds or just kind of a passive agreement not to sell to blacks?

Riddlesperger: I've heard of some of those, but I can't speak to if first-hand. But I've heard that there were some, and when they inquired about a house or said something on the telephone, the tune changed somewhat when they really appeared. But I don't have first-hand information of that, and I get a little bit mixed up about what happened here and what happened around the community. So it blurs a little bit.

Byrd: I heard of one story of photographs being taken of properties that were owned by absentee landlords in south Denton and whatnot.

Riddlesperger: Yes, yes.

Byrd: Are you familiar with this? Can you tell me more about it?

Riddlesperger: Yes, now that you mentioned it. Some of the people who were considered upstanding and affluent citizens owned some

property that they didn't keep up at all in the black area. It was just a disgrace. I know that that, in fact, was true. I guess there was this feeling that they didn't have to fix the windows when they broke or fix the steps when they deteriorated or the doors when they fell off the hinges and whatnot. As long as they could get their rent money out of it and somebody lived there, then so be it. I regret to say that I think that probably is true.

Byrd: At the same time, it's my understanding that there were also some absentee black landlords who were in the same kind of boat.

Riddlesperger: I think so. I think that's true. That was my understanding.

Byrd: How did the group shift from being kind of social to more of an activist group?

Riddlesperger: Well, I don't know whether I'm rationalizing or what. I guess that as the problems in school came up, too, and we visited the school board meetings and whatnot...I guess that as we became aware that the blacks were having some of the problems, like, housing and the streets in southeast Denton and having trouble being accepted in the nice dress shops and trying on clothes and so on, we thought, "What are we going to do about it? These people have become our friends, and how can we help tackle these social problems?" I think it kind of came to us that there was more to this than tea and crumpets.

I think it just evolved with whoever co-chaired the

meetings. When we had new people--we served a year--and as the new pair took the reins and scheduled the meetings and that sort of thing, they kind of had their pet idea of what we should work on. I think that some of the people had little more ambitious ideas than others. We spent some really serious thinking about what we could do and how we could do it and the timing and who we could see at the city hall and who we'd touch base with to try to right some of the things that were just not fair.

It was a socially conscious group of women. Ann Barnett was one of the early people, too, and so was Bea Simmons, a black lady; Sylvia Sears, yes; Billie Johnson, yes; Lovie Price, yes. Some were more active than others and stayed over a longer period of time. Billie Mohair was another. The Mohair family--there's Ruth Mohair and several others. We got to know them through activities in the community, and then some of these people were the ones put on boards that the city appointed and so on. Some of them are teacher's aides in the public schools, and they sort of got in the schools that way. One of the things that I considered...it was a problem, but it also indicated to me the trust that some of the black people had in some of their white friends to do something in behalf of their kids that they thought were treated badly. I can't even remember the circumstances, but I and two or three other white women were invited to a home

in the black community, and, again, I can't even say which one it was. They spelled out the injustices they thought had been done to their black child in school and what would you do about it and what would you recommend. Well, I thought it was a knotty problem, and we didn't know how to solve it. But the fact that they thought we could be helpful was the payoff. To me that what was important. To this day we see these people, and it's like seeing a friend, although we don't meet on a regular basis.

Byrd: You talked about the streets; you talked about the school board difficulties and the problems in the schools. Were there other issues that the...

Riddlesperger: Well, there was the housing. I mentioned the need for open housing. I don't remember how we tackled it. They were issues that were coming up in the whole community, in the area, and so we shared newspaper articles about what had been done in other communities relative to these problems. It was kind of a lively discussion. We broke up into groups a couple of times. I can't even remember what we talked about. But we had kind of interest groups--those who wanted to talk about the problems the kids were having in school would be over here (gesture); the problems you're having in another area, over here (gesture). I remember that meeting pretty well, although I don't remember what the issues were. But it sort of gave some options as to what

you wanted to talk about and discuss. The problems they were having at Strickland, for instance, seemed to be a problem.

Byrd: At Strickland?

Riddlesperger: Well, I don't know what they were, but it was one of our two junior high schools. A lot of the black kids went there, and it was relative to the treatment they got or what they didn't get or whatever. Again, I'm just real fuzzy about the content, but it's by way of kind of telling, as I recall, what we did at these meetings. So it was substantive in addition to being social.

Byrd: Did the group become politicized? I've been led to believe that there were some organized voter registration drives sponsored by the group.

Riddlesperger: Oh, yes, right. As we talked about these problems, we wanted to know how to deal with them, how do you contact people who are in authority who make rules and procedures and so on. As candidates emerged, you know, we wanted to know how they thought and how would they treat such-and-such problems. So, yes, I think that we became aware of where the power gets in, you know, who are we going to support or who do we think would help us in this area or that. So it became active in that area, also, but it was a gradual emergence, I think.

