Memory and a Sense of Community

THE WAKE OF INTEGRATION:
LOSS OF A SCHOOL AND THE DEMISE OF A COMMUNITY

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There was a negative charge in the air on that hot day of August 29, 1971, but it was more than just the Central Texas summer that could be felt by the students nervously waiting for the bus on their first day of school. They were all going to new high schools, some five miles away and others up to twenty-two miles, but what was unique was that many of these students had all been going to school together since they were in kindergarten. What should have been a jovial meeting of students talking about their summer vacations, wearing their favorite outfits, and joking about the new teachers, was a gathering of the African American students of recently closed L.C. Anderson High School waiting to be bused to predominantly white high schools across Austin. Many of them had spent time over the summer protesting the closing of their beloved school, but it was only in vain as U.S. District Judge Jack Roberts ordered Anderson High School closed and the busing of African American students all over the city in the name of desegregation and the opportunity for all races to get a high-quality education.
However focused the entire story was on the current students of L.C. Anderson, it never expanded to envelop the other African Americans who lived in East Austin and considered the high school to be the nucleus of the community. No one mentioned the loss of identity for these students and this community or the effects it would have for years to come. On paper, desegregation was an effort to improve the quality of education for black students, but in reality, the closing of Anderson High School had a degenerative effect on not only the current and former students of Anderson, but also the community as a whole.

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that public school segregation of black and white students was constitutional as long as the services the schools provided were equal in quality. Jim Crow laws, dictating “separate but equal” facilities for black and white citizens were seen as the norm throughout the South, including Austin, Texas. Desegregation efforts in public schools began in 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* that separate schools for white and black students were “inherently unequal.” In 1955, when the Supreme Court gave a second opinion in *Brown*, known as *Brown II*, the Court insisted that desegregation occur “with all deliberate speed.” Both *Brown I* and *Brown II* triggered a change within schools in the U.S. that would have effects for the south and Texas for decades to come.

When *Brown I* and *Brown II* were handed down, the Governor of Texas was Allan Shivers, who was considered conservative by the standards of the time and pro-segregation. Shivers’ anti-integration stance mirrored other Southern states that applied resistance, and he quickly voiced after *Brown I* that it would take many years to comply with these rulings in the state of Texas. In 1955, Shivers appointed a 40-member, conventional Texas Advisory Committee on Segregation in the Public Schools to consider the implications of *Brown I* and *Brown II* on Texas schools, where segregation of public schools was written into the state constitution. However conscientious the committee’s intentions were on paper, Shivers requested that they find ways to circumvent integration to present a plan to the State Board of Education at a later date. By 1956, while other Texas schools began the process of integration, the issue culminated in Mansfield, when the Federal District Court ruled that the schools there must immediately integrate. Shivers called the Texas Rangers to the school to bar black children from entering, and ultimately the children were bused to a nearby Forth Worth school. Integration in Texas schools proved to be a painstakingly slow process that faced many stumbling blocks placed by the large portion of the citizens that believed segregation was natural and therefore justified.

Texas’ capital city, Austin, followed the pattern of many other communities in the South and tried integration of schools in the most minimal manner. To comply with *Brown II*, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) instituted a plan called “freedom of choice” that began with the senior schools in 1955 and disseminated to all grades by 1963. Under this plan, black students were able to attend all-white schools if they chose instead of their all black schools, which they were designated to attend by residential school zoning. The same option was also offered to white students if they chose. By 1960, zero white students had transferred and 40 out of 5,512 black students attended white high schools.

In 1968, Jerold Ward, Chief Justice of the Dallas Education Branch of the Office of Civil Rights, sent a letter to AISD outlining its failure at effectively desegregating the school system and emphasizing the ineffectiveness of the “freedom of choice” plan. After receiving the complaint, AISD began negotiations with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), which led to HEW filing suit against AISD in 1970 for failure to
desegregate. U.S. Federal Judge Jack Roberts ordered AISD to cooperate with HEW to compose a plan that would correct the effects of past discrimination. As a temporary measure, Judge Roberts put a plan into place that rezoned some of the AISD schools so that approximately 385 white students would have to attend L.C. Anderson High School, the black high school. Many parents of the white students that had children rezoned to attend L.C. Anderson began putting their houses up for sale or renting apartments in other parts of the city that fell into a white school zone. After only four days, Judge Roberts rescinded the plan because only 56 children enrolled. Fear of white flight and pressure from the white parents in Austin caused this attempt at integration to fail, and it also set into motion a plan to close L.C. Anderson High School permanently.

