

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Pickens

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com   |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Pickens, Robert, 1943-2018   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Pickens,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | June 24, 2002  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2002   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:58:43).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Football player and wrestler Robert Pickens (1943 - 2018 ) was an Olympic athlete who went on to become Cook County, Illinois Commissioner. Pickens was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2002_089  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Robert James Pickens was born on February 2, 1943 to Sarah Wilson and Nathaniel Pickens in Chicago, Illinois and grew up in Evanston, Illinois. After graduating from Evanston Township High School in 1962, Pickens was the first African American to represent America in wrestling in the 1964 Olympics. He placed sixth in the Greco-Roman division.

Continuing his career in sports, Pickens played football as an offensive tackle for the Chicago Bears from 1967 to 1969. He earned a B.S. in Business Administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1969 and then spent a

year playing for the Edmonton Eskimos in the Canadian Football League while working as the Assistant Personnel Director for Foote, Cone and Belding-an advertising agency. In 1970, he began an 18-year career with Sears, Roebuck and Company in which he was eventually promoted to toy department buyer.

In 1988, Pickens left Sears to become the owner and managing director of Rainbow Classics, Inc., a Hong Kong-based trading company dealing in toys and sundry items. In 1991, Pickens became the president and owner of Merrill Associates, Ltd. and the construction coordinator for DJP Development and Consulting, a family-owned business. In addition to his professional duties, Pickens began serving as a Chicago Park District commissioner in 2000.

Pickens never left sports behind: he served as an official for the Big 10 Football Conference between 1976 and 1989, and co-founded a mentoring group of retired professional athletes called Team Up, Inc. in 1985. He held the position of national steering committee president of the National Football League Players Association and president of the National Football League Retired Players Association's Chicago Chapter and worked with youth through the Better Boys Foundation and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Pickens had two adult children, and married Judith Jamison in 2002.

Pickens passed away on April 12, 2018 at age 75.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with Robert Pickens was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Football player and wrestler Robert Pickens (1943 - 2018 ) was an Olympic athlete who went on to become Cook County, Illinois Commissioner.

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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:**

Pickens, Robert, 1943-2018

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Pickens, Robert, 1943-2018--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Football Player

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Wrestler

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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 Robert Pickens, June 24, 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 (Matters 1995).

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## 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 Robert Pickens, Section  
A2002\_089\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:42 2002/06/24

Robert Pickens describes his family background and childhood. His mother, Sarah Stampley, was born on April 1, 1912 in Stampley Station, Mississippi to Rose Stampley and worked as a housekeeper. Stampley Station was a predominately black community where the whites had less political and economic power. Pickens' father, Nathaniel Pickens, was born around Birmingham, Alabama, and worked as a spring setter. When Pickens was four, his parents divorced and his mother, Sarah Stampley, married Robert Wilson. Pickens was born on February 2, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois and was raised in an all-black community in Evanston, Illinois. He remembers being bullied in school as well as his parents operating a honkey-tonk bar in their house. He attended Foster Elementary School, Haven Junior High School, and Evanston Township High School, where he excelled at sports including wrestling and football. He graduated from Evanston Township High School in 1962.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Pickens, Section  
A2002\_089\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:42 2002/06/24

Robert Pickens describes his college years and his career as a professional athlete. After graduating from Evanston Township High School in 1962, Pickens enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he played football. In 1964, Pickens left the University of Wisconsin and became a wrestler for the 1964 United States Olympic team in Tokyo, Japan. In Tokyo, Pickens placed sixth in the Greco-Roman division, the highest an American had ever placed and met other black athletes like HistoryMaker Willye White. After the Olympics, Pickens enrolled at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, where he continued to play football and married his first wife, Doris Pickens, in 1967. In 1969, Pickens graduated from

the University of Nebraska with a B.S. degree in business administration and played offensive tackle for the Chicago Bears for two years. After working for the advertising firm of Foote, Cone, and Belding in 1970, Pickens began his eighteen year career working at Sears Roebuck and Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Pickens, Section A2002\_089\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:59 2002/06/24

Robert Pickens describes his career at Sears, Rainbow Classics, and the Chicago Park District. In 1970, Perkins was hired as Assistant Personnel Director for the advertising firm of Foote, Cone and Belding, where he was responsible for creating a more positive environment for their black employees. In 1971, he started at Sears, Roebuck and Company and worked as an Assistant Buyer, Assistant Marketing Director, and Sales Manager for Men's Sportswear. In 1988, Pickens left Sears to become owner and managing director of Rainbow Classics in China, the second largest black doll manufacturer at that time in the world. Pickens reflects on his marriage to Doris Pickens, who died after their thirty-four years of marriage, and their community involvement in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood. He also talks about his marriage to Judith Jamison, who he married on June 1, 2002. In 2000, Pickens began serving as a Chicago Park District commissioner, where he is focused on parks for the disabled and elderly.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Pickens, Section A2002\_089\_001\_004, TRT: 0:27:20 2002/06/24

Robert Pickens reflects on his community service in the Chicago Parks District and the Better Boys Foundation, as well as his work as president and treasurer for the National Football League Retired Players Association. He also reflects on his hopes and concerns for the African American community, his family, the importance of African American history, and his legacy.