

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

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616<br>info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com  |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Johnson, Robert, 1935 June 17-   |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | August 1, 2003   |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2003   |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:57).  |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Corporate chief executive Robert Johnson (1935 - ) is the CEO of Johnson Bryce Co., a supplier of food packaging to PepsiCo. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 1, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2003_172  |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.  |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Robert "Bob" Johnson, born June 17, 1935, in Chicago, was the older of two children born to Gladys and Robert. Johnson attended Roosevelt University in Chicago, earning a B.S. in sociology in 1958.

Following graduation, Johnson went on to work at the Chicago Housing Authority as a community relations aide. In 1965, he was hired at Sears Roebuck & Company, and rose to the position of vice president of specialty sales. In 1988, Johnson and his daughter partnered to form Bagcraft Corporation of America, a flexible packaging manufacturer, created as part of an initiative by PepsiCo and Frito-Lay to encourage the creation of minority-owned businesses suppliers. In 1991, Johnson and business partner Tom Bryce formed Johnson Bryce, Inc., as part of that same PepsiCo initiative. Johnson currently serves as CEO and chairman of the company. In 1997, with revenues exceeding \$25 million, Johnson Bryce, Inc., was named the Frito-Lay Flexible Packaging Supplier of the Year.

Johnson is also active with several organizations and universities. He is a trustee of LeMoyne Owen College and a member of the board of trustees of Clemson University's Packaging Science Department. He is a founding member of the Executive Leadership Council, a nonprofit corporation that provides a networking and leadership forum for African American executives. Johnson also serves on the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Johnson and his wife, Rose, live near Chicago and have two daughters.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Johnson was conducted by Adele Hodge on August 1, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate chief executive Robert Johnson (1935 - ) is the CEO of Johnson Bryce Co., a supplier of food packaging to PepsiCo.

## 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:

Johnson, Robert, 1935 June 17-

Hodge, Adele (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, Robert, 1935 June 17---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:

Business Chief Executive

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# HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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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 Johnson, August 1, 2003. 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).

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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 Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:27 ?

Robert Johnson was born on June 17, 1935. Born in 1905 in Belleville, Illinois, his mother, Gladys Cherry Johnson, was a seamstress and dressmaker and was gentle, generous and loving towards him and his younger brother, Paul Warren Johnson. His father, Robert L. Johnson, was born in 1895 in Hope, Arkansas and worked for the post office for forty years. Johnson grew up in a strict household, but was a mischievous child. During the war years, Chicago's South Side changed from a relatively stable community to a more transient one. Johnson was exposed to different people because his family rented rooms in its apartment at 49th Street and South Champlain to boarders during World War II. His father eventually saved approximately \$4000 from renting rooms to purchase his own apartment building. Johnson attended Willard Elementary School in Chicago where he showed behavioral problems, despite his teachers' best efforts to change his behavior.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:52 ?

Robert Johnson was raised on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois where his father worked at the post office and he remembers walking in Washington Park with his family and visiting his grandmother in St. Louis, Missouri during the summer. Johnson attended DuSable High School where he was a poor student until his junior year when his civics teacher, Mary Herrick, encouraged him to apply himself academically. Johnson was dissuaded from pursuing his interest in engineering by a high school counselor. After graduating from high school, he enrolled at Theodore Herzl Junior College in Chicago, where he majored in pre-law. After receiving his associate's degree, he enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1955. UIUC was Johnson's first experience at a majority white school and his first experience encountering wealthy students. Having worked at the Chicago Public Library in high school and junior college, Johnson also worked in the university library.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Robert Johnson describes experiencing racial discrimination as a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his subsequent decision to leave the university after one year. Johnson then enrolled at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois where he was influenced by well-known anthropology professor, John Gibbs St. Clair Drake, and decided to study sociology. After graduating from Roosevelt University in 1958, Johnson joined the U.S. Army where he was stationed in the South at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. After leaving the Army in 1960, Johnson began working for the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) as a community attendant relations aide. He later entered the CHA's management training program and became an assistant housing manager where he worked at Henry Horner Homes, Ida B. Wells Homes, ABLA Homes, and Cabrini-Green Homes. This sparked his interest in business.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:02 ?

Robert Johnson worked at the Chicago Housing Authority from 1960 to 1965 and comments on how the high-rise design of the CHA was chosen to increase profits for the agency rather than create an environment where families could thrive. In 1965, Johnson began working at Sears, Roebuck, & Company as an executive trainee at a store on 63rd Street and Halsted Avenue in Chicago where the store's staff was primarily white and the customers, increasingly black, which caused tension. Johnson was initially given assignments that were inappropriate for his status as a corporate trainee, but he eventually was appointed assistant manager of the store's toy department. Johnson recalls compensating a customer for the customer's missing layaway items. Johnson continued to encounter racial discrimination after moving into Sears C-Suite. He tells of being considered for a promotion only after reporting his manager to the personnel department.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:43 ?

Robert Johnson was searched as he left the Sears, Roebuck & Company building on Chicago, Illinois's West Side during the riots in 1968 following the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. During his career at Sears from 1965 to 1988, Johnson held several management positions and was appointed vice president of the men's apparel department. Johnson is a member of the Executive Leadership Council which was formed in 1986 for black senior executives. Founding members of the council included HistoryMakers James Kaiser, Elynor Williams, and Toni Fay. Johnson talks about some of the challenges of being an African American CEO, the racial discrimination he and other African Americans encounter in the corporate world and the leadership of

HistoryMaker Richard Parsons, former CEO of AOL Time Warner. At the age of fifty-five, Johnson decided to leave his senior position at Sears to begin his own packaging business.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Johnson, Section A2003\_172\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:54 ?

Robert Johnson purchased a majority interest in Bagcraft, a packaging company in Chicago, Illinois and partnered with the Bryce family in Memphis, Tennessee to form Johnson Bryce, Inc. in 1991. The company prints and laminates the packaging labels for a range of products. As of 2003, Johnson Bryce, Inc.'s customers included Frito Lay, Slim Fast, Kodak, and Hewlett Packard and Johnson's goal is to continue to expand and diversify the business. Johnson Bryce, Inc. at one point considered a merger with Procter & Gamble, but the deal failed because of a lack of significant synergy between the two companies. Johnson enjoys the independence that comes with running his own company and believes that small business owners must know their own business. He describes the permanency of racism in Corporate America, how he would like to be remembered and lists his favorites.