

**Oral History Interview of
Thomas James Patterson**

**Interviewed by: Blythe Carol
July 8, 1999
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*African American Interview Series***

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Interviewer: Blythe Carol

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Interview Series Background:

The African-American Oral History Collection documents the diverse perspectives of the African-American people of Lubbock and the South Plains. These interviews and accompanying manuscript materials cover a myriad of topics including; early Lubbock, segregation, discrimination, politics, education, music, art, cultural celebrations, the May 11th 1970 tornado, commerce, and sport.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features Thomas James Patterson as he reflects on his involvement with journalism and writing for newspapers such as the *Southwest Digest*.

Length of Interview: 00:39:06

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Keywords

Journalism, Community Life and Development, Ethnic Minorities

Blythe Carol (BC):

Today is Thursday July 8th, 1999, and I am Blythe Carol interviewing TJ Patterson, city councilman of Lubbock, Texas, and also, co-publisher of *Southwest Digest*. [Pause in recording] First, I'd just like to get a little background information about you and your career as a journalist. So if you could first state your full name.

Thomas James Patterson (TJP):

My name is Thomas James Patterson Senior. I was born June the 29th, 1937, in a city called Waxahachie, Texas in Ellis County. I grew up in Wichita Falls, Texas most of my life. Lived four years of my life in a place called Atlantic City, New Jersey. After moving back to Atlantic—from Atlantic City, New Jersey, to Wichita Falls, Texas in 1950, I graduated from high school in '54. Class of 30, my class. Twenty-three girls and about eight boys. I mean, twenty-three boys and eight girls. Seven girls. There wasn't many girls in the class and I received a one hundred dollar US scholarship to go to Bishop College. That was a black school, private school, Baptist denomination. Founded by ex-slaves in 1881 in a place called Marshall, Texas. A hundred dollar scholarship was for nine dollars and sixty-five cents a month and I was a janitor for those nine months. Finished school in four years, but my journalistic background began while I was in college. You know, I was an F student in English. As a freshman, that was a very difficult subject for me and as the old folks said, "I was rejuvenated by mom to learn English." To be able to understand it to be able to write, and I became the sports writer—editor—of the college paper at my sophomore year. The name of the newspaper was *The Tiger* and I wrote some columns. I was on the eco trip [?] [0:02:37]. My name and picture was there in the paper. My junior year, I was this editor of *The Tiger* and I began liking what I was doing and that was a mighty long ways, my friend, from an F student in English to being able to understand English, to understand how to put words together to where people could understand what you were saying. In those days, we diagrammed sentences and we knew subjects and predicates and direct objects and those kinds of things and I learned that very quickly. I had to do so and I loved doing that. My senior year, I was elected president of the student body. So I think about that. I think that was the beginning of being able to interact with people and not being ashamed of from wince you come from, how your posture may be. That's where it all began. Of course, when I came back, I finished college and I went to Fort Worth, Texas, as an insurance writer and I didn't have a car, but I walked all over Fort Worth. Northside. Southside. All over Fort Worth. I could ride the bus and walk to many joints. When I first went to Fort Worth, I had eight dollars in my pocket. Eight dollars. But I had a YMCA card so you could stay in the Y for six dollars and I had—paid six dollars to stay in the Y. I had two dollars to eat on for a couple of weeks. There was a restaurant across the street from the Y. I stayed on the second floor and my meal was Cheetos, crispies, and a soda pop. You know? And I would raise the window immediately and smell the aroma of that food and pretend that I had something to eat. I did that. From one damn near office, a man saw I was crying and they took me in and I lived with them for twenty-five dollars a week and for an extra ten dollars a week, of course, they fed me. But while I was in Fort

