

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Roberson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberson, James, 1943-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson,
Dates:	March 21, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:34:35).
Abstract:	Auto sales entrepreneur and high school administrator James Roberson (1943 -) served as an educator and administrator for the Alabama Board of Education. He then became the first African American with a Pontiac car dealership. Roberson then became owner of USA Auto and Budget Truck Rental Store in 2000 until his retirement in 2003. Roberson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 21, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_104
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

James Earnest Roberson was born on June 14, 1943 to Aressa and Mack E. Roberson in Birmingham, Alabama. Roberson's parents were activists and involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Roberson lived across the street from Bethel Baptist Church, home to Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, that was twice-bombed by the Ku Klux Klan.

Roberson attended A.H. Parker High School where he graduated with an advance academic honors diploma in 1960. He received his B.A. degree in secondary education from Alabama A&M University in 1964; his M.A. degree in educational leadership in 1986 from University of Alabama; and his J.D. degree from Faith College in Alabama.

Roberson led demonstrations and was a political broker on the Alabama A&M University campus. He spearheaded sit-ins to desegregate Shoney's and Big Boy restaurants.

For nearly thirty years, Roberson worked as an educator and administrator for the Alabama Board of Education. He taught earth science at A.G. Gaston and Leeds Junior High Schools before becoming assistant principal.

Roberson joined the Ford Motor Company's Minority Dealer Development Program, and in 1993, he was named a dealer candidate, making him the first African American with a Pontiac dealership. Roberson then became owner of USA Auto and Budget Truck Rental Store in 2000 until his retirement in 2003.

Roberson holds memberships and leadership positions in various organizations including 100 Black Men of Birmingham, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., the March of Dimes and Grace House Ministries. He has received multiple awards and recognitions for his contributions to the community.

Roberson and his wife, Linda, currently reside in Birmingham, Alabama.

Roberson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 21, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Roberson was conducted by Denise Gines on March 21, 2007, in Birmingham, Alabama, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Auto sales entrepreneur and high school administrator James Roberson (1943 -) served as an educator and administrator for the Alabama Board of Education. He then became the first African American with a Pontiac car dealership. Roberson then became owner of USA Auto and Budget Truck Rental Store in 2000 until his retirement in 2003.

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:

Roberson, James, 1943-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Roberson, James, 1943- --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Auto Sales Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 James Roberson, March 21, 2007. 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 James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?
James Roberson was born on June 14, 1943 in Birmingham, Alabama to Aressa Craig Roberson and Mack Roberson. His mother, who had both black and

Native American ancestry, was one of twenty-one children born to Abraham Craig, a minister and farmer in Clanton, Alabama. Roberson's mother graduated from high school in Clanton, and then studied to become a dental hygienist. His father was born in Monroe, Georgia, and moved to Birmingham to work for the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. Roberson and his siblings, Lawrence Roberson and Bernita Roberson Sawyer, were raised in Birmingham, where their father coached the neighborhood sports teams, and wrote poetry and plays. Roberson recalls his mother's cooking, and the chores she assigned to her children each day; as well as his parents' discipline, including corporal punishments administered by his father. Roberson's religious upbringing was influenced by his mother as well as Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, who led Birmingham's Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_002, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

James Roberson's paternal family used various spellings of their surname, with some relatives going by Robinson or Robertson. Roberson's paternal grandparents, Lola Roberson and James W. Roberson, lived in Georgia, where his grandmother was the national secretary of the Baptist Convention, and his grandfather sold coal. Both Roberson's maternal and paternal grandparents owned farms. His parents met at a dance in Birmingham, Alabama shortly after his mother moved to the city. Roberson's father had many hobbies, including construction, and once built a golf course in his front yard. He also kept a strict curfew for his children, and Roberson was occasionally disciplined for staying out late. In Birmingham, Roberson grew up across the street from Bethel Baptist Church, and attended kindergarten at a school run by the American Cast Iron and Pipe Company. In the early 1950s, Roberson helped his father build and move his grandfather's tombstone to Monroe, Georgia. He recalls visiting the gravesite in the 1990s.

Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

James Roberson attended Hudson Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, where he skipped several grades. He lived across the street from Bethel Baptist Church, where civil rights leader Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth founded the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights after the State of Alabama banned the NAACP. Because Roberson's father attended the movement's weekly meetings, his family's phone was wiretapped by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. During this time, Roberson was a student at A.H. Parker High School, where he was mentored by Principal Robert Charles Johnson. Roberson took honors classes, and worked as a paper boy outside of school. Upon graduating in 1960, he enrolled at the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College. In Huntsville, Alabama, he became involved with civil rights, and organized sit-ins at Shoney's Big Boy Drive In Restaurant and S.S. Kresge Company lunch counters. Roberson also pledged Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity due to his admiration for Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_004, TRT: 0:29:25 ?

James Roberson organized a student strike to improve living conditions at the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College in Normal, Alabama, and negotiated a compromise with administrators the night before the strike was to begin. During the summers, Roberson worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He graduated in 1964 with a degree in biology, and became a teacher at the all-black Roosevelt Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama. During integration, Roberson was transferred to the previously all-white Leeds Junior High School. Despite initial hostilities, he was named teacher of the year at the end of his first year, and was promoted to assistant

principal, and then to principal at E.B. Erwin High School. In 1990, Roberson retired from education to join Ford Motor Company's dealer development program. After training at the Ernest McCarty Ford dealership, he opened a rental car company in Bessemer, Alabama. Roberson married Linda Thompson Roberson, with whom he raised three children.

Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_005, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

James Roberson lived for a time with his family in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he attended Samuel Ach Junior High School. He was unaccustomed to Ohio's cold weather, and was bullied for his southern accent. As a result, he welcomed his family's return to Birmingham, until he was reminded of the South's Jim Crow laws. Around 1970, Roberson sought to become the first African American to work in an automobile dealership in the region. On the recommendation of Birmingham city councilman Edward Blankenship, Roberson was hired by Blaine Brownell of Brownell Pontiac. He enlisted local black radio deejays like Paul Dudley White and Shelley Stewart to advertise for him. Despite experiencing discrimination from his white co-workers, who hid his car keys and gave him incorrect vehicle serial numbers, Roberson became an award-winning salesman. He married Linda Thompson Roberson, a teacher and administrator in the Birmingham City Schools. Roberson also describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with James Roberson, Section A2007_104_001_006, TRT: 0:06:50 ?

James Roberson narrates his photographs.