

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Albert W. Johnson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Johnson, Albert W., 1920-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson,
Dates:	August 14, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:11:03).
Abstract:	Auto sales entrepreneur Albert W. Johnson (1920 - 2010) is the founder of Al Johnson's Cadillac dealership in Chicago. Johnson is the first African American to own and operate a G.M. dealership. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 14, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_142
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entrepreneur and philanthropist, Albert W. Johnson of Chicago was the first African American to have a General Motors franchise and later became a leading independent Cadillac dealer. He has received numerous recognition awards, including the Entrepreneurship Hall of Fame and Man of the Millennium from the University of Illinois School of Business.

Johnson was born on February 23, 1920, in St. Louis, Missouri, the son of a physician. He received his B.S. degree in business administration from Lincoln University in 1940 and his M.S. degree in hospital administration from the University of Chicago in 1960. He became an assistant administrator of a St. Louis teaching hospital in 1945 and sold automobiles part time. He became known as “the man who sold cars from a briefcase,” since African Americans could not be hired to sell inside a dealership.

Johnson’s persistence in realizing his dream of being a car dealer paid off in 1967. He became the first African American given a General Motors franchise, more than fifteen years after he began petitioning General Motors. He obtained a Cadillac franchise in 1971, and the next year, he became an independent dealer. He sold his companies in 1994 and has devoted his time to civic involvement. Not only was Johnson a founder of the PUSH Foundation and a life member of the NAACP, he has made significant contributions to hospitals, schools, recreational facilities and charitable organizations across the nation.

Johnson has received an honorary doctorate of law from Mary Holmes College and an Honor of Entrepreneurial Excellence from Howard University School of Business Administration. Among his many other affiliations include chairman emeritus of the University of Illinois Center for Urban Business, College for Business Administration; board member of LaRabida Children’s Hospital; member of the Executives Club of Chicago, Ingalls Memorial Hospital, the Better Business Bureau, Chicago Tourism Council, Bellwood Bank, and the General Motors Black Dealer Advisory Board.

Johnson and his wife are the parents of three grown sons.

Johnson passed away on January 13, 2010 at the age of 89.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Albert W. Johnson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 14, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Auto sales entrepreneur Albert W. Johnson (1920 - 2010) is the founder of Al Johnson's Cadillac dealership in Chicago. Johnson is the first African American to own and operate a G.M. dealership.

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:

Johnson, Albert W., 1920-2010

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Albert W., 1920-2010--Interviews

African American automobile dealers--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 Albert W. Johnson, August 14, 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 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 Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_001, TRT: 0:27:35
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Albert W. Johnson was born on February 23, 1920 to Anna Theresa Johnson and Oscar Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. Johnson's father grew up in Memphis, Tennessee and decided to pursue a medical degree to support his father and two sisters. After attending a Baptist university, he earned his M.D. degree from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, then moved to St. Louis where he helped to found the Homer G. Phillips Hospital to serve African Americans. Johnson's father and mother met at Union Station in St. Louis. Johnson's mother donated her time to a St. Louis church, founding a youth group there. Johnson vividly remembers his first day of school at West Belle Elementary School in St. Louis and his teachers, who lived in his community. In addition to his mother who served as an example for his community service work, Johnson identifies Virgil McKnight, Dr. Fagen and Maury Lyons as individuals who mentored him in his careers as a hospital administrator and car dealer.