Worth, I applied for a job at the Bethlehem Recreational Center, which was on the south side of Fort Worth and I want that job so badly. So badly did I want it. They never called me. My aunt had a private school here in Lubbock. This was 1958 when I came here. She offered me a job to be a teacher, but she hooked me. She set me up. She said, "I'm going to give you a '51 Plymouth car if you come out here and go to work and pick it up." I said, "I'm going to play a game on my aunt. I'm going to pick up the car and go to Atlanta, where Dr. Martin Luther King was. That's where I was going and somehow or another, the rest is history. I've been here ever since. It was never my goal to live in Lubbock. I wanted to leave and go to Atlanta or go elsewhere. And I got involved in the school and I was at Texas Tech University for twelve years in the College of Business Administration. I taught a class at Texas Tech University. It was a freshman orientation class. In those days, it was called BA-1290 and that's a three hour course, I'm told. An orientation class to let young people know the different disciplines of business. In other words, there's a difference between bookkeeping and accounting or what is marketing now—what is finance—and those areas. I had fun with that class. Two sections. Tuesday, Thursday. Forty-five students in each class. That was my thing. I really enjoyed that because I interacted with a lot of young people. When I left Texas Tech in '84, starting a newspaper in Lubbock in '77. *South of Lubbock Digest*. It was called *Master Southwest Digest* with my partner, Eddy Richardson. We started that paper. Five dollars. No equipment. Nothing. But just a gut feeling that was a need to fill a void—see ethnic minority, so-called newspapers in any city strictly fills the void from the general media because we can address issues in areas, whereas the general media has no interest. It has no motivation for doing so. You're never in competition with general media in reference to revenue and those kinds of things. So you do things that are applicable for your area and since 1977, this is 1999, into our twenty-third year. And thank God we've come this far. In other words, the general media—not general media, but the fourth estate of pretty media [?] [0:08:23], becomes a part of you. You know, like deadlines and those kinds of things, you eat and sleep that. You know, you can put a newspaper together in your sleep. You can go to Africa and have somebody do it for you, you know if they're lying to you or not because you know what it takes because you've gone from A to Z. You've improvised so many ways. That's what turns me on and it—we into a high tech era now. It has its advantages as well as its disadvantages because young people don't really understand the workings of the pre-press. Now, it's all program that's how it should be. But the nuts and bolts is what we've come through and we say that with sincerity, and hoping that young people like you, my friend, will be a part of keeping the fourth estate and the proper perspective. Not to abuse the citizens, but to tell the truth without fear or favor. I think sometimes there's a lot of things that crossover that becomes very nasty. I don't think the press was meant for that. That's my opinion and that's what I've seen so that's how I've got to where I am. I'm the first born child of the eighteenth kid born to my grandmother. My mother was the baby. My grandmother was a slave child and so there's a lot in my history. My grandfather was Anglo in Ellis County, Waxahachie, his sisters and brothers would shoot at him with a shotgun for marrying my grandmother, but he raised those eighteen kids. I've got uncles that could pass for white. Anybody—[0:10:27] that's amazing. That's why when the folks talk

about the racial thing, I get upset because I look from wince the I come from and all that's not true, but we pray, our young children by the press. By the press. Are getting mixed signals about that. I think that's detrimental to this republic [inaudible] [0:10:50]. So that's who I am. I'm just on the table. _____ [0:10:55]. Nothing to hide. You got—what else?

BC:

Okay. Do you recall—I know you've touched on, kind of, highlights of how you began your career, but do you recall one specific event that impacted your career, either in a positive or a negative light?

TJP:

So many things have affected me. My neighbors. Where I grew up impacted me because they corrected me when I was wrong. They congratulated me when I achieved something. That's who I've become by now. So I think that had a very significant part in my life. I grew up to where people cared. They still care today. You understand? But there's always a hidden agenda. You see? When I left home going to school, we walked three miles to school. What's your first name again?

BC:

Blythe.

TJP:

Blythe?

BC:

Um-hm.

