

**Oral History Interview of
William Tydeman**

**Interviewed by: David Marshall
November 28, 2017
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*General Southwest Collection Interviews***

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features William “Bill” Tydeman as he discusses his hometown of Roosevelt New York.

Length of Interview: 00:25:31

Subject

The town of Roosevelt
Racial tensions when he was growing up
The Civil rights movement of the sixties
Changes to Long Island
Where Bill went to high school and college

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David Marshall (DM):

The date is November 28, 2017. This is David Marshall interviewing Bill Tydeman at his home in Lubbock, Texas. Part two.

William “Bill” Tydeman (BT):

Part two.

DM:

Yeah, we talked. What? Last week or week before, but we talked. You mentioned Roosevelt. The town of Roosevelt.

BT:

Right.

DM:

And there were a couple of other things you wanted to say about that—some of the changes that occurred in that town.

BT:

Yeah. Roosevelt was, as many of those south shore Long Island homes, were basically suburb USA. Working class with some segregation, as far as income was concerned, but the biggest point I want to make is that this—I’m growing up in the 1950s and we’re growing up in a town that you can’t really tell too much about where the city marker stops and another one begins. Where the, “Now Entering Roosevelt,” “Now Entering Free Port.” I mean, if they didn’t have those signs, you couldn’t tell much of a differentiation. There was the beginnings of what we would call today, strip malls, but they hadn’t quite come to fruition, although there was a downtown shopping area and stores on Main Street, but the civil rights is yet to hit or expand. And the point that I wanted to make was that civil rights and the evolution of black power hits the north, I wouldn’t say equally, but it was different from the exposure and the events that would be happening in the south, at what point we’re told is the Civil Rights Movement. So there was a lot—Roosevelt has twelve, fourteen thousand people, and I’m guessing at that. As lots of anxiety demonstrated by undercurrents of racism are concerned that the quote, “negroes,” end quote, were moving in, and so there was a clear racial boundary. Kind of like one side of the tracks and the other side of the track, but on one side of the tracks was your working class, middle class families. On the other side of the tracks, it was almost completely black. And so schools—it was residentially segregated. Not much said about it, except when the working class kids and people would get together at social gatherings or block parties or whatever. There was, “I heard that the **Moncells** [0:3:30] are selling their house. Have we heard anything about that?” [whispered tones] It was that kind of conversation. There was a great deal of—I don’t know exactly how you would categorize it beyond racism, but it was, you know, there were Jews.

There were a lot of Polacks. There were a lot of Italians. There were—oh man, I don't know. We may have to start looking. We may have to start looking around. So the schools were residentially segregated as well. The school districts were. And so Underhill Avenue School, a middle school, or was a junior high in those days, was almost exclusively black, while the school I went to, again, a junior high, began to feel these currents when I was about in the six grade, and they were almost exclusively white. Exclusively white, but I think I could probably count on one hand the number of Hispanics that were there. The Hispanics were a presence, but closer into the city and you know Harlem and the Puerto Ricans were easily designated racially, but I mean, there was two kids that I can think of in a probably, a couple hundred school district.

DM:

Two Spanish-speaking kids?

BT:

Two Spanish-speaking kids, who spoke English fine, but were easily identified by their motorcycle jackets and their engineer boots and their gaucho belts. You know? It was just, as I say, a couple of kids. So there begins in the late fifties, early sixties, kind of a trickle that turns into more of a stream, which eventually becomes a river of white flight, getting away from the threat of blacks and the antagonism would spill over into occasional pushing and shoving or you know, pointing fingers. There was, after football games, Roosevelt was just a junior high. Hempstead was a senior high school with K through 12. After ballgames, there'd be pointing fingers and shoving. There were a couple instances where we would go into the woods because we were out looking around, looking at flora and fauna, my friend, Todd and I, and we'd get stopped by a couple of black kids. You know, wanted money. It was stereotypic stuff, but again, that undercurrent was there and growing, and so I just think when I went—by the time I went to college, it was, as I say, more a river than anything else. I was struck then how different the cultural landscape was when you crossed over the railroad tracks. I mean it was like you had moved from middle class, as I said earlier, largely working class housing and people into a rural southern setting where cornfields were. Crops were being grown. It was startling to me. I was a mail carrier for a couple of summers. Just a substitute mail carrier, so that was a real posh job for a college kid. You know? You would get a government wage and government pay. My mother knew the post mistress and so that was the connection. But the larger picture I was just trying to pain there was, again, I'm repeating myself, but one of racial tension and real recognition that major change was on the way. It wasn't until the late fifties—I'm sorry—the late sixties, early seventies, that it was demonstrable that there was a black presence that was growing and becoming more powerful. And so by the time the sixties rolls around into the seventies, Roosevelt becomes a black community and the consequences of that is there are some individuals that begin to stand out for their accomplishments and racial leadership, as well as sports. Julia Serving, the great basketball player, was from Roosevelt. Graduated from Roosevelt High School. Roosevelt High begins to be desegregated in a sense that there's a mixed

