

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rodney E. Slater

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Slater, Rodney Earl, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rodney E. Slater,
Dates:	November 14, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:59:55).
Abstract:	Transportation lawyer and cabinet appointee Rodney E. Slater (1955 -) is the former U.S. Secretary of Transportation. Slater was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 14, 2003, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_267
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer Rodney Slater was born on February 23, 1955, in Tutwiler, Mississippi. By the age of six, Slater was picking cotton with his mother in order to earn money for a bicycle, and he continued to pick cotton throughout his youth to supplement the family income. He attended Eastern Michigan University on a scholarship, where he was captain of the football team and star of Eastern Michigan's national championship forensic team, graduating in 1977. He went on to attend the University of Arkansas School of Law, earning a J.D. degree in 1980.

Slater became an assistant Attorney General upon graduation from law school, and he remained in that position until 1982. It was during that time that he met then-governor Bill Clinton. In 1983, Clinton named him one of his assistants, where he worked first in the economic and community affairs areas, and then later as special assistant for community and minority affairs. In 1987, Clinton named Slater to the Arkansas Highway Commission, where he became chairman in 1992. During this time, Slater served as director of government affairs for Arkansas State University. Following the election of Clinton as President of the United States, Slater was named the director of the Federal Highway Administration, and in 1997, he was named Secretary of Transportation, a position he held until the end of the Clinton administration. Today he is with the law firm of Patton Boggs LLP.

Slater is involved in numerous civic organizations, including the Arkansas Children's Hospital Community for the Future, the Boy Scouts of America and the Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation, among others. He has been named one of the "100 Most Influential Black Americans" by *Ebony*, and has received an Albert Schweitzer Leadership Award and an honorary doctorate from Howard University. Slater and his wife, Cassandra Wilkins, have two children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rodney E. Slater was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 14, 2003, in

Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Transportation lawyer and cabinet appointee Rodney E. Slater (1955 -) is the former U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

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:

Slater, Rodney Earl, 1955-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Slater, Rodney Earl, 1955---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Dept. of Transportation.

Occupations:

Transportation Lawyer

Cabinet Appointee

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers|PoliticalMakers

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 Rodney E. Slater, November 14, 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).

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 Rodney E. Slater, Section A2003_267_001_001, TRT: 0:29:40 ?
Rodney E. Slater, former U.S. Secretary of Transportation, describes his family background. His mother, Velma Lee Slater-Brewer, was born December 18, 1937 in or around Des Arc, Arkansas. Her father, Salone Slater, was a sharecropper and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and her mother, Bessie Glasson Slater, was a domestic worker. Slater recounts stories from his mother's upbringing working in the cotton fields of Jefferson County and Cotton

Plant, Arkansas. He describes how one year, when there was too much to harvest by daylight, the family picked cotton by the light of the moon. Slater does not know his biological father, but his stepfather, Earl Brewer Jr., was born December 29, 1933 in Lee County, Arkansas to Earl Brewer Sr. and his wife, both domestic workers and farmers in Marianna, Arkansas. Slater reflects upon his stepfather's work ethic, and lists his four younger siblings. His earliest memories are of watching cars along Highway 79 in Marianna and wondering where they were going.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney E. Slater, Section A2003_267_001_002, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Rodney E. Slater talks about growing up in Marianna, Arkansas. He attended Strong Elementary School, named for educator Anna P. Strong, a colleague of civil rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune. Often, he had to walk along the railroad tracks to get to school where he observed how the tracks separated communities and symbolized the hardships of poor African Americans. Slater also recalls his childhood exposure to the intellectual community of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where the University of Arkansas is located. He talks about the history of eastern Arkansas, from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movement, and lists prominent Arkansans including Confederate generals and Reconstruction Era African American politicians. At Strong Middle School in Marianna and Lee Senior High School in Robert E. Lee County, Arkansas, Slater became increasingly cognizant of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. He recalls Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1968 assassination in nearby Memphis, Tennessee and the struggles of school integration.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney E. Slater, Section A2003_267_001_003, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Rodney E. Slater recounts his college years at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in Ypsilanti. While attending Lee Senior High School in Lee County, Arkansas, he participated in a student strike to protest the slow pace of integration. As a running back on the football team, he received a scholarship to EMU upon graduating from Lee in 1973. At EMU, Slater had his first serious exposure to a diverse student body, including not only black and white students, but international students and people from Michigan's Arab and East Asian immigrant communities. Slater talks about his college football career and about the coaches, friends, and teammates that inspired and helped him. He also describes his intellectual development, and how he became involved in the EMU's forensics team. He majored in speech communication and hoped to attend law school. Through the forensics team, as well as earlier exposure to the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and others, Slater developed a passion for rhetoric.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney E. Slater, Section A2003_267_001_004, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Rodney E. Slater describes his year on the forensics team of Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in Ypsilanti. He recounts how, when he joined the team his senior year in 1976, they showed him a tape of an after-dinner speech by one of their previous champions. The speech dealt with racial stereotypes, and while he was offended at first, he was impressed by its powerful message and committed to learning how to deliver such speeches. He participated in national forensics meets at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and at George Mason University, outside Washington, D.C. in Fairfax, Virginia. There, he met speakers from top schools throughout the country. Slater shares the advice from a colleague at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois about listening to one's own voice in the dark, and talks about President Bill Clinton's oratorical skills. He also talks about prominent African American athletes, and about college football since the years he played in the 1970s.