TJP:

We walked three miles to school and three miles back from school. And always, along the way, there were adults who watched you, who looked after you, and you had to act right. If you didn't give you a note to take to your mom that's a note of—what am I saying? That's what Hilary Clinton said. An old African proverb. Take a village to raise a child. A child cannot be raised or reared in their family. A child is reared with its surroundings Now, people may live next door to you, Blythe, You don't know who they are. You know they drive a car, their first name, you don't know them. In those days, we had nosy neighbors. So the nosy neighbors impacted my life to want to do the best that I could do no matter what it was. My first job I was a dishwasher before they had the automation, when you had to wash the dish, then you had to dip the dish, then you had to dip it again. And had to work until your hand would shine so when people ask where you work, they look at your hand. In other words, back to the basics. So the basic things in my life have helped me. That's what helped me, and I think Browning made a statement that a

man on woman's reach, to paraphrase, must extend one's grasp by what they're having fun. So nothing wrong with reaching for something if you are determined for bigger, then hang in there. You know? I'm not dreaming. That's the way I look at life so people—what am I saying? People, the neighborhood impacted my life because they were down to earth, honest people who told the truth and that's hard to come by in your era. That make sense?

BC:

Um-hm.

TJP:

That's why. That's when we talk—

BC:

Okay. You've also touched on—you kind of said that journalism—you kind of eat and sleep journalism.

TJP:

Yeah. It becomes part of your system.

BC:

Uh-huh. That's what I was going to ask you.

TJP:

It's a part of your system.

BC:

What is journalism exactly to you?

TJP:

It's recording history, whether it's in a news article with the four W's, or it's an opinion of a human being who sees something out of his/her eyes and where they, in that moment in time, they capture the moment. I guess it's the same for the prior, for the electronic media, but more so for the printed because when I came up, the electronic media was not in that hot stead [0:15:11] it is today. So you had—when you read—you had to visualize, to dream, what you were saying and what you were reading. You understand what I'm talking about?

BC:

Um-hm.

TJP:

So it becomes a part of you. And then when you go into the business of it—when you go into the business of this and you love it, it comes first. You know what I'm saying, it starts from family, but it's—if you don't get it done right, you don't feel right. You're going to make mistakes. You understand what I'm talking about? The *New York Times* or the *Dallas Morning News*, I can show you some garbled mistakes in any issue they put out, but in this business, when you make a mistake, you don't quit. You keep on keeping on. Seeking perfection, trying to get that one day and you're never there so it's a part of me. In my blood. It's as simple as that. It's in my blood. It's in my blood. I wouldn't do anything else right now. I'm getting tired though, but nothing else right now.

BC:

Okay. Why exactly did you choose journalism?

TJP:

That's a good question. That was not my intent. But sometimes, those kinds of things are thrust upon you. When I went to the military in Lubbock—I'm a veteran of Vietnam—when I came back, that was in '63. There was an Anglo brother in town who had a newspaper that was directed at the African American community. It was called the *Manhattan Heights, West Texas Times*. He gave me a little old job. He paid me ten cents a column inch, everything I wrote. You hear what I'm saying. And what I didn't realize was a bunch of words is not necessarily good journalism. You understand what I'm talking about? But I was trying to prolong the writing to buy my kids some milk. And I enjoyed that because reaching that deadline—he'd pick up the news on Monday so I spent my Sunday's afternoon typing as much as I could and that became a problem. I thought about the high school media (0:17:45)—and the high school, back in college days, and I just got hooked on it. And when you're hooked in journalism, it kind of stays with you. You can go anywhere in America. I'll never starve. I know the writing side and some of the technical side of the newspapers. So anywhere I go, I can work. From circulation to the to the mailing, et cetera to putting it all together. I understand column inch. I understand pikers. I understand all that. You understand? So I wouldn't have—I know all that's changed with these computers now, but I have the sense of what it takes to be a part of something like so. So it's a part of me now. I'll die in my grave with my ink stains in my hand. It's as simple as that.

BC:

What would you say has been the pinnacle of your career as a journalist?