By 1970, L.C. Anderson High School had already been at four locations. Robertson High School, the first one for blacks in Austin, opened its doors to the four-room building in 1884. In 1907, the school moved and was renamed E.L. Anderson after the renowned African American educator and brother of the principal, L.C. Anderson. By 1913, the school relocated again, and in 1938, it was renamed after the former long-time principal, L.C. Anderson. The six-room building received constant renovations to keep up with growth, and the school moved into a new location again in 1953. This location on Thompson Street would not be the last school to bear the name L.C. Anderson High School, but it would be the last that was known as the black high school in Austin.

After HEW’s initial lawsuit with AISD, many plans to integrate Austin’s public schools drawn up by AISD and HEW sought minimal impact on students. Student busing as a remedy to segregation was a hot topic across the nation, and Austin’s residents generally opposed the idea. In April 1971, the Supreme Court ruled that busing to achieve racial desegregation was constitutional and could be required in the case of Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. After this, both HEW and AISD presented separate plans for desegregation to Judge Jack Roberts in the case against AISD. HEW’s plan called for two-way busing, where AISD’s plan was to close L.C. Anderson High School and two other predominantly black schools, and for one-way busing of the African American students to white schools. Following a ruling by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, Judge Roberts ordered the AISD plan for integration. The predominantly black Kealing Middle School and L.C. Anderson High School closed and the students were ordered to begin busing at the start of the school year. Judge Roberts said the AISD plan had minimized busing by only requiring the African American students be bused out.

Although the U.S. Department of Justice filed an appeal on the grounds that the AISD plan violated the constitutional right rights of minority children on August 3, 1971, this case lasted many years, and the schools never reopened. That August, the district bused thousands of students to several different high schools across the city. By 1973, AISD opened a new high school on the west side about 15 miles from the old L.C. Anderson High School, and they named it L.C. Anderson High School. They changed the mascot, the school colors, and erased the identity of the high school that had a history dating back almost 100 years.

In 2012, Interstate Highway 35 runs vertically though the center of Austin, splitting the east and west sides of town. Before completion of the interstate in 1962, though, East Avenue ran through the center of the city, dividing the city by a strip of pavement out in the open, but by race covertly. In 1928, the city took legislative action to segregate African Americans into the east side of the city by adopting the “official Austin city plan whose
purpose was to encourage the settlement of Negroes in East Austin. Restrictive deed requirements disallowing blacks to obtain a loan for a property on the west side of the city, and the establishment of the black schools on the east side also led to Austin having two sides: west for whites and east for minorities.

The many years of racial segregation resulted in the establishment of a vibrant and energetic African American community on the east side of Austin. The forms of expressive culture entrenched in African Americans’ connection to the traditions of Africa abounded throughout the community. The influence and melding of African traditions coalesced with the experience of U.S. slavery and racism resulted in a rich local tradition of creative production. From oratory and spirited praise-song in the churches, to more formal visual and musical expression through the schools, to the everyday soul food culinary arts, and blues and jazz music in the cafes, the black community of East Austin had a unique cultural identity that set it apart from the other sections of the city. East Austin was a small, tightly knit neighborhood in which everybody knew each other.

The function of the educational institutions, including L.C. Anderson High School, and their responsibility in defining quality of life, promise of advancement, and degree of personal and civic success for African Americans was very significant in East Austin. The black community throughout Austin has always valued education as the means for maintaining a strong community and supplying a way for future generations to advance and lead in careers in civil society and business. Support for the schools came not just from students and parents, but from the entire community. In an effort to desegregate the faculty of the schools, AISD had white educators teach at L.C. Anderson High School beginning in 1969. Anna Stole was one of the “crossover” teachers, and she recalls her first experience learning that a school function was not just attended by students:

Another teacher and I sponsored the ninth grade, and they wanted to have a Blue Afro Ball. So we said, “Why not?” They dressed up in dashikis and African clothes, and they had blue bread and blue punch. I don’t remember all the stuff we did at that little park by Hancock Center. I didn’t know much about high school, and I didn’t know all these community people would come.

