

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Holt, Leo Ellwood, 1927-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt,
Dates:	February 21, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:10:48).
Abstract:	Civil rights lawyer and state circuit court judge The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt (1927 -) is a former Cook County Circuit Court Judge, and has served as an attorney for civil rights activists such as Dick Gregory and Al Raby. Holt was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 21, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_054
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Leo Ellwood Holt, a retired Cook County Circuit Court judge, was born July 2, 1927 in Chicago, Illinois to Laverne Hamilton Holt and Pullman porter Miller Holt. Attending Willard Elementary School and Englewood High School, he dropped out at age sixteen to become a cook on the Santa Fe Railroad. After briefly returning to Englewood High, Holt joined the United States Army in 1945 and earned his diploma. In 1947, Holt enrolled at Wilson Junior College and received his A.A. degree in 1949. After studying accounting and business law at Roosevelt University, Holt entered John Marshall Law School, graduating with his L.L.B. degree in 1959.

In 1960, Holt passed the bar, got married and began private practice with former classmate, Earl Taylor. Working with attorney James Montgomery to defend Al Raby, Dick Gregory and other Chicago open housing activists, Holt's involvement bolstered the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson. Holt was elected judge of Circuit Court of Cook County in 1986. In 2003, Holt received the Charles E. Freeman Award from the Illinois Judicial Council.

Holt's honors include the Richard Westbrook Award from Cook County Bar Association in 1975; the Robert Ming Award from the Cook County Bar Association in 1981; the Operation Push Community Service Award in 1981 and the South Suburban Leadership Council Community Service Award in 1985. Holt is an outspoken advocate of increasing the number of African Americans in the judiciary. Father of two grown daughters, Holt lives in Chicago.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt was conducted by Larry Crowe on February

21, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights lawyer and state circuit court judge The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt (1927 -) is a former Cook County Circuit Court Judge, and has served as an attorney for civil rights activists such as Dick Gregory and Al Raby.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

- Holt, Leo Ellwood, 1927-
- Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)
- Parker, Iris Dawn (Videographer)

Subjects:

- African Americans--Interviews
 - Holt, Leo Ellwood, 1927---Interviews
-

Organizations:

- HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)
 - The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection
 - Illinois. Circuit Court (Cook County)
-

Occupations:

Civil Rights Lawyer

State Circuit Court Judge

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, February 21, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt was born on July 2, 1927 in Chicago, Illinois to Ethel Hamilton Holt and Miller Ashley Holt. Holt believes his maternal great-grandmother, Fannie King Hamilton, was born a slave in Kentucky. She moved to Evansville, Indiana before settling in Chicago. Holt's mother was born on October 20, 1899 in Chicago. She attended Ferron Elementary School, but did

not complete high school. She worked as a maid and at a defense plant during World War II. Holt's father was born in Athens, Alabama, and his family settled in Rockford, Illinois after World War I. Holt's father was a Pullman porter. Holt's parents met at a dance, married in 1923, and separated when Holt was two years old. During the Great Depression, Holt's family often had to live in overcrowded dwellings as they moved around the South Side seeking affordable housing. Holt attended Frances E. Willard Elementary School. Holt remembers learning how to skip in kindergarten, reading comic books and listening to the radio.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt grew up in Chicago's Ida B. Wells Homes and walked twenty blocks every day to Frances E. Willard Elementary School. Holt learned how to swim at the Wabash Avenue YMCA. Since his strict mother did not allow him to play outside often, Holt listened to radio programs like 'The Lone Ranger.' Holt attend Metropolitan Community Church, where his grandfather was an associate pastor in the early 1900s. His family converted to Christian Science, but Holt left the religion as a teenager. Holt attended the movies often and saw Lionel Hampton and Duke Ellington perform at the Regal Theater. When Holt transferred from Englewood High School to the overcrowded Wendell Phillips High School, his academic performance suffered. Upon realizing he could earn as much money as his mother, Holt quit school to work as a cook for the Illinois Central Railroad. Holt remembers Two-Gun Pete, a black police officer from Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_003, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt quit high school at age seventeen to work for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in Clovis, New Mexico. At his mother's request, Holt returned home and continued his education, but dropped out of school again to join the U.S. Army in 1945. Discontent with the racist treatment of black soldiers, Holt left the Army and passed the GED. Holt graduated from Woodrow Wilson Junior College in 1949. With his mother living in Los Angeles, California, Holt moved there to support her while taking classes at Los Angeles City College. Upon returning to Chicago in 1954, Holt completed a year at Roosevelt University before entering The John Marshall Law School. As a law student, Holt worked as a timekeeper at a water-pumping station for the City of Chicago. Holt graduated in 1959 with his Bachelor of Law degree and joined former classmate Earl Taylor at his private practice. In 1960, Holt lost his first murder case before a jury. Holt recalls facing racial discrimination from clients.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_004, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt met his wife, Dorothy Holt, while working at the Cook County Department of Welfare. They married in 1960. In 1961, Holt was indicted on insurance fraud charges along with T.R.M. Howard and Kenneth Brundage. While the other men were acquitted, Holt was convicted of conspiracy to defraud. HistoryMaker James D. Montgomery began representing Holt. When the case was retried before a jury, Holt was acquitted in 1963. As a criminal defense lawyer, Holt represented members of the Almighty Latin King Nation and Jeff Fort and his associates. Holt won four capital cases involving twenty-two men, setting a record in Cook County. Holt shares his thoughts on the death penalty, the Illinois State's Attorney's office, and racism within the

court system. Holt recalls the raid led by Illinois State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan, which led to the assassination of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Holt explains Illinois's public defender system.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_005, TRT: 0:28:12 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt represented many protesters arrested during The Civil Rights Movement, including teacher and founder of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations Al Raby. Holt also marched with HistoryMaker Dick Gregory and met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. After encountering HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, Holt became involved with Operation Breadbasket. In 1986, with support from HistoryMaker James D. Montgomery and Harold Washington, Holt won the seat for Circuit Court of Cook County. Holt shares his thoughts on the outcome of the O.J. Simpson murder trial and the Rodney King trial. Holt criticizes Richard M. Daley's tenure as Cook County state's attorney and his response to Chicago Police Detective John Burge's torture of suspects. Holt also criticizes the handling of the Jeanine Nicarico murder case. Holt explains the role of criminal defense lawyers in the judicial system and shares his judicial philosophy.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_006, TRT: 0:28:38 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt presided over the case involving William Ligue, Jr. and William Ligue, III, a father and son who attacked Kansas City Royals Coach Tom Gamboa at Chicago's Comiskey Park during a White Sox game. Holt's sentence of probation for the father was highly criticized by the public and the media, but Holt stood by his decision. When Holt presided over the bond hearing for Kenyatta White, a suspected member of the Black P Stone Nation charged with murder, he faced criticism again for granting White bail. Holt talks about the mass incarceration of African American men. To address the problem, Holt advocates that first time offenders receive probation and less jail time. However, Holt notes sentencing is difficult because of the public scrutiny judges face. Holt shares his thoughts on how the constitutional right to bail is often subverted, racial disparities in sentencing, and removing victim impact statements from criminal cases.

Video Oral History Interview with The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt, Section
A2005_054_001_007, TRT: 0:16:14 ?

The Honorable Leo Ellwood Holt was a member of HistoryMaker Reverend Jesse L. Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH coalition and a frequent participant in the 'Saturday Morning Forum.' Holt talks about his daughters, Pamela Holt and Paula Holt Hall, and their careers. In describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, Holt notes the importance of voting. Holt reflects upon his life, how he would like to be remembered and his legacy as a judge.