

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

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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>	Sengstacke, Robert A. (Robert Abbott), 1943-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 19, 2003
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2003
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:30:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photojournalist Robert Sengstacke (1943 - 2017 ) is president of the Chicago Defender newspaper. Sengstacke was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 19, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2003_305
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Photographer and heir of a distinguished African American newspaper publisher, Robert Abbott Sengstacke, popularly known as “Bobby,” was born May 29, 1943, in Chicago, Illinois. Named after the founder of the *Chicago Defender*, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, Bobby attended the University of Chicago Lab School, Manument boarding school in Pennsylvania and Howalton Day School in Chicago before attending Hyde Park High School. Sengstacke graduated from Central YMCA High School in 1962. Artistic and restless, he attended Florida’s Bethune Cookman College for three and a half years before returning to Chicago.

Growing up with the newspaper gave Sengstacke unique access to important events and people. Learning to shoot from Le Mont Mac Lemore, Billy Abernathy and Bob Black of the *Chicago Sun-Times* in the mid-1950s, Sengstacke’s thousands of black and white photographs of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Muhammad Ali, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Imamu Baraka and other well-known figures, places and events were widely published. His compositions, *Spiritual Grace* and *Saviour’s Day*, are included in the “We Shall Overcome” exhibit and are from his days as staff photographer for the Nation Of Islam’s periodical, *Muhammad Speaks*. His work also appears in most Black Arts Movement anthologies of the 1960s and 1970s. Widely collected and archived, Sengstacke was recognized for his photography.

Sengstacke returned to the family business, joining with other family members in working with the *Chicago Defender*. He was active in helping to increase the circulation of the paper, which remains as one of the nation’s last African American daily newspapers.

Sengstacke was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 19, 2003.

Sengstacke passed away on March 7, 2017.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Sengstacke was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 19, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photojournalist Robert Sengstacke (1943 - 2017 ) is president of the Chicago Defender newspaper.

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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:

Sengstacke, Robert A. (Robert Abbott), 1943-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sengstacke, Robert A. (Robert Abbott), 1943- --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:

Photojournalist

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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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 Sengstacke, December 19, 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 Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_001, TRT: 0:30:33  
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Robert Sengstacke was born on May 29, 1943 in Chicago, Illinois. His mother, Myrtle Picou Sengstacke, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana but moved to Los Angeles, California with her well-off aunt and uncle after her mother died. Her grandmother was a voodoo healer. Sengstacke's father, John H. Sengstacke, comes from a line of German-African descent. Sengstacke's great-great-grandfather, Herman Henry Sengstacke, was a first mate from Bremen, Germany and made frequent trips to Savannah, Georgia where he bought the freedom of a slave, Tama Melrose, who became his wife. They lived in

Germany and had two children, one was John Herman Henry Sengstacke, who returned to Savannah for business upon his father's death and met African American widow Flora Abbott and her young son, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, who went on to found the Chicago Defender. They married and had children, including Herman Alexander Sengstacke, Sengstacke's grandfather. Sengstacke talks about his German relatives and Robert S. Abbott's family.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:42 ?

Robert Sengstacke tells the story of his great-uncle, Robert S. Abbott, founder of the Chicago Defender, and his drive to succeed stemming from being rejected by a light-skinned girl when he was young. Sengstacke references Abbott's biography, 'The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott,' by Roi Ottley, which mentions his relationship with orator Roscoe Conkling Simmons. Abbott used the Chicago Defender as a platform to campaign against lynching, and encourage the integration of unions and black migration to the North for job opportunities; The Defender is credited with fermenting the Great Migration. Although it was banned in the South, it was distributed widely by Pullman porters traveling from Chicago throughout the country. Upon Abbott's death in 1940, John H. Sengstacke, Sengstacke's father, ran the newspaper, and formed the National Newspaper Publisher's Association and Amalgamated Publishers, Inc. Sengstacke describes the role of the black press in discovering Jackie Robinson.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Robert Sengstacke describes the relationship between his father, John H. Sengstacke, and politician William L. Dawson, which began when Sengstacke helped Dawson become a committeeman in Chicago, Illinois by persuading him to become a Democrat. Together, they built the African American voting bloc in Chicago and helped bring African Americans into the Democratic Party, contributing to President Harry S. Truman's victory. Truman was to have an integrated inaugural ball, and when Sengstacke and Dawson found out that African Americans had not been invited, Sengstacke paid for everyone's ticket to the ball. John H. Sengstacke helped enforce the integration of the U.S. military for twenty years as a member of Truman's integration commission. He was also integral in getting national advertising in African American press, and enjoyed the success of the Chicago Defender's expansion in the 1950s. Robert Sengstacke describes his mother's personality and reflects upon his personal legacy beyond the Defender.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Robert Sengstacke lived in the Rosenwald Apartments on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois until the age of five, when his family moved into a house in the Kenwood neighborhood. Sengstacke attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, where his kindergarten teacher encouraged his art, then went to the progressive Manumit School in Bristol, Pennsylvania for 3rd, 4th and 6th grade. In 5th grade, he returned to Chicago to attend St. Ambrose Elementary School, a Catholic school where he did well under the strict supervision of the nuns, and Howalton Day School in Chicago for 7th and 8th grade. Sengstacke did not find academics stimulating for his creative mind, instead day-dreaming and drawing during class. He attended Hyde Park Academy High School but due to his poor grades, transferred to Central YMCA High School in Chicago, where he motivated himself to finish high school,

although it still took him an extra year. Sengstacke reflects on making the Sengstacke name well-known through his photography.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:23  
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Robert Sengstacke became interested in photography as a teenager fascinated by the process of developing photos. His father bought him his first camera and photographers at the Chicago Defender encouraged his interest by bringing him to shoots. Sengstacke continued drawing, but began to focus more on photography after one of his teacher at Hyde Park Academy High School in Chicago, Illinois stole his work. His hobby grew into a business by the time he left Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida, and he was photographing Civil Rights leaders such as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but focused more on the participants of the Movement. He was the first non-Muslim photographer to work for the Nation of Islam at Muhammad Speaks, and was active in the Black Arts Movement, documenting African American life through natural light photography, an innovation during the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by HistoryMaker Gordon Parks. Sengstacke reflects positively upon not studying photography in school.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_006, TRT: 0:30:29  
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Robert Sengstacke left Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1964 to focus on photography. He reflects upon the photographers of the Civil Rights Movement and how their photographs changed the way people saw the movement. He describes how documenting the growth of the African American community during the African American renaissance helped him to realize his identity as an artist. Sengstacke talks about his most sought after photographs, which includes his work on the Wall of Respect. He describes the types of cameras he has used throughout his career, and the pros and cons of digital photography. Sengstacke talks about his involvement in the business side of the Chicago Defender and his father's management style.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Sengstacke, Section A2003\_305\_001\_007, TRT: 0:28:40  
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Robert Sengstacke talks about the Chicago Defender's financial difficulties, including a large amount of debt, following his father's death in 1997. After taking over control of the paper from an interim trustee, Sengstacke and his cousin Thomas Maurice Sengstacke Picou were able to make all of the papers the company owns profitable and pay down the debt. They still face the challenges of increasing the paper's circulation and appealing to younger readers. Sengstacke hopes to target an audience under fifty years old, by focusing on community stories such as elementary and high school sporting events and following new trends in fashion. At the time of the interview, Sengstacke's daughter wrote for the newspaper as a New York City correspondent. Sengstacke describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He concludes by reflecting upon his life and his family's legacy.