

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willy T. Ribbs

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Ribbs, Willy T., 1956-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 1, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:57:11).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Race car driver Willy T. Ribbs (1956 - ) was the first African American race car driver to participate in NASCAR and was the first African American to compete in the Indianapolis 500. In 1989, Bill and Camille Cosby funded the Raynor-Cosby Motorsports team with Ribbs as the star driver. Ribbs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 1, 2002, in San Jose, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_045
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

William Theodore Ribbs, Jr. was born on January 3, 1956, in San Jose, California, to Geraldine and William T. Ribbs, Sr. Rather than managing the successful family plumbing business founded by his grandfather in 1927, Willy T. Ribbs races cars professionally. He is the first African American to compete in the Indianapolis 500 and one of the only African American NASCAR racers.

Ribbs' love of cars and racing began at the age of four. At age nine, Ribbs worked

as a ranch hand on his grandfather's ranch. His first foray into motorsports was driving Formula Ford cars in Europe soon after his high school graduation in 1975. He won the Dunlop Championship in his first year of competition, then returned to the United States and raced Formula Atlantic cars. Ribbs won the pole in the Long Beach Formula Atlantic race in 1982, outpacing veteran drivers before his engine failed. In 1983, he won five races in the SCCA Trans-Am and was honored as Pro Rookie of the Year. After competing in two NASCAR Winston Cup races in 1986, financial difficulties including the lack of corporate sponsorship kept his team from finishing the season.

In 1989, Bill and Camille Cosby stepped in and funded the Raynor-Cosby Motorsports team with Ribbs as the star driver. Ribbs won two top-ten events in his 1990 Championship Auto Racing Team (CART) Indianapolis debut. In 1991, he became the first African American to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, and he qualified again in 1993. However, by 1994 it was clear that corporate sponsors were not yet willing to back an African American motorsports athlete, despite Cosby's offer of free television commercials in return for sponsorship. Ribbs was released from his Indianapolis 500 contract and spent the year competing in the CART series, finishing in the top ten at Michigan and Denver Grand Prix races.

In 1999, Ribbs raced in the Las Vegas Indy Racing League (IRL). In 2000, he signed with Victoria Motorsports SCCA Trans-Am team and finished second at Long Beach, third at Detroit and fourth at Las Vegas. He was awarded the Johnson Triple Crown. In 2001, Ribbs joined the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series with the support of Dodge, which initiated a motorsports diversity program to provide opportunities for minorities to race. This made Ribbs the first African American in the modern era to compete full-time in a major NASCAR division. Ribbs successfully raised his two children, Sasha and William Theodore Ribbs, III as a single parent.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willy T. Ribbs was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on April 1, 2002, in San Jose, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Race car driver Willy T. Ribbs (1956 - ) was the first African American race car driver to participate in NASCAR and was the first African American to compete in the Indianapolis 500. In 1989, Bill and Camille Cosby funded the Raynor-Cosby Motorsports team with Ribbs as the star driver.

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# 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Ribbs, Willy T., 1956-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Race Car Driver

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

SportsMakers

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## **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 Willy T. Ribbs, April 1, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 2002/04/01

Willy Ribbs discusses his family history and his childhood. He focuses in particular on the time he spent at his grandfather Henry Ribbs's ranch, and the influence his grandfather had on his upbringing and his values. Ribbs concludes by describing some of his earliest experiences with racing cars, starting at age nine--experiences that were instrumental in shaping his love of fast cars, and his desire to race competitively.

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/04/01

Willy Ribbs talks about teaching himself to race cars on back roads. He then briefly discusses the history of the Indianapolis 500, before delving into his own experience qualifying for the Indy 500 in May, 1991. In particular, Ribbs focuses on the crucial role Bill Cosby played in helping him reach the Indy 500 by becoming his sponsor.

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/04/01

Willy Ribbs describes the euphoria of being the first African American to qualify for the Indianapolis 500, followed by the letdown of being unable to finish the race because of a mechanical failure. He describes the different levels of discrimination and acceptance in the auto racing industry. He then revisits his youth, describing his father's

and his paternal grandfather's attitudes towards auto racing, as well as some "youthful indiscretions." The tape concludes with Ribbs detailing his experiences in London, racing at the Formula One Grand Prix.

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/04/01

Willy Ribbs discusses racial discrimination in sports, particularly in auto racing. He focuses on the obstacles he encountered, as one of the few African American race car drivers, in garnering corporate sponsorship. He then describes how, with the help of mentors such as Bill Cosby and Paul Newman, he eventually became a success despite racist attitudes in auto racing.

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00 2002/04/01

Willy Ribbs describes Indy Car racing from the inside-- what he thinks and feels inside a car, and what makes a great race car driver. He discusses his future plans, particularly in terms of his legacy. He describes some of his role models, and talks about why he would like to be remembered as they are.

Video Oral History Interview with Willy T. Ribbs, Section  
A2002\_045\_001\_006, TRT: 0:28:01 2002/04/01

Willy T. Ribbs shows photographs of his family and his career as a professional race car driver.