

From the Negro League to the mayor's office: black America tells its story

SOME OF the names and faces - among them the singer Harry Belafonte and the actor Danny Glover - are famous the world over. Others, such as Henry Presswood, who played professional baseball at a time when blacks were not allowed in the major leagues, are known to specialists. And still others, such as Alonzo Pettie, now aged 93, are familiar to perhaps just a handful of people - those who know him as America's oldest black cowboy.

But researchers aiming to create the biggest video archive of oral African American history believe that together, the stories and testimony of up to 5,000 black Americans - famous or otherwise - will be a rich resource. They also hope that, when viewed as a whole, it will help scholars and students become more aware of the role in the development of black American consciousness played by people whose names did not make the headlines. Thus, the project is a radical attempt to amend the received wisdom about who were the key people in the struggle. "Their names are not just Harriet Tubman, WEB DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr and Ella Fitzgerald," say the researchers.

Not since the Depression of the 1930s, when out-of-work

BY ANDREW BUNCOMBE
in Washington

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, which interviewed 50,000 Holocaust survivors in 57 countries.

Ms Richardson and her team have set themselves the task of interviewing 5,000 black Americans on video by 2005.

So far, the team - supported by the likes of Mr Glover and the writer and former Black Panther Angela Davis, who have done some interviews themselves - have completed 400, each interview running for up to two hours.

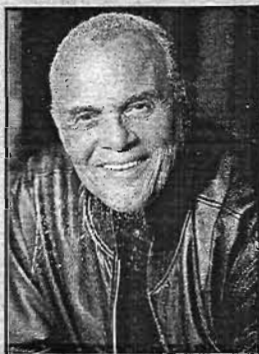
The team estimates that the project will require \$30m (£20m). It has raised \$2.4m so far, mostly from grants and foundations. The singer Dionne Warwick is among some of today's black stars raising funds for the project.

The stories range from that of Mr Presswood, who played between 1948 and 1952 in the Negro Baseball League, to that of Marion Barry, twice mayor of Washington DC, and Bob Beamon, the athlete who overcame a childhood of hardship and delinquency to win an Olympic gold medal in the long jump in Mexico in 1968, leaping 8.90 metres (29ft 4½ins) to set a world record that stood for 23 years.

VOX AMERICANA WITNESSES FOR A PEOPLE



ROSA PARKS, CIVIL RIGHTS CAMPAIGNER: Refusal to move to the back of a bus touched off the Montgomery bus boycott and the civil rights movement. Here she is fingerprinted after being charged with violating segregation laws



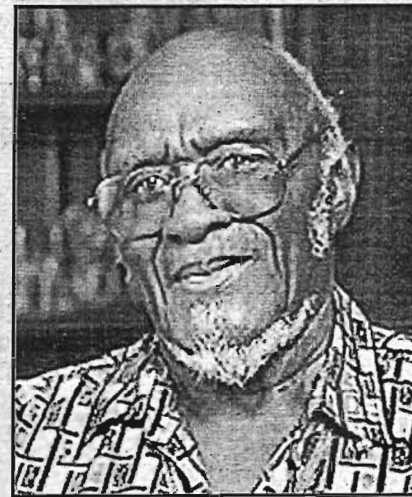
HARRY BELAFONTE, ACTOR AND SINGER: Strong critic of Colin Powell



DIONNE WARWICK, SINGER: Will stage a series of fundraising concerts



DANNY GLOVER, ACTOR: Conducted interviews for the project



ALONZO PETTIE, AMERICA'S OLDEST BLACK COWBOY: 'I have seen lots of change, some all right and some bad'



BOB BEAMON, ATHLETE: Overcame childhood of hardship and delinquency to win 1968 Olympic gold medal

US to record interviews with 2,300 former slaves, has such a comprehensive attempt been made to record the African American experience as told in the first person, claim those behind the project.

"We are preserving living history," said Julieanna Richardson, who established the HistoryMakers project. "In today's world, you hear Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. You keep hearing the same names over and over again.

"But if it had not been for the lawyers behind the scene and funders like Harry Belafonte, there would not have been a Martin Luther King. The stories are out there but you never get to hear them. It's a humungous resource and people will want to tap into this. It is a resource that will not be easily replicated." The project, based in Chicago, was started when Ms Richardson was a graduate student at Harvard, completing a project on oral history.

She was inspired by the discovery that the history of blacks in America contained so many different stories and yet people had heard very few of them. The closest comparison is to Steven Spielberg's

the project's website (www.thehistorymakers.com) is dedicated to: "Stories of success against the odds, of achievement in the face of adversity and in all cases stories of inspiration." The story of Mr Pettie could be placed under any of these headings.

Born in Tyler, east Texas, in 1910 and named after his grandfather, who was born in slavery, Mr Pettie learned to break horses at an early age after the death of his parents forced him to fend for himself. The stories of his skill as a professional rodeo rider and cowboy are legion and in 1996 his life in the saddle earned him a place in a television commercial for Levi's Red Tab jeans.

Mr Pettie is modest about his inclusion in the project. "They should study everything," he said from his home in Denver, Colorado. "I did not go to school too much. I did my learning working. Working. That was all I did."

Mr Pettie, who only stopped riding horses eight years ago, added: "I have seen lots of change - some all right and some bad. Some things are still the same. The [situation] of black people has changed a whole lot since I have been around - for the better."

The development of black consciousness in the US and the sensitivity surrounding racial issues as America tries to reconcile a society still scarred by discrimination is the cultural backdrop against which the HistoryMakers project is taking place.

The problems of bringing about such reconciliation were demonstrated last year by one of those included in the project, Mr Belafonte, who likened the position of Colin Powell within the Bush administration to that of an obedient slave. Mr Belafonte, a liberal activist, said: "There's an old saying: in the days of slavery, there were those slaves who lived on the plantation and those slaves that lived in the house. You got the privilege of living in the house if you served the master... exactly the way the master intended to have you."

The Secretary of State responded: "If Harry had wanted to attack my politics, that was fine. But to use a slave reference ... is unfortunate and is a throwback to another time and another place, that I wish Harry had thought twice about using."

Earl Graves, the publisher of *Black Enterprise* magazine, said he believed Ms Richardson's work was important because US "history, only since the civil rights movement, started to recognise the importance of the contribution of African-Americans".

"And if you have a programme such as what is in place now, that can be put away, then people a couple of hundred years from now can look back," he told *The New York Times*.

Ms Richardson said she hoped eventually that the HistoryMakers video recordings would be stored in a digital archive that would be made available to black colleges as well as libraries and national research centres, including the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York.

"Out of this will develop this quiltwork where you'll see patterns between stories and you will see new stories emerging," she said. "It is designed to show the breadth and width of the African American experience. There are lots of ways of filling in the gaps."