Byrd: When you ran for the school board, did you get support

from the group?

Riddlesperger: Oh, indeed. We had our little flyers, which were not very sophisticated in those days--they were just little eight-by-tens--and we posted them in the laundromats in southeast Denton and in the grocery stores and the food stores and the churches. And we had brochures. They had gatherings in the black community where the various churches would have singsongs on a regular basis, and so I went to some of those. Oh, yes, I had good support. That was another by-product. You didn't know, when you got into some of these things, how it's going to impact your experience later on. But it was a boon; they were my friends.

Byrd: Other than yourself, were there other candidates who came out of the group for other offices or boards?

Riddlesperger: Well, currently, of course, Dorothy Adkins is running for the state school board, but that's now twenty years later. I can't think of any others, but that isn't to say that there weren't. I'm sure that a lot of the people that were in this group have expanded their friendships and have benefited by the friendship. We see these women now. About the only time we see them is when we go to the Association of Christian Women meetings, which are held whenever there is a fifth Tuesday in the month. We go to our own women's organizations on a scheduled basis, but on those three or four times a year that there's a fifth

Tuesday, we have what we call the Association of Christian Women. That was a real opportunity for black people to get acquainted with white people. In recent years more blacks have been attending than whites, with people having gone back to work, and, oh, just with everything changing. When we go to those meetings, we see a lot of these people. Alma Clark's name, for instance, comes to mind. I'm thinking of Alma Clark as someone I see there, and Norvell Williams.

Byrd: I've heard this from some of the other women. When you started going to the school board meetings, it's my understanding that not a whole lot of folks, prior to the advent of the group, had attended the school board meetings. How was your group accepted when you were in the audience?

Riddlesperger: Well, actually, not too many people went to school board meetings at all. Some of the principals and some of the staff people came, and the League of Women Voters usually had what they called an observer there. I don't know if any other group had an observer. But a very, very small group of people attended, except as an issue came up that they wanted to speak to. In recent years, of course, it has changed. But you view them with a little suspicion: "I wonder why they're here." We always encourage people to come to council meetings and commissioners court and school board meetings, but unless you are vitally interested— say you have your own activities, or you've kind of agreed

to do it for an organization and then report back--the public at-large isn't particularly interested. It was a new experience: "What's happening? What's going on? What does this mean?" It's an educational thing, and we're slow learners sometimes. It takes a long time to catch on to what's going on. But it did introduce them to a system which was new to whites, too. I remember the first time I went just as a guest, and I felt a little bit awkward.

Byrd: It's kind of a learning experience for both races in the organization.

Riddlesperger: You know, we can recommend to other people that they should do it, but lots of times we don't do it ourselves.

Byrd: One other item or issue that may have been raised during this period of time when the group was most active in the 1960s had to do with the issue of urban renewal in the city of Denton. Were you active? How were you active in the decision to help with urban renewal or not help with urban renewal?

Riddlesperger: I don't have a clear recollection of anything we did. We certainly were aware of it, but I don't know if I did it. And I can't remember that our group did anything. We talked about it; we were aware of it; and we were in favor of it. But I'm sort of blank on that.

Byrd: There's one other election I'd like to find out some information on. I think it was Othella Hill's election to the

Democratic Executive Committee. Were you backers of her campaign?

Riddlesperger: Yes. The whole Hill family was very highly respected in the black community. Some of them--granted--became kind of a token black, but it was a push to try to get them involved in the process.

Byrd: The question we had was, why a black woman and not a black man? I know it's a woman's group and what-have-you, but it has been hinted that there may have been some problems with trying to run a black man.

Riddlesperger: I think that maybe a woman would be less threatening.

Byrd: Threatening to whom?

Riddlesperger: A woman would represent kind of a gradual entry rather than coming on too strong. I don't know that that was ever expressed, and I don't know where the decision came from. But I was aware of it, and I was in favor of it.

Byrd: Back to the closing of Fred Moore, were you participants as a group in the decision to close or not to close? Did you have arguments for or against the closing of Fred Moore?

Riddlesperger: I don't know that we had any influence. I was aware of the trauma or the push-and-pull, but whether some members of the organization were more involved than I, I really can't speak to that. I remember distinctly some of the arguments and the fact that some of us said...well, I didn't have children in the elementary schools, so it wouldn't have

affected us, but some of the members said, "I wouldn't mind my child to go to Fred Moore." But it wouldn't have affected us one way or the other because our children were older than that. Then, of course, I knew some people who didn't want that at all because it would be going backwards in terms of facilities, appointments in the school, library, and things of that nature. You know, we want the best for children. But some of them felt as if the relationships with the black kids would compensate for it, that they'd learn anyway. Kids will learn regardless of the teacher. It all sort of evens out. If the group was organized, I don't recollect.