Clifford McPherson was a teacher at Anderson in the 1960s, but McPherson was born and raised in Panama, and he noted the sense of community brought by the school. “The school is like the community, I mean, when they had football games on Friday or Saturday nights, the community was there. . . So that sense of community and so forth was there, you know. And they all looked forward to taking part in that type of stuff.”

L.C. Anderson High School was a social cornerstone, acting as a meeting place for community events. Charles Akins was a graduate of L.C. Anderson High School and went on to become a teacher and Assistant Principal of the school. “Anderson was a citadel for learning. It was kind of the hub of the community. If we had a band concert, we had good crowds. If we had a play, we had good crowds.” L.C. Anderson High School graduate Reginald Smith agrees: “The high school was somewhat the nucleus of the community. The educational environment seemed exceptional when we look back at those days of segregation.” The community physically demonstrated its collective sense of “we” in their participation and support of events related to L.C. Anderson High School.
The sense of a prideful community ran deep in East Austin, and an important, tangible symbol of that self-respect was L.C. Anderson High School. When the trial against AISD for maintaining a dual school system began in 1969, the rumblings of the possible closure remained low. However, in the spring and summer of 1971, the discussion moved to one that could not be silenced, as members of the African American community fought to save Anderson from death. In May 1971, the students of L.C. Anderson High School issued a statement at a school board meeting stating:

The federal government said to integrate black schools, not to close them down. You said Anderson can’t be integrated, have you tried? Have you told white and Mexican American students that they would have to go to Anderson? Why is it every time you have a problem, you throw it on the Blacks?

Why do you think we have gone from colored to Negro to Black; and then to slap us in the face by taking one of our accomplishments. Do you think this is really going to help you?

After listening to the official statement and several similar opinions from the African American community, the school board replied that they did try to integrate Anderson in 1970, but due to that failure, their only resolution was to close the school.²⁰

The community became vocal again after Judge Roberts announced L.C. Anderson High School would not resume classes in the fall of 1971. Organized meetings occurred immediately in the East Austin community to rally for an appeal that would take place, but AISD never opened the doors again to L.C. Anderson High School. Terrence Woods formed and led a group called the “East Austin Citizens for Equal Education” that arranged pickets late in the summer of 1971.²¹ Community members and students picketed the AISD Administration building with signs illustrating their exasperation with the situation. Many of the signs demonstrated that they did not want L.C. Anderson High School to close, and some pointed out the lopsided obligations for integration asking why black students were being bused instead of both black and white.²² It was clear the entire community did not support closing the black schools. Charles Akins, said:

[The closure of L.C. Anderson High School] was devastating to the Black community. Because Anderson High represented, for the Black community, something more than just a high school . . . it was a social center . . . a symbol of history, a symbol of achievement and a symbol of accomplishment for the community. I think that was part of the devastation.²³

A passionate member of the East Austin community held a rally at Rosewood Park, where over 400 people attended. Velma Roberts urged the crowd to boycott public schools in Austin and to begin an alternative school in the fall. Although Roberts did actually open an alternative school that September, only 43 students enrolled, and the curriculum had not been planned for the long term. By October, the school was bankrupt, and the students enrolled either dropped out or were bused to white schools in Austin.²⁴ There would never be another black school in Austin after this.

Although the actual story of L.C. Anderson High School closing in 1971 is a fascinating one in itself, it poses deeper questions about the effects on the overall community of East Austin. If the school was such a symbol of pride and acted as a nucleus,
where did that identity go? Did the community reinvent itself around another source of pride? Iola Taylor, a former teacher at Anderson said:

when the school was closed, there was a feeling on the part of Austin’s Black community that one of the major institutions of the community—the center of the community had been closed. Anderson’s teachers, administrators, and staff were leaders in the community—did a whole lot of things in the community. It was a center and focus of the Black community.²⁵

After reading multiple statements like Taylor’s, curiosity naturally turns to how this community reinvented itself, if it even did, and what the documented effects of the closing of Anderson were to the East Austin community. Anna Victoria Wilson, a scholar on Austin public school integration, notes that few academic professionals have focused on the impact black school closures have had on black communities, and few people realize the extent to which both historically black schools and their communities changed.²⁶

When a gaping hole in the history of a community becomes apparent, such as the one documenting the East Austin African American community focused around Anderson High School after the school closed, questions come to mind as to why there is not more history recorded on the subject. Historian James O. Horton elucidates how difficult histories are complicated to present for public consumption, especially when dealing with social issues like slavery and racism. Horton explains slavery is one of the most difficult subjects to interpret in American history because of its status as “America’s fundamental contradiction.” He clarifies the issues in needing to examine how to present the subject of slavery to the general public in a way that focuses on the real history and how to deal with various innately negative memories of the institution itself, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and consequently Jim Crow laws.²⁷ Integration of public schools and the closing of Anderson High School are direct results of the abolishment of Jim Crow laws, so a correlation can be made between the lack of history of the school and a community’s demise, and the painful memories of the negative outcome.

