

June 19, 2020

UTSA Office of Sustainability Blog ~ Campus Interests

For today's blog, I thought I would find something about Juneteenth. Honestly, I think I've always known Juneteenth was a "holiday" and while I thought it had to do with Black History, I certainly never bothered to understand what or why. I guess if it didn't happen to me, and I didn't get a day off from school I didn't bother; and therein is the issue. In the world today, ongoing protests, discussions, panels, and fighting for the rights of underrepresented people, I wanted to look back at what San Antonio archives had about Juneteenth. I was hoping to educate myself and look for pictures or stories to connect Runners to the date and events of the past. The following is an article from The Sunday Express News, Published January 10, 1982 page 117, by Lorece Williams and Walt Smith: "[Memories of West End full of cultural heritage](#)". It's about San Antonio history and a little relevant to Juneteenth and perhaps a look back to open a look forward, for myself and maybe you. I hope you enjoy the article. *Copy was rewritten for legibility.*

Memories of West End full of cultural heritage

An old neighborhood has character. Each street is different. Even if the houses were similar years ago, today the front yards and porches are a testimony to decades of creativity. Trees and rose bushes someone started years ago grew up with children from the families who tended them. Flower beds and potted plants. Herbs and vegetables. Chairs, swings from tree limbs and curtained windows.

Behind those windows is the source of an old neighborhood's character. The people in their family homes. Children, parents. Especially the elders. Those who have lived in the neighborhood and been a part of changes taking place as each generation came and went.

With anticipation for a trek back through time, we waited for the locks to open. The cool fall air at our back was greeted by toasty warm air from within. And we were warmly greeted by a beautiful woman who has lived in San Antonio and the "West End" for over four decades. This afternoon we were guests to hear about the real history of San Antonio – about the lives of unheralded folk who contributed to San Antonio's rich cultural heritage.

While we enjoyed a feast of tasty sausage and homemade sweet pickles prepared by our hostess, memories of yesteryear were the honored guests of the afternoon. Antique furnishings, handmade quilts and cushions, kerosene lamps, countless memorabilia and family pictures, the fireplace and family kitchen. Treasures from the past bringing cultural heritage into the present. To come were stories of Juneteenths, quilting parties, wagon trips to church, Christmas pageants, birthdays, weddings, funerals, brand new Model A Fords, visiting with relatives and playing with friends.

Our hostess first took us back to the days when her grandmother was a slave, and then to Goliad where the first of her 11 brothers and sisters was born. At the turn of the century, her family moved to San Antonio. The West End was rural then. "Ours was one of the first houses.

All around us were trees, bushes, and fields. Papa used to kill a lot of rattlesnakes. We grew a lot of our good in our gardens. The dirt roads in the area were called Garza, Castro and Lakeview. Today they are Poplar, Laurel and Martin.

“My mama used to read to us when we were very young. Before I went to school I could read my name and spell words like ‘cat.’ Our teachers saw to it that we worked hard to become ladies and gentlemen. Black children walked to the old Riverside School – way across town from the West End near, at that time, the Ursuline Academy.”

Riverside School grew from an elementary school to a 12-grade school. Then it became Douglas High School, and later was moved to the East Side of San Antonio where it first became a high school and later a well-known junior high school. “The building stands there today,” she says, its rooms echoing the sounds of students struggling to learn during hard times when Black education was scarcely recognized in Texas.

“I went to Riverside School for 12 years. Ours was the last class to graduate. Then I went off to Prairie View for my teacher’s certification and came back to find the school gone. I just stood on the corner and cried. Something inside me loved that piece of ground.

“WHEN WE WERE kids, everyone anticipated Juneteenth. Three fun-filled days of celebrating ‘Our Day’. There was a parade starting on the East Side beyond the S.P. Depot, down by where Joske’s is today. I remember Papa was the grand marshall. Our wagons and horses were decorated to make a grand show on the way to San Pedro Park. We could get the park back then for our celebrations.

“Everybody had something to eat. There were food stands for fish and chitins and other goodies. This was an occasion of splendor – the time for a very special new dress. Mama could make the finest dresses. Girls and boys, young and old folks strolled the grounds, showing off their new attire and enjoying the company of people who were seen once a year, Juneteenth, unless, of course, some more permanent arrangement were established at the celebration.