population as kids go to either one of the schools and so it is, you know, a world of change coming and lots of resistance. You know, the Drum and Bugle Corps, the fire department waves Confederate flags and you know, the whole demonstration.

DM:

In New York?

BT:

Yeah, absolutely. So the high school drama was pretty much controlled. I mean, that is to say, most of the kids that I knew who were African-American played sports, kind of stereotypically, but the outstanding football player probably in the county and in the entire of Long Island was a black running back who went to Notre Dame. There were kids that went to—a few black kids who went to some of the predominantly elite black colleges, so there was a movement in that direction, but my parents followed the wave. My mother had been born and raised in Roosevelt and knew everybody. My father lived in the next town over, Uniondale. They decided—I don't know exactly what the date is, but sometime in the—I was in college, so it had to be sometime middle sixties, they joined the wave and moved. Sold the house. My father had redone it all. Changed it all. Done all kinds of work on the house so it didn't look any like the surrounding houses because he had been busy adding porches and doing all kinds of things.

DM:

They moved east along? Was that white flat east along Long Island?

BT:

Yes, exactly right. East and North. So the town that they moved into was Fort Salonga, which had I guess a presence in the Civil War, but you aren't that far, maybe ten minutes from the water. And water played a significant part of our growing up because we were seven miles when we were still in Roosevelt and growing up, we were only seven miles from the ocean. So all our summer activities were spent at Jones Beach, which had been turned into a park by Robert Moses. And so every—in the summertime, virtually, every weekend, if we weren't old enough to drive, our parents were taking us to the beach or once we were old enough to drive, every Saturday, for sure, we'd be out jumping in the waves. There was a huge Olympic size pool. There were stadium for activities. It was quite an unusual events and it was events, but it was all facilitated by the great builder of New York, Robert Moses, and Moses had in mind to provide an escape route for the people in the city who could take bus—well no, we're not going to allow bus transportation. We're not going to allow any commercial traffic at all, so it's going to have to be passenger cars and again, it's going to have to be available to the elites, the people who could afford to pay the taxes.

DM:

Right. That was planned that way to where there would be no public transportation.

BT:

From the get go.

DM:

Wow.

BT:

Right. Moses went to Yale and was a swimmer so he wanted to provide the facilities for the youth and the growing up.

DM:

How far are you talking from Brooklyn? How far out would that be?

BT:

Well the island itself is a hundred and ten miles from Manhattan. Tip of Manhattan to the lighthouse in Sag Harbor. Brooklyn would've been, I'm guessing, thirty or forty miles from Brooklyn to the end of the island, but this was a big expansion and movement, again, from all the towns that made up, excuse me, part of that movement was all east to west. I'm sorry. It was filling in—Suffolk County was the next county was considered rural. The county before that was Nassau County, which was the fastest growing population in the US for a period of about five or seven years.

DM:

Okay, was Roosevelt in that?

BT:

No.

DM:

No, okay.

BT:

And then there's Brooklyn and then there's Manhattan. Now, the south shore communities and the top of the fish, if you will, were part of that movement to either north to the more colonial, older sections. Settled as early as the Connecticut and the colonial period, but that movement was a north-south movement and a west to east movement, where the rural areas began to be filled in with housing and malls and shopping and highways. Moses came up with a notion of the