It is effortless to also imagine more overt reasons for this history not being made available, and obviously racism comes to the front of the mind first. However, this would oversimplify the problem, because there has not been a deliberate act by anyone to conceal the history of the demise of the East Austin black community. One can also ponder if the lower economy of East Austin does not seem significant enough to be considered an important part of Austin’s past, or could the politics of the school board or urban planners limiting where African Americans could reside play a role in the limited history? Questioning the reasons for this is fruitless in the end, though, because it is probably a culmination of all these factors, so public historians must take it upon themselves to create the history.

One of the best attributes of oral history is that when a certain history is missing or ignored, it can be created through interviews. Oral history has become the primary tool for documenting lives of ordinary people since the 1960s, and it has played a vital role in formations of social histories in the U.S. Community historians use oral histories as evidence of the connections that tie a group of people together into a community.²⁸ The connection in East Austin was Anderson High School, and the closing of that school had a significant consequence on the community. The impact needs to be documented to
understand the depth of the impact of integration on not only Austin public school students and teachers, but on an entire community of people as well.

Eva Lindsey was born in Austin and grew up on the east side of the city. She attended Blackshear Elementary, Kealing Junior High, and graduated from Anderson High School in 1965. After graduation, Lindsey attended Fisk University and obtained her bachelor’s degree. She then moved back to Austin in 1969 to rejoin the community. In 1971, she was hired by AISD to assist in student adjustment to integration after the forced implementation of busing. Lindsey’s span of life and participation in the East Austin community made her an ideal candidate for an oral history regarding the community that thrived on Anderson High School.

When Ms. Lindsey returned from Fisk University to Austin in 1969, she was shocked to see some of the changes already taking place to the community.

There was urban renewal happening at that particular time, which I began to understand, and it made me very angry, so my homestead . . . . All the houses that we owned in East Austin, which were four houses in the community because my grandfather had enough land that my grandparents house was built. My dad built a house. My aunt built a house, and we all lived on the same block. It was fun. It was very protective also. And all of that was razed. It was razed. The community was being destroyed, the schools were beginning to integrate.29

Signs in East Austin were already pointing to change, but the community held on to its schools. When the order came to close L.C. Anderson High School, it stung the residents, but the parents of students remained determined to try to keep a sense of connection for the African American students that were bused across the city. There was still a need for an association between members of the community to be made, and Lindsey remarks how that was accomplished at first.

Maybe at church or maybe at activities that were in East Austin. Black parents began to think about how to work in the community and create different activities for students so that life would not be so difficult. They used the parks, particularly in the summer when school was out. It became more popular. They had what you would call a canteen at Rosewood Park, and it was a dance party. On the weekends, we could go to dance parties. Because the feel of the community was still very much intact, we could gather. We had individual parties. I had parties at my house, and it was fun. And our parents protected us. There was a community center where we had dance lessons and activities. We could use that community center on weekends. I remember going to parties at the community center.30

When the Austin school board voted to close Anderson High School, “the commitment that board made to those parents was that the very next high school built in Austin would be named L.C. Anderson High School.”31 In 1973, AISD opened a new high school in an affluent section of west Austin, and named it L.C. Anderson High School.

When the new Anderson was built, in the wisdom of those that were on the school board, they decided to strip the mascot, strip the colors, and strip . . . but they took L.C. Anderson, the photograph that was in our school and
hung it in the hallways of the new school, which for us felt like it was a way of destroying everything we had worked for in our community. And L.C. Anderson a very important part of our community. Before his death, he was at Prairie View University, but the school was named after him because he was most recognized as one of the most important educators in the African American community. So they took his picture and hung it on the walls of this brand new white school on Mesa Drive in west Austin. And there was no identity. It lost all of its identity because the school itself did not live up to the respect of the person that was hanging on the walls.\(^{32}\)

However the community fought to stay connected, part of the identity seemed lost forever when Anderson High School on Thompson Street shut its doors. There was not a point in time where the total character of the community was lost, but the closing of the school is still associated with the demise of the African American community in East Austin.