“Once I went to Del Rio around Juneteenth. I’d heard some about the Seminoles there, the half Negro and Seminole Indians. They had a grand picnic, but I couldn’t understand them sometimes. Someone invited me to their ‘We Day’. I had no idea what they meant until they explained that it was their Juneteenth. ‘We Day’, that’s what they called ‘Our Day’.

“San Antonio has changed. The evolution of prejudice has sometimes been for the better and sometimes for the worse. Like the springs at San Pedro Park. As a child on Juneteenth, we could wade in the cool springs. I was amazed to watch the water bubbling up constantly. Then they built the swimming pool and Blacks had better not go near that pool! But now we can go to the pool. Like I said, there’s been some evolution.

“Our church was always there as part of our life. St. Paul Methodist Church, the old one that used to be at St. Paul’s Square. I was going there even before I was born! There was a Baptist

Church closer to our home in the West End where Mama thought she would be welcome. But she couldn't understand why they'd let her pray there but not take communion.

"So Papa would hitch up the wagon every Sunday and on Wednesday nights for testimonials. He was a coachman for some of the prominent families in town. Every Wednesday night, over and over again, the old folk were testifying, partying, singing and praising GOD 'from whom all blessing flow.'" Mama's favorite songs were 'Amazing Grace' and 'How Sweet the Sound'. In our growing up we gave out the Negro spirituals like, 'Father, I stretch my hands to Thee, for no other help I know.' We shouted out in praise and thanksgiving to a 'never changing, infinitely merciful loving God' for bringing us safe this far.

"EVERYBODY HAD to work back then. The smallest kids could iron the handkerchiefs after Mama washed large bundles of clothing and bedding. When we were at Riverside School, we used to slide down the river bank at the end of St. Mary's Street before they built the bridge across. Then we'd be punished for getting our clothing dirty. Oh, Mama didn't like that!

"Mama had quilting parties with our neighbors and friends. She'd make fresh lemonade and cookies and the grownups would have a grand time visiting. We kids had better be quiet if we wanted some cookies. We sure weren't like some kids are today who pay no mind to their parents and teachers."

Our hostess took us to her old cedar chest to show us some of the fine quilts made during quilting parties over the past four decades in the West End. Each one had memories for her – a design her mother showed her how to make, a piece of cloth from a favorite childhood dress, or a piece of linen from a tablecloth that the family used years ago....

"I WAS TELLING you about the evolu8tion of prejudice in San Antonio. You don't remember the street cars. As a child, I know nothing about 'sitting in the back of the bus.' Someone complained about using Negro, so they changed it to colored. But the thing was so disgusting. Papa had a lot of pride and he wasn't going to have us on that segregated streetcar.

"I wanted to take that sign off so many times. But Papa had dared us as kids to get on: 'No! You're not riding that streetcar to school. You walk.' And we went on to school every day, in the extreme cold and the blistering head. On balmy days, those five miles to school seemed like a hop, skip and a jump. It took nearly an hour. Not so now. With modern transportation, we can get to town in 10 minutes."

We listened and laughed and cried for much of the afternoon as our hostess recalled more memories of growing up and teaching for three generations in the West End. The courage and resourcefulness of her parents and neighbors of humble beginnings. "We were poor as Job's turkey." They nurtured and guided their children who, even in the at era, received degrees from Samuel Houston, Prairie view, Columbia, Fisk, Morehouse, Wilberforce or Atlanta University to become physicians, homemakers, social workers, lawyers, ministers and teachers.

Memories of the West End as it changed from “country” into city, as prominent people tried to buy land and homes of early Black settlers, and then moved out of the West End “because the owners refused to sell. Our old neighborhood has changed with so many homes and businesses housing projects and new school. Many races live together here now.”

“This is just a short history of the West End.” Our hostess reminded us. “This is the history of our people in a small part of San Antonio. You young people, don’t you ever forget your history.”

Lorece Williams is (was?) a professor at the Worden School of Social Services at Our Lady of the lake University. Walt Smith is (was?) Director of One City Many Cultures.