

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

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Johnson, George, 1927-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 18, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:48:08).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Personal care executive George Johnson (1927 - ) is the founder of Johnson Products Company, which revolutionized the hair care market with products designed for African American women. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 18, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_303
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

George E. Johnson, Sr. was born in Mississippi on June 16, 1927, in a three-room sharecropper's shack. Following his parent's separation, Johnson moved to Chicago with his mother, Priscilla, in 1929. Johnson began working shining shoes at the age of eight while attending Doolittle Elementary School. He then attended Wendell Phillips High School for three years before quitting to work full-time.

Johnson worked during the day as a busboy, and in the evenings he set pins in a bowling alley. In 1944, he went to work for S.B. Fuller, a black-owned cosmetics firm, as a production chemist. In 1954, at the encouragement of Herbert Martin, a German-born chemist at S.B. Fuller, Johnson left the company and founded Johnson Products, focusing on the African American male hair care market. The seed money for the company came from a loan of \$500 that had been earmarked as a vacation loan. Within three years, Johnson Products found success in the women's hair care market with the development of Ultra Sheen, a revolutionary hair straightener that could easily be used in the home. Over the next few decades, Johnson Products continued to grow, focusing its efforts on not only creating quality products, and also on training cosmetologists on proper usage. In 1964, Johnson founded Independence Bank, and during the 1960s he became the exclusive sponsor behind the nationally syndicated dance show *Soul Train*. In 1971, Johnson Products became the first African American-owned company to be listed on the American Stock Exchange. That same year, Johnson became the first African American to serve on the board of directors of Commonwealth Edison.

In the mid-1980s, more and more competitors began entering the African American hair care industry and the Federal Trade Commission forced Johnson Products to put warning labels on lye-based products, without requiring Revlon to do the same. In 1989, Johnson and his wife of thirty-nine years, Joan, divorced. As a part of the divorce settlement, Johnson transferred 49.5 percent of the company over to her. Their son, Eric, took over the reins, but left the company in 1992, and the company was sold to IVAX for \$61 million the following year. In 1995, Johnson and Joan remarried, and in 1998, Carson Products bought the company.

During the course of his career, Johnson received numerous honors. *Ebony* magazine awarded him with its American Black Achievement Award in 1978, and in 1979 Johnson received the public service award of the Harvard Club for the work of the George E. Johnson Foundation and the George E. Johnson Educational Fund. He has been active with a number of civic organizations, as well, including the Chicago Urban League, the Lyric Opera, Northwestern Memorial Hospital and Operation PUSH.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with George Johnson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on December 18, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Personal care executive George Johnson (1927 - ) is the founder of Johnson Products Company, which revolutionized the hair care market with products designed for African American women.

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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:

Johnson, George, 1927-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Johnson, George, 1927- --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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Johnson Products Co.

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## Occupations:

Personal Care Executive

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|StyleMakers

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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 George Johnson, December 18, 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 George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:15 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson describes his family background, detailing his parents' separation and his subsequent move to Chicago with his mother. Johnson describes his neighborhood in Chicago, naming several prominent people in the community. Johnson explains how his entrepreneurial spirit showed itself at an early age, as he lists the many jobs and schemes he used to start making money when he was a child.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:18 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson shares memories of his child neighborhood in Chicago, and explains the start of his entrepreneurial career as a paper boy for the 'Chicago Herald-American' newspaper. After talking about his personality as a teenager, Johnson explains why he dropped out of school to become employed full-time at Fuller Products Company. Johnson describes S. B. Fuller and talks about how Fuller influenced his own development. Johnson then describes his duties while working for Fuller Products.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:50 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson details the success of Fuller Products Company, and describes the various chemists with whom he worked, including the innovative Dr. Herbert Martini. Johnson lists the many successful products he helped to sell all over Chicago. Johnson then details the beginnings of his own Johnson Products Company, which turned on his discovery of a man with an all-chemical hair straightener that needed refinement. Johnson also explains how he met his wife.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:19 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson details the early days of his business, explaining his split with original business partner Orville Nelson, and sharing how he was able to secure his first loan. Johnson describes the early production processes, and explains how he used on-site training to show barbers how the products should be used. Johnson discusses his first successful product, Ultra Wave Hair Culture, and talks about his efforts to expand his market in cities around the country.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:22 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson details the expansion of his company, which began with the decision to develop hair care products for women and sell them in beauty salons. Johnson explains the strategies behind the expansion, and how he changed the company's personnel to keep it successful, naming some of the key employees during the period of expansion. Johnson also explains how the company survived a fire that gutted its headquarters in 1964.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:53 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson details the financial side of his company, and lists many of the investors with whom he has worked over the years, including a continued discussion about S. B. Fuller, and the founding of Independence Bank. Johnson also discusses the advertisement of his products, including his involvement in 'Essence' magazine, and the development of the product Afro Sheen as a response to the Black is Beautiful movement.
- Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:19 ?  
Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson details the expansion of Johnson Products into public consciousness. He describes the company's TV programs, 'And Beautiful' and explains the impact of 'Soul Train' on the

company's success. Johnson also discusses his interactions with B. B. King, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson. Johnson then explains the decision to go public with Johnson Products Company in 1969.

Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_008, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson continues to discuss his company's initial public offering in 1969, and details the increased competition that resulted. In particular, Johnson discusses his feud with Revlon and the Federal Trade Commission, which occurred after warning labels on his Ultra Sheen product resulted in lost market share. Johnson explains how the company survived that attack, and begins to discuss introducing his products into Nigeria.

Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_009, TRT: 0:31:19 ?

Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson discusses the challenges of doing business in Nigeria and explains why he pulled his company out of that nation. Johnson details the factors leading to declining profits for his company, and describes the series of events leading to the subsequent sale of the company, which Johnson would have opposed had he remained in charge. Johnson acknowledges that the black hair care industry is almost non-existent, but points to a number of successful black entrepreneurs in other industries that have taken up where he left off.

Video Oral History Interview with George Johnson, Section A2003\_303\_001\_010, TRT: 0:10:55 ?

Johnson Products Company founder George Johnson talks about his friend Whitley Phipps's efforts to improve the lives of children whose parents are incarcerated. Johnson then remembers his mother, highlighting her best qualities. Johnson then discusses his charity efforts with his educational foundation, and considers his legacy and the future of the black community.