American highway where you had a—it was not referred to as a highway. It was referred to as a parkway and so he built in accordance with the principles of granite and bridges and trails and pedestrians heading to Jones Beach and other places. Brooklyn, the Long Islanders in Nassau County, in particular, but later, in Suffolk County, had a real love-hate relationship with the city. With Manhattan. I mean, going to the city was a big deal because in point of fact, you could hop on the train and you'd be in Penn Station in forty minutes, but the Long Island residents—oh my god. “We better leave.” My father said, “We better leave. You know. We need to be on the road in about—well, we need to be at Aunt Mildred's by ten thirty before the traffic really hits,” and so it was always a game of how far we needed to go and what time to avoid the traffic to get to the relatives houses. But there were—I had an aunt that lived in Brooklyn and the walk up and the brown stone style and what we come to think of as, you know, the heart of the city was actually made up of those series of islands that had Hudson flowing and Harlem river flowing. So change was a coming, and it's not to say that among us kids, we didn't have all the derogatory phrases at our fingertips and you know, occasionally, getting ourselves in trouble because of our own racial attitudes and things like that. That was the world of the late fifties. So Roosevelt was immersed in an era of change.

DM:

Okay. What year was it that you moved?

BT:

David, I'm really—I was out of college or was just about to finish college. So when they—my parents would've bought the house. My father came out of World War II. Came home at the end of the war, where I think we had said last time, he had worked as a repair person on aircraft. They bought a house. My mother had rented while he was in England working on airplanes and when I came home, I want to say '47, but it could've been '46, they bought a house and my father started working on it. Would've stayed there from the late forties until—I want to say, '63, '64.

DM:

Okay. So you went to high school at Roosevelt?

BT:

Roosevelt did not have a—

DM:

That's right.

BT:

A high school, but had a junior high. We were the first graduating class for the brand new seven

through nine Roosevelt Junior Senior—Roosevelt Junior High School. Later on, it became Roosevelt Junior Senior and was a full-fledged school, but the—I lost my train of thought. What?

DM:

Where you went to high school.

BT:

Oh. So we went to seven through nine and then went to Hempstead or Free Port. Hempstead, largely black. Free Port, kind of a mixed clientele and the Fort Salonga was a much more upper middle class place with a lot of—my mother loved gardens and so she had built gardens and tiers and they had done all kinds of landscaping work and everything else. And they stayed there until—well my father stayed there until after my mother's death.

DM:

Oh really?

BT:

So he—I always have a hard time, psychologically, remembering the exact date. She passed away from pancreatic cancer. We were in North Carolina at that point, so we had moved from—my ex-wife and Bill and Douglas. Douglas had been born, so we moved where I took a job after graduate school.

DM:

Morris Hill.

BT:

To Morris Hill, which was a whole different world.

DM:

Well seems like, let's see. When did you graduate from high school? And which high school did you graduate from?

BT:

From Free Port High School in 1960.

DM:

Okay. Did you go straight to Syracuse?

BT:
Yeah.

DM:
That seems like that would be a different world.

BT:
Yeah, it was.

DM:
First of all, you went as what? A double athletic scholarship?

BT:
Yeah. So—

DM:
So we need to talk about your high school a little bit too.

BT:
Yeah.

DM:
You obviously had athletic interest. Did you have interest in what you would later become a professional at? Did you have any interest in history? Natural?

BT:
Yeah.

DM:
You did have natural history?

BT:
Natural history. As far as history itself, I always liked history. It was one of my favorite subjects, but I never thought in terms in high school of making a career out of it. It was like, well what I really want to do is play in the NBA, you know?

DM:
Sure.

BT:

But the—let's see. Where were we going with that thought?

DM:

Well academically, what were your strong points?

BT:

So I, in high school, I was a good student and had—you know, I think I graduated twenty-fourth out of four hundred and something so it was on the higher end. Yes, I was interested in sports. I had started playing—it didn't occur to me until a good deal later and long after high school, that my parents really liked sports and so my father did nothing but run track a couple of years, but again, it was the Depression and there were obligations at home and things that needed to be done.

DM:

Remind me, where did he go to school?

BT:

He went to school in Union Dale, which was between Hempstead and Free Port.

DM:

Yeah, but he went to college right?

BT:

He went to college, but didn't—never in a degree problem, so he was, in effect, rubbing shoulders with engineers and working on highly technical projects, including that—I think we mentioned the moon walk. He was part of that team, so he had tremendous knowledge of things mechanical.

DM:

But not a college degree?

BT:

Not a college degree.

DM:

Interesting.

BT:

And at that time, he—it wasn't that unusual. You know, college wasn't as universal as it is now

so he made of—a lot of his friends were engineers and technology people. [Dog barks] Excuse me just a second, and I'll pause that first.

End of Recording