Byrd: One of the programs that was conducted early in the group was the tutoring program prior to the integration of the schools.

Riddlesperger: Yes, I had forgotten about that. I didn't do any of it, but I was aware of it. I had some input in promoting it, but I, myself, didn't do it. I think that was a forerunner of the formation of the group. That's my understanding.

Byrd: Do you remember how it was conducted or who the tutors were?

Riddlesperger: No.

Byrd: One program that I need to get some information on is the jobs program, and that was in the latter part of the 1960s?

Riddlesperger: I don't have a clear picture of that. I guess I'm not sure what the jobs program, as such, is.

Bryd: We kind of had a hint that Elneita Dever was involved in it. It's my understanding that prospective employers were brought in to talk to the group, and there were perhaps workshops or seminars on how to prepare a resume or how to behave at an interview or what to expect in an interview.

Riddlesperger: Elneita was kind of in and out of the group at different times. When she was there, she was very strong and exerted a lot of influence. Of course, that was kind of her thing--to prepare poeple. So she would be the one, now that you've mentioned her name, to do that. I remember one of the meetings we had at their home--they lived on Emerson--and she had some "powerhouses" in. She was a little more militant, you know, among the black women. She was an educated woman. She introduced some of these basic things that you have to do to present yourself and put your best foot forward and that sort of thing. I remember her talking about it, but I didn't know about any workshop that she had. But that sounds like something she would have done. I didn't have anything to do with it, except as people made application. We talked in the group: "Well, how did it go?" "Your son is going to apply at such a place." "I hear there are some openings at such a place." So it was a conversation that went along as it came up informally, but I wasn't aware of any structured help.

Bryd: I've been led to believe that as the group progressed, more

and more professional black women began to join the group. Ms. Dever was evidently one of those?

Riddlesperger: Yes. There were several of them whose jobs were in the service. Some were in some business; some were in teaching. The wife of one of the men at North Texas was there for a while. It seems like her name was Washington, and she was a bright star. But they weren't in long enough...they were just kind of brought as guests. They came a few times, and I don't know why they didn't come back. Perhaps they went out of curiosity, and it wasn't structured enough or if it wasn't worth their time. Some of us who were in kind of from the beginning went kind of out of loyalty, interest, concern, and friendship for all these people. I can see why someone might come as a visitor a time or two as this had been going on for years and not feel as if it had anything for them. They weren't from here; they were from another part of the country or whatever, and this didn't speak to their needs, or their time could be spent more profitably in some other place. But we did have some more better educated people and folks with better jobs. This first wave of people were people who did housework or worked in the service area—at North Texas in food service or in the dormitories or something like that. They just got on-the-job training. They didn't have to have degrees or previous experience. So most of them were just ordinary folks.

Byrd: It's been suggested that one of the reasons why the group more or less faded, I guess you could say, was due to the role of the more militant, younger black women in the group. Would you concur with that, or is that totally erroneous?

Riddlesperger: I wonder who that was. Do you know?

Byrd: I can't recall offhand. I remember hearing that the younger black women tended to be more educated in the early 1970s and were more militant.

Riddlesperger: My understanding of why it kind of didn't meet the need anymore was that we were having difficulty bringing in new people who would stay. Those of us that were in on kind of the ground floor kept coming because of friendship and thought that it had served a useful purpose. But we were not able to bring in either new black people or new white people for whom this was a chance to get together. It seemed to kind of outgrow its purpose. And the purpose was just not clearly stated initially. It just kind of evolved as we became acquainted. That's kind of my understanding. Plus, it was hard to get people to serve as co-convener because everybody who was active had done it. So interest kind of diminished, and the need didn't seem as great because of the opening up of the opportunities and what was happening in the country.

Byrd: Well, it seems to me that...I have a list of projects that you undertook, and a lot of them led to successful fruition.

Riddlesperger: Well, when you think about it, those were issues that the whole nation was struggling with. This group of women, just in talking to the blacks and becoming aware of the discrimination that they experienced, we felt, "Well, let's see if we can do something about it and make our voice heard." But I think it just kind of evolved. It was intentional; it wasn't that it was like Topsy and just grew. It became intentional when we sort of agreed on what we were going to push.

Byrd: Are you familiar with the role of Jerry Stout in the urban renewal campaign?

Riddlesperger: Yes. He was not a friend. He was a menace. He was a bad influence for a whole period of time in his newspaper, the Enterprise, and in the people he supported and pushed for running for boards and the city council. That was a real fight—real, real, fight. Was that in the 1970s?

Byrd: It was 1966. At that time they were talking about urban renewal.

Riddlesperger: A lot of people subscribed to his point of view. Of course, his paper didn't measure up to journalism standards that most of us subscribe to. It was gossipy, and it was inaccurate. You kind of had to read it to see what the opposition was saying. We wouldn't subscribe to it. I think for a while it was thrown without charge in our yards. But we never subscribed to it. We got it when I was in RSVP.