TJP:

I would say—what would I say? Involved in some daring activities. Showing the drug pictures—the person's photos. You ever seen that? We run copies of people's pictures who sell drugs and are arrested. We run from twenty to thirty pictures every three weeks in our newspaper. That's a

very shaking experience because we're threatened from time to time, but we didn't arrest those persons. The pinnacle of what I'm saying is because we're trying to show young children that talk is cheap. You must become a practitioner. Yes, and not this only academic side [?] [0:19:45]. So we do those kinds of things to uncover wrongs in the neighborhood. A lot of folk don't think much of that. They think we embarrassing people. Hell, they're selling drugs to our children to our children. You think they're macho. And I think that's—to me—I think that's been very daring. You stand alone with that and of course, we do drug marches and things like that so we've taken the newspaper and interacted into the lives of men and women, boys and girls, that this is wrong. I don't care who it affects. You should care now. It's been very good. I could tell you some very crazy stories, but I will not do that. I would think that's about it.

BC:

Okay. And also, you touched on how the technology has changed, the newspaper industry. So how would you say, specifically, probably in West Texas, have you seen—what kind of growth have you seen, as far as technology?

TJP:

As far as the ____ [0:21:02] are concerned, it's grown dramatically. The first issue we put out, we started from the seventh of September in '77. We didn't finish until the ninth—the baby wasn't born until the ninth of September. About midnight. We didn't have a computer. We had no ____ machine [0:21:31]. And we were able—we knew how to justify the causes. You know how to do that? Without the machine. You set your pikers on butcher paper. You understand that? That's what we did. We had—we used the old glue that you would put on your blow ups so both sides would stick. And we had the standard—we had the—we didn't have the standard SAB size sheets. They were about eight column sheets. We had eight columns each ____ [0:22:05]. But now, the computer, you can do one page in the computer and bring it out. So that was back in the hot type days. My headlines, I'd go up to a man on 34th Street. He would set my headlines from all that hot type stuff. He had the metaling man. He changed our lives [?] [0:22:27]. Like going from A to Z. Night to day. But of course, he graduated from that and got a topographic record [0:22:38]. We had to utilize the different chemicals. The positives and the negatives. Had to change that. You don't think about those now. If the machine broke down, somebody had to fly in, and they'd charge an arm and a leg. It changed dramatically. High hazard. It's changed completely a hundred degree turn. Oh yes, it's changed. Three hundred and sixty degree turn. It's changed. It really has. I've seen it change from the Slatonite operation in Slaton ____ [0:23:17]. All over. It's changed. Not for me or much with the gentlemen at the *Avalanche Journal*, but I'm sure they've experienced the same criteria. They had the hot type when the labor union did that type setting those days. I know that.

BC:

Okay. Also, kind of touching on technology, how would you say the internet has changed newspaper?

TJP:

It's affected the general media.

BC:

Right.

TJP:

It will not affect my daily, our weekly, paper because we are geared towards us and there's no substitute at present time that can replace that. I'm not belittling the general media, but when you finish with the *Avalanche Journal*, it goes in the trashcan. The ethnicity of all these papers has been tamed and hand and passed on to other folks [0:24:14]. Now, the internet may have a small affect but not right at present time. It may be coming, because more black publishers were lynched and killed in the history of our newspaper, The rest of the world encouraged us to tell that story. We were actually lynched. So we will not disappear from the face of the earth. No. The modernistic technology will be utilized, but we'll not be displaced by that. I don't think we will. It's my opinion. I don't think we will. No. We've come too far. Too much has happened for us to diminish because of technology. That's my opinion and I believe that.

BC:

Okay. How did you become involved with the *Southwest Digest*?