It destroyed the community. Everyone knew what was happening at the time, and the closure of those institutions was happening then that were connected to the soul of the community. This education and the churches were the soul of the community. It was like pulling a tree that was blossoming up from the roots and it dies, and that’s what happened. I know some people now; they talk about their feelings about what happened. All of the young people that were friends from a particular community or are involved in particular things together whether it was choir or it band or home economics, or that had similar interests, they were separated. They were disbursed all over the community. They didn’t take into account. They did this division, the school district did this division that neighborhoods. . . . The plan was faulty. It was really faulty.\(^{33}\)

The identity associated with being a member of a community with a highly reputable, black high school did not transfer to another institution, but it passed on to being a member of a community whose schools were closed down in the name of desegregation.

We had a trophy case in the school with all of our big trophies from all of the events that made us proud. When they shut the school down, there was a small committee of people that, because they were going to just throw all of those trophies in a closet and be over with, so they built a trophy case at Rosewood Park. And the trophies are down there. But that was a fight because the city had to pay to build the trophy case. Those trophies are there. Everything is kind of split up, spread out, a lot of people have kept all their yearbooks and those kinds of things. The community identity was around Anderson High School and the families that built the educational community.\(^{34}\)

Since the 1980s, the community that attended L.C. Anderson High School holds an all class reunion every two years. It is a chance for the alumni to reminisce about the days when so much of their identity related to the pride they had for their school. It’s also seen as a positive reunion for the entire pre-1971 East Austin African American community.

The good thing that happened with the Anderson High School graduates from my, particularly from my generation forward, was that there was a committee organized to do what is called an all school reunion. Anybody
that graduated from Anderson High School, every two years, we come together and have a huge reunion. People come from all over the country . . . that attended high school, and they have local committees that promote and disseminate information. There people are honored for their achievements and there’s people at the reunion. It’s so well organized. We wear badges of what class we attended, what year we graduated. I’m in my forty-sixth year, so we’re almost fifty years. Our children, our grandchildren, and so, we all come together. There is laughter. It is the one thing that has sustained the memory.35

The importance of these reunions, acting as official commemorations of not only L.C. Anderson High School but also the East Austin African American community overall and their fight to save the black schools, cannot be downplayed. Public historian Delores Hayden speaks to the significance. “The sense of civic identity that shared history can convey is missing. And even bitter experiences and fights communities have lost need to be remembered—so as not to diminish their importance.”36

Without the meaningful oral histories, the history of the East Austin’s African American community’s demise in the 1970s and 1980s would not be as rich. A battle was lost, and a community disbanded, but that does not diminish the importance of that community to the overall history of Austin. The trials of African American students and communities were daunting and not perfect, but the bittersweet nature of the Civil Rights Movement ushered in new hope along with new tribulations. Eva Lindsey and the community of East Austin were understandably upset by the closing of L.C. Anderson High School, but in hindsight they understand the importance of integration to an entire race of people:

The Civil Rights Movement did one wonderful thing for the African American community, and that’s where we gained our humanity, because before that, we didn’t have full citizenship. We were considered second class by law. And the Civil Rights Movement gave me my full humanity, and that was so important. It was so wonderful, but we didn’t recognize what the downside was going to be.37

1 Phyllis v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
4 Robyn Duff Ladino, Desegregating Texas Schools: Eisenhower, Shivers, and the Crisis at Mansfield High (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1996), 26-42.
5 Ibid., 93-117
7 Ibid.
8 Joanne Salas, “The Austin School District Fights Two-Way Busing, While the Black Community Protests the Closing of their Schools,” Manuscript (University of Texas at Austin, 1979), 5.
11 Arriola, Austin Schools Project.
16 Wilson, *Oh do I remember*, 88-89.
17 Ibid., 102-103.
23 Wilson, *Oh Do I Remember*, 104.
26 Ibid., 97.
29 Eva K. Lindsey, interview by author, digital recording, Austin, TX, 09 April 2012.
30 Ibid.
32 Eva K. Lindsey, interview by author, digital recording, Austin, TX, 09 April 2012.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Eva K. Lindsey, interview by author, digital recording, Austin, TX, 09 April 2012.