

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Lee

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lee, James Oscar, 1912-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Lee,
Dates:	December 5, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:12:21).
Abstract:	High school mechanics teacher James Lee (1912 - 2005) taught aviation and engine mechanics to white pilots in WWII and then taught in the Chicago Public Schools for fifty years. Lee was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 5, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_296
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired Chicago public school teacher and veteran World War II Naval aircraft maintenance instructor, James Oscar Lee was born April 1, 1912 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. With family roots in rural Gloucester, Virginia, Lee grew up amid the row houses of North Philadelphia. He graduated from Central High School in 1930 with a B.S. in industrial arts. Central High, founded in 1836 and the second oldest high school in America, was at one time authorized to grant baccalaureate degrees. He went on to attend traditionally black, Cheyney State Teachers College in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, graduating with another B.S. degree in industrial arts in 1934. Lee also attended the University of Pennsylvania.

A caterer in 1938, his teaching career began at James Adams Senior High School in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, where he taught from 1939 to 1942. At the onset of World War II, Lee served at the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Chicago, Illinois. At this facility, which is now Chicago Vocational High School, Lee taught aviation engine mechanics exclusively to white soldiers. Black soldiers were not chosen to learn aviation engine maintenance. Later, in the South, Lee was not allowed to teach whites who needed to know aircraft maintenance because he was black. These restrictions rendered him idle for long periods of time. In order to work and travel, Lee became a chief carpenter's mate.

In 1948, the Chicago Board of Education's new Dunbar Trade School employed Lee. Unfortunately for black students, Dunbar's status as a "trade" school was soon changed to "vocational" school. This change meant a loss of true union apprenticeship programs and the guaranteed jobs that followed. Lee was also a pioneer homeowner in Chicago's Park Manor neighborhood. Facing threats of violence, Lee and his family endured and lived in the home for over fifty years. After fifty-one years of teaching and numerous citations for superior performance at Dunbar, Lee retired as teacher emeritus in 1997.

James Lee passed away on July 15, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Lee was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 5, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. High school mechanics teacher James Lee (1912 - 2005) taught aviation and engine mechanics to white pilots in WWII and then taught in the Chicago Public Schools for fifty years.

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:

Lee, James Oscar, 1912-2005

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Lee, James Oscar, 1912-2005--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

High School Mechanics Teacher

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 James Lee, December 5, 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 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).

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 James Lee, Section
A2003_296_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 2003/12/05

James Lee was born on April 1, 1912 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lee's maternal and paternal grandparents both owned farms in Gloucester County, Virginia. His paternal grandfather also raised racehorses. Lee remembers visiting Gloucester County as a child and fishing for oysters in the Chesapeake Bay. Lee's parents, Carrie Ward Lee and Walter Lee, met in Gloucester County and relocated to Philadelphia soon after their marriage. During Lee's childhood, his father largely abandoned the family although he remained in Philadelphia. Lee lived in North Philadelphia with his maternal grandmother, two siblings, and mother, who worked as a domestic and freelance cook to support the family. He devised a rudimentary radio as a child, worked in a print shop, and attended Episcopal church services. Lee lived close to the Pearl Theater, where entertainers such as comedians Jodie and Susie Edwards and musicians Count Basie and Jimmie Lunceford performed. He talks about a device called a busybody.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lee, Section
A2003_296_001_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2003/12/05

James Lee crafted toys for himself and his siblings as a child. He talks about several elementary school teachers he had at John F. Reynolds School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Lee attended Philadelphia's Central High School, a racially integrated science magnet school, from 1929 through 1933. Lee held several jobs while in high school; he cleaned teachers' cars during the academic year and worked at the Spray Beach Hotel in Beach Haven, New Jersey during the summers. Lee wanted to become a teacher so after graduating from Central High, he enrolled in Cheyney State Teachers College, which was majority female with only about fifty male students. He used personal savings and scholarship funds to pay for his tuition. Lee interacted with Bayard Rustin before the noted

civil rights activist was expelled from Cheyney. He talks about radio and television appliances from the 1940s and his relationship with students and parents as a teacher at Dunbar Trade School in Chicago, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lee, Section
A2003_296_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2003/12/05

James Lee majored in industrial arts at Cheyney State Teachers College in Cheyney, Pennsylvania. He crafted a block front desk as part of his undergraduate studies and played basketball and football against other HBCUs. A strict code of conduct governed student life. After graduating in 1934, he worked for a Jewish catering business before obtaining a position at James Adams School, a historically black elementary school, in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. After two years at James Adams, Lee enlisted in the U.S. Navy and moved to Chicago, Illinois to teach aircraft engine maintenance to white soldiers at the Naval Air Technical Training Center. He wanted to work with black soldiers at the nearby Great Lakes Naval Training Center but remained at the training center until its closure near the end of WWII. Lee then held a variety of civilian positions in Fresno, California and served as a chief carpenter's mate until being discharged in 1946. He began teaching at Chicago's Dunbar Trade School in 1948.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lee, Section
A2003_296_001_004, TRT: 0:30:41 2003/12/05

James Lee began teaching at Dunbar Trade School in Chicago, Illinois in 1948. Dunbar was founded during WWII to educate African Americans in the manual arts. Although teachers at Dunbar were unionized, graduates were discriminated against and often barred from union membership. Lee was a member of a cabinet makers union. Soon after he began teaching at Dunbar, Principal Clifford Campbell resigned and the Chicago Board of Education transformed the school into a vocational high school, dismantling the union apprenticeship programs in the process. Lee based his teaching philosophy on respect between student and teacher; two accounts of his interactions with misbehaving students illustrates this principle. He attributes many student behaviors to a lack

of parental discipline. Lee explains how the disappearance of trade schools in Chicago has led to a decline in the city's pool of black skilled laborers and contributed to the economic disenfranchisement of the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lee, Section
A2003_296_001_005, TRT: 0:13:10 2003/12/05

James Lee, with his wife Verlena Lee, purchased a home in the Park Manor neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois in 1953. Settled primarily by Irish and German immigrants, Park Manor experienced a rapid demographic shift in the 1950s as African Americans moved into the neighborhood in large numbers and white flight followed. After purchasing their home, the Lees were assigned police protection. Lee recalls experiencing little discrimination, and he shares a story about purchasing house awnings from a neighbor. He has consistently advocated for neighborhood beautification and expresses frustration at the lack of interest in alley clean-up. Lee concludes by reflecting upon his legacy; considering what he would have done differently in life; and describing how he would like to be remembered.