TJP:

Eddy Richardson, my partner, who is the co-publisher, begged me, "Let's do something." And of course, I procrastinated because I was comfortable with what I was doing. You see, in the sign of progress, like somebody at something is always hurt. I don't want to leave my comfort zone up here in the ten and fifteen cents a column for somebody else. Not enter into this in September the 7th, 1977. So I would think that Eddy Richardson was very much involved in that. I've found he showed us that we need to leave something back for the children. It now be enough for Mammoth [0:26:04]. But it hasn't been. ____ [0:26:09] for thirty year or twenty-fourth year, or pretty close there, '77. Twenty-two years—going twenty-three in September. To me, that's quite significant. Our goal was to stay twenty-five years, we're almost home. You see? And at the end of twenty-five years, I would think it would be time for some new blood to come and venture into an infrastructure, not in John Elroy's, but in concept and philosophy, and the philosophy that I think will be followed into the new century. I do think. I really believe that.

BC:

Okay. How has your success with the *Southwest Digest*, how do you think that's affected the local African American community?

TJP:

I don't like to look at my success. That's not for me to determine. I would hope that my presence had made some kind of sense, but only history will reveal if I was successful in that term or not. I will say this, I've tried to give all I could give. You see, yesterday's homerun will not win today's ballgame. I cannot thrive on what I did yesterday because a lot of people in the world who could care less about what you did yesterday. What are you doing today? But I think—now, I could tell you one story that I think, to me, is very, very, very significant to the role of the *Southwest Digest*. Back in the 1970s, about '76, between '75 and '76, a young black couple got married and they spent many thousands of dollars, but the local general media did not print that wedding announcement. Not their way. And we've actually downgraded, et cetera, and we looked at that and then we came into business in the neighborhood, then the general media began to kind of accept things. So I think by our presence, our presence, it has made a significant change. Not all folk are bad. You know what I'm talking? Not all people. But sometimes it's hard to get in that circle. You don't worry about the snake out in the yard, but when he get in the house and he'll bite you. You see what I'm saying? So I think because of our presence that people who look like me, who look like us, have been treated in a more positive perspective. I really believe that. That's not the panacea about how should live their life, of course, but we would hope that we would have contributed something here to make Lubbock a much better place, our region a much better place to raise our children because we cannot live—that's in the south, the north, the east, and the west. We have to live collectively together. You see, we don't put ourselves in the position of going out and accepting donations—what you owe me? No one owes us anything. We work by the sweat of our brow. So integrity presence, Blythe, we would hope it had that. We would only hope that. We would only hope that. And I'll also admit to you, getting started, sending advertising was hell. We not in the top thirty markets. You understand what I'm talking about? So you there by the grace of God. That's all. And it's been very, very difficult. We are not better people. We're just stronger people. So I pray for our integrity and we never—listen, my young lady, we have never missed a publication date. We've never been late. Thank God. We never have. We never have. Fifty-two issues a year. And by law, you're allowed to miss one issue. We've never done it. That's right. True story. Yeah.

BC:

What do you foresee for the *Southwest Digest* in the future? What do you think?

TJP:

Number one, I hope that we can encourage some young people to come along and want to do what we've done. See, a race gets tiresome. You know? You know? You can only have so much

energy. So I guess in our latter couple years, on the way out, we be looking for some people who want to come in and just willing to do something. You know? Don't come in and see what you're going to give me. Nobody going to give you nothing. What kind of sacrifice will you make to make it happen? You know what I'm talking about? So that's what we looking for. Hopefully. And if that doesn't happen, that means that—golly. It would be our death. I hope not, but I could be because we ____ [0:31:34]. I would hope new person comes along. I would hope with new ideas. But be honest, have integrity. You know? If you say you're going to do something, dog gone do it. You understand? If you make a mistake, you listen above the noise. [Recording cuts. End of Tape 1]

BC:

Okay. Who would you say has been a key player in your career advancement and development?

TJP:

You always look from wince you come with. It'd be my mom. You see, where you come from. And of course, those neighbors and folk around me. She's perhaps the only one I can see now. So I had a very bad disease when I was a kid. Blythe, I had what some call infantile paralysis. There was six of us who had that. I lived through it. Other five white kids died. I lived. I was sickened sick. They sewed my back to cardboard so I could breathe, but mom was there with me. So I would say she had to there. My buddy. She's gone home to glory now, but that's my buddy. Yeah. I've got upset now.