I don't know how we got it. We didn't subscribe to it, but it was available. Maybe they put it in our door. I don't know. But he was a much talked about personality in that period of time. He was not progressive in any shape, form, or fashion. He was bad news in the estimation of a lot of people.

Byrd: I was talking to Ms. Bell, and she said that some blacks were afraid that they might lose what property they had and not be able to get comparable housing elsewhere. She indicated that many blacks were rather attached to the property they had, no matter what shape it was in. She was very emphatic about that. She was suspcious of urban renewal for that very reason. In fact, she was talking about the group that chartered buses or a group of her neighbors that chartered buses to go into Dallas, I believe, or maybe Fort Worth, where urban renewal projects were underway, and they didn't like what they saw.

Riddlesperger: Catherine is a good barometer of the black community, I think. She's someone that we embrace each time we see her. She's glad to see me, and I'm glad to see her. She's a nice person, and I think she wants to keep in touch with us. For instance, I talked to her recently about something, and I think she wanted me to know that her husband had been laid off. Of course, their son died, and he was their only son. They were distraught about that. She's a dear person.

She's the one I see most. Oh, I see Bessie Harden, and I see Ruth Mohair and Linnie, of course, and Betty Kimble once in a while. I talk to her mother, but I can't recall her name. Those girls were in Scouting with my girls and went to camp together. Bea Simmons was kind of later in coming. Her husband was with County Extension Service. He had a good job.

Byrd: One other person who had a role in the urban renewal was a fellow by the name of Mark Hannah.

Riddlesperger: Well, he was mayor. I don't have anything of any substance to say to that. He was the leader during that period of time.

Byrd: When the black school was closed, we found some information that there were, I believe, 157 blacks from other school districts where there was no black schools. They were bused into Denton to go to Fred Moore. We don't know what happened to them when they integrated the schools. They were then out-of-district.

Riddlesperger: I guess they had to pay tuition.

Byrd: We haven't been able to find anyone who knows what became of those students. I thought I'd ask you because no one seems to know what happened to these folks.

Riddlesperger: There were 157 who were bused in from other areas?

Byrd: Yes. According to the newspaper accounts at the time and whatnot, the breakdown of the enrollment, there were black students from other districts who were being bused in.

Riddlesperger: Well, of course, if they were from other districts than ours, they had to pay tuition. I don't know what happened to them. That's a big number. I don't know how many scholastics Fred Moore had at the time they desegregated.

Byrd: I can't remember, but I believe it was 500 or 565.

Riddlesperger: Judging from the size of the building, it would accommodate 500 students or something, I'd say.

Byrd: What about the black faculty and administrators at Fred Moore? What became of those folks when the school was shut down?

Riddlesperger: I don't know if any of them were integrated into our school or not. The people that I knew who had long histories of teaching, Alice Alexander, for instance, was Fred Moore's daughter, and there are several women whose names do not come to right now were long-time teachers in the black school. I don't know if any of them were integrated in our school or not. It would be my guess that their training would not be up to the standards that they might have exacted in the Denton Independent School District. Now, Coach Collins has been in our school district from Fred Moore. I think he finally retired a year or so ago. He's just been an institution, and he was kind of a liaison with the black community. I think they called him the dean of men. He kind of through the years could tell what was going on in the black community. He knew the parents of the kids. He was a big, big asset and help, and has been, all these

years. I know he is from the Fred Moore faculty, but except for him, I don't know of anyone. That isn't to say that they're not there. He was of the "old school," and he was pretty hard on the kids if they were truant. From my point of view, as I perceived the school's point of view, he was a real link with the black community, and a good link. He was respected. He wasn't above using the strap and all those things that, you know, aren't really acceptable anymore. But according to his point of view, it worked. A lot of people think that that probably is not such a bad method of discipline.

Byrd: I'd like to thank you, Ms. Riddlesperger, for your time this morning.

Riddlesperger: Well, it's been kind of fun.

Byrd: I may at a later time have some more questions. Would you be willing to continue at a later time?

Riddlesperger: Oh, sure, if I have any that I can add. I don't know if I know a great deal. It's just kind of been a nostalgic trip. When you go to these meetings, you'd think, "Oh, goodness, it's Interracial Fellowship night," and sometimes you'd wish you didn't have to go. But we were pretty good about calling neighbors and picking them up and kind of carpooling. I think that we had a kind of missionary zeal, almost. It had enough meat to it and enough sociability to it and enough little benchmark successes along the way for

it to have been a significant chapter. Of course, you see that from a different advantage point when you look back. So for whatever it's worth, it will be interesting to see what comes of it.

Byrd: Thank you again.