African American automobile dealers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_002, TRT: 0:31:00
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Albert W. Johnson was raised in an upper-middle class environment in St. Louis, Missouri where he attended West Belle Elementary School and Marshall High School. He was an overly active child who aspired to be a doctor like his father, Oscar Johnson. He later changed his mind after observing his father's demanding schedule. After graduating from high school, Johnson began working as a receiving room clerk at St. Louis' Homer G. Phillips Hospital in 1941. He also began selling cars out of a briefcase to hospital employees. In 1967, he purchased his first car dealership becoming the first licensed African American dealer with General Motors. Johnson found the organizational skills and knowledge of personnel policies he gained in the hospital served him well as a businessman. He proposed a training program for minority car dealers at a 1968 meeting with GM executives in Detroit, Michigan. In 1969, GM implemented Johnson's program by creating a dealer development department.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_003, TRT: 0:30:51
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Albert W. Johnson inherited his love for cars from his father. Johnson began selling cars in 1953 for a St. Louis, Missouri Oldsmobile dealership. He worked there for seven years before moving to a second Oldsmobile dealership. Johnson wrote to several automobile companies in the mid-1950s seeking to purchase a dealership. Once pressure to diversify businesses increased during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Johnson received more responses; and, in 1967, he became the first African American to receive a General Motors automobile dealer franchise. His Oldsmobile dealership was located at 74th and Halsted Streets in Chicago, Illinois. Since he was not a native of Chicago, he was encouraged to integrate into the Chicago community by civic leaders like Fred Walls and to join the Cosmopolitan Chamber of Commerce and Operation Breadbasket. Johnson talks about Oldsmobile's place in the automobile industry and his attempts to increase racial diversity in the industry during the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_004, TRT: 0:30:10
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When Albert W. Johnson assumed ownership of Ray Oldsmobile on Chicago, Illinois' South Side in 1967, some workers refused to work for him because he was an African American. However, Johnson convinced most of the staff to stay by instituting a profit sharing plan and by unionizing. Johnson, as an African American dealer, faced other challenges, including competition from

neighboring automobile dealers and losing some of his African American clients, although he did not lose any white clients. He implemented new management strategies and hired new staff including two of his white friends from St. Louis, Missouri. He also had the support of General Motors consultant Maury Lyons, who served as an important advisor through the late 1960s and helped Johnson better manage the dealership's body shop which had been costing it money. Before Johnson implemented new procedures, employees were taking paint for personal use and the body shop was losing money due to high commission fees paid for police referrals.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_005, TRT: 0:30:46
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Albert W. Johnson explains how the Civil Rights Movement and passage of federal antitrust laws during the 1960s led to changes in the automotive industry. African Americans like Robert Nelson, Jr. and Cubs legend HistoryMaker Ernie Banks bought their Ford franchises in 1967, the same year Johnson bought his Oldsmobile franchise from General Motors. Johnson built his dealership into a multimillion dollar business while increasing his net worth and investing in his employees. Despite Cadillac's resistance to both non-corporate and black car dealers, in 1971, Johnson obtained a Cadillac franchise and opened his dealership in Tinley Park, Illinois, a location he chose based on research by the marketing department of the Chicago Tribune. He remained active, during the late 1960s and 1970s, in Operation Breadbasket and other civic organizations. He also joined the Political Action Committee of Illinois (PACI), which fundraised and registered voters for Mayor Harold Washington's 1983 mayoral campaign.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_006, TRT: 0:30:11
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During the 1970s and '80s, Albert W. Johnson worked with the Political Action Committee of Illinois (PACI) which supported the campaigns of Chicago Mayors Michael Bilandic, Jane Byrne and Harold Washington. Johnson recalls the role that whites, Hispanics and independent politics played in Washington's 1983 election. Johnson worked with the business organization Chicago United as an unpaid consultant to assist in furthering downtown business leaders' support of Washington's business agenda. Johnson explains how the racing industry had been closed to minorities. He lobbied State Senator Richard Newhouse, Jr. to allow black businesses to host racing events, where the day receipts could reach \$1 million. He became a part owner in Sportsman's Park, a site for horse racing in Cicero, Illinois. A conversation with HistoryMaker Alvin Boutte prompted Johnson to research the cable industry in other cities and attend cable conventions. He then worked with Continental Cable to develop a franchise bid for Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_007, TRT: 0:31:30
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Albert W. Johnson ended his day to day role as a car dealership owner in 1983. From that point on, he worked as a consultant on a myriad of projects including increasing minority ownership in gaming and casinos. Johnson reflects on his generation of entrepreneurs and their impact on expanding opportunities for African American businesses. He talks about the future of African American-owned businesses, the American automobile industry, the attributes of a good businessman and how his mentors, in both hospital administration and the automotive industry, influenced his success. Johnson concludes by reflecting upon his legacy and describing how he would like to be remembered. He

narrates his photographs and spells out names mentioned during the interview for the historical record.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_008, TRT: 0:31:00
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Albert W. Johnson continues to narrate his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Albert W. Johnson, Section A2002_142_001_009, TRT: 0:08:00
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Albert W. Johnson continues to narrate his photographs.