BC:

Okay. What would you say your advice would be for aspiring journalists?

TJP:

Have patience. A long journey begins with a single step. You're not going to get there overnight. You're not going to get your Watergate overnight. You have to have the patience to endure, to hang in, and stay focused on what you want to do. Take the bitter with the sweet, the ups with the downs because it will not go the way you want to go. That's a simple how it is. But you got to have patience. It's not a TV show where you got commercials. Life is for real. Life is serious. You just got to have patience to get there. I would agree with that. Yeah.

BC:

How would you say your career as a journalist has helped you in your second career as a councilman in Lubbock?

TJP:

It gave me the patience, persistence, endurance, being honest. It all goes hand in hand together. It's a task. You can't have school, you can't have stuff. You got to do it. When you in the public

eye as an elected official, everybody watches you. You don't belong to yourself. You have to understand that. You belong to its people. You learn to listen above the noise. You know, give people the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes in my career, I wanted to hold the axe and go grab somebody, but someone back there said, "No, you don't do it like that." Patience. Now, many people of color don't like to use the word patience. They want it to happen right then. It doesn't happen like that. So my discipline has come from this weekly publication. Given me the endurance to hold off. Yeah. I know it. Yeah. But I still have a lot to learn. Yes, I do. Yeah.

BC:

Just looking back on your career, if you could go back would you change anything?

TJP:

No, I would not.

BC:

No?

TJP:

I maybe would do some things different, but I wouldn't change the adventure I've had. You know? Like I said, life is not about one, two, three. It's not like that. My objective may mean to get to that door. But I may use other means of getting there. No, I wouldn't change it. I feel strong. I'm weak as far as the frailty of my body, but I feel different in here. You know, I feel good. I'm having F-U-N, young lady. I have fun.

BC:

If you were searching for a journalist for the Southwest Digest, let's say, what would be especially important to you in a journalist besides—I know you've touched on patience, but—

TJP:

Somebody who has the desire to want to do something. You can pretty well—you can't judge a book by its cover. You cannot do that. I understand that, but sometimes, as we say in the neighborhood, we feel—we're able to feel a person's vibrations. Like, when you ___ [0:36:38]. They saw something in you. Not just your credentials. Somebody felt some vibrations about you. See, I look at that and hopefully, you look for the—you see, you go to school to learn some skills, but the professionals you work for are going to vote you ___ [0:37:00] in the first place. You understand what I'm talking about? You can't see the answers on page twenty-five. It don't work like that. You have to have the willingness to be able to accept responsibilities. You know, when you—if you're—farmers tell me this—when you put old you with young you, that's balance. If you put two young you's, they all want to go different ways. So even people with

balance, that you can help develop them so they can make an outstanding contribution for your endeavor and you look for that. Okay?

BC:

What would you say has been your greatest accomplishment?

TJP:

That's not for me to say.

BC:

Oh.

TJP:

That's not for me to say. If there is anything, if there was one attribute I could say I hope would be that I love working with people. I would hope that. But that's not for me to say. Sometimes at night, I lay down and cry, Blythe, because I didn't think things travel the way it should've travelled. But yeah, that's not for me to say. What did Shakespeare say? He said, "If the world is a stage, we're nothing but actors and actresses. We have our entrance and our exit. We have our parts to play. When the great producer says it's over, it's over." That's why I hope I played my part in an equitable manner. I hope that. I feel like—I hope. Yeah.

BC:

Well thank you, TJ. Do you have any closing remarks that you'd like to say?

TJP:

I just wish you the very, very best and pass on to young people in this endeavor that it takes patience, integrity, and honesty and to make things happen not just in Lubbock, but in America. Good luck to you in what you're doing. Thank you.

End of Recording