

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ruth Wells

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wells, Ruth, 1934-2009
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells,
Dates:	January 15, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:37:00).
Abstract:	Community leader Ruth Wells (1934 - 2009) was a member of the Contract Buyers League, assisted black homebuyers fight housing discrimination in Chicago, Illinois, and was an advocate against police brutality. Wells was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 15, 2004, in Oak Park, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_002
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Community leader Ruth Wells was born on August 1, 1934, to Mettie Johnson and George Darnell, in West Point, Mississippi. Wells attended Cola Springs School, Cedar Grove School, and Lamont County Training School in Caledonia, Mississippi . At thirteen, she moved to Gary, Indiana, and attended Theodore Roosevelt High School. By 1950, Wells had dropped out of school to work for the Standard Oil Company in Whiting, Indiana. In 1952, she married James "Ira" Wells and in 1959 she began working for Chicago's 3M Company. The Wells bought a home on land contract, where they fell victim to Chicago realtors known as "panic peddlers."

In 1968, when her West Side home insurance rates rivaled those of Chicago's North Shore residents, Wells confronted the realtors head on. Father James Egan (the late Monsignor Egan) introduced her to Father Jack Macnamara, a young Jesuit organizer whose resources honed Wells' leadership skills. She became the voice of hundreds of African American homebuyers who formed the Contract Buyers League (CBL). Civil rights attorney, Robert Ming, and pro bono attorneys from the law firm of Jenner & Block filed a lawsuit, and by 1972, most of the unethical "contracts" were converted to mortgages.

In 1972, Wells was recruited by Mary Powers to join Citizens' Alert, a criminal justice watch organization. There, she organized citizens and confronted powerful figures like Chicago Police Superintendent James Rochford and City Personnel Director Cahill. In 1976, she was hired as an Information Officer by the Office of the Village Clerk of Oak Park, where she retired in 1990.

Ruth Wells passed away on June 14, 2009, in Chicago, Illinois.

Ruth Wells was interviewed by *the HistoryMakers* on January 15, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ruth Wells was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 15, 2004, in Oak Park, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community leader Ruth Wells (1934 - 2009) was a member of the Contract Buyers League, assisted black homebuyers fight housing discrimination in Chicago, Illinois, and was an advocate against police brutality.

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:

Wells, Ruth, 1934-2009

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wells, Ruth, 1934-2009 --Interviews

African American women civic leaders--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Community Leader

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Ruth Wells, January 15, 2004. 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 Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_001, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Ruth Wells was born on August 1, 1934 in West Point, Mississippi. She is the youngest of ten siblings. Her mother, Mettie Johnson, was from Vernon, Alabama and moved to West Point after marrying. She died unexpectedly when Wells was two years old. Wells' father, George Darnell, might have been from Alabama and came from a family of sharecroppers. Wells speculates that he moved to Mississippi in search of better work. The family moved to Caledonia,

Mississippi when she was still a baby. Wells remembers her time there, including her mother's passing and having an adult explain what death was. She also remembers learning to pray prior to beginning school. After Wells' mother's death, her father remarried. She lived with them and several of her siblings until she was about eight years old. She then went to live with her older sisters, including with one who lived in Indiana. Wells concludes by comparing parenting styles from her childhood to the present.

African American families--Southern States.

Sharecropping--Southern States.

African American children.

African American parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_002, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Ruth Wells enjoyed Christmas and Thanksgiving as a child because during that time of the year, her house was filled with fragrant fruits. She recalls other childhood memories, such as a time when her older sister was bitten by a snake, and when she caught a life-threatening case of pneumonia and was healed by a group of older women. Wells attended Cola Springs School and Cedar Grove in Mississippi, and Lamont County Training School in Vernon, Alabama which was a private boarding school that required uniforms. Wells remembers the school's principal and assistant principal. She enjoyed English class and history. As a teenager, Wells moved to Gary, Indiana, where her second oldest sister lived. She attended Roosevelt High School where one of her classmates defended her after a teacher tried to humiliate her for being Southern and darker-skinned. In about 1949, Wells moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she earned her high school diploma. Wells talks about the importance of not playing favorites with one's children.

Children--Diseases.

Education, Secondary--Mississippi.

Brothers and sisters.

African American children.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_003, TRT: 0:30:00 ?

Ruth Wells lived with her older sister in Gary, Indiana as a teenager. Her niece, who was almost her age, disliked her because she was southern. Wells left school to work at Standard Oil in Whiting, Indiana. At the time, the company was forced to hire black women or risk losing government contracts. The company began asking for physical proof of a high school diploma to curb black applicants. Wells was hired, despite not having completed high school. As black women were hired, many white women quit and those who stayed were offered bonus pay to train the new employees. Wells recalls some of her white coworkers; one woman was illiterate, another became less prejudiced after working with black women. Wells worked at the Gary YMCA; she vividly remembers the facility's unsanitary kitchen. After getting married at the age of twenty-one, she moved to the Chicago, Illinois' West Side with her husband and began to work for 3M. Wells describes South Siders' disdain for the West Side and remembers the Civil Rights era.

African American couples.

African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Social aspects.

Standard Oil Company--Race relations.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Ruth Wells' husband voted Republican in presidential elections, while she was a

Democrat. In approximately 1959, the couple bought a home on Chicago's West Side" on contract" which they were told could be converted into a conventional mortgage. After paying her down payment, Wells realized that affordable conventional mortgages were unavailable to African Americans. She hired a lawyer to fight for the mortgage. After a year of receiving no support from her lawyer, she sought help from a local priest, Father Egan, who directed her to a young seminarian named Jack Macnamara, through whom she became involved with the Contract Buyers League. Macnamara encouraged her to speak at a meeting and encourage others to tell their home-buying stories. The group met every Wednesday and gathered a group of lawyers from top Chicago law firms, including Jenner & Block and Boodell & Sears. Wells describes how realtors incited fear amongst white homeowners on the West Side as they cheated African American buyers.

Cooperative societies--Illinois--Chicago.

Discrimination in housing--Illinois--Chicago.

Contract Buyers' League (Chicago, Ill.).

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_005, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Ruth Wells recalls that the Contract Buyers League's (CBL) lawyers initially had difficulty finding a basis for their suit. At the time, it was not illegal for realtors to inflate housing prices for African Americans; African American attorney Bob Ming was the only lawyer able to find a loophole that allowed the homeowners to ask for renegotiated contracts. Wells describes Ming's personality and how the media distorted his tax evasion conviction in 1970. Wells also describes other CBL attorneys. Wells attempted to make contact with Cardinal John Cody because the Archdiocese of Chicago owned property on the city's South Side where many African American South Siders faced the same discriminatory housing practices. Wells frequently spoke publicly on behalf of CBL and reflects on how the organization helped her realize she could change her situation. She also remembers ways she was able to force realtors to renegotiate and CBL's role in helping homeowners renegotiate contracts.

Contract Buyers' League (Chicago, Ill.).

Discrimination in housing--Illinois--Chicago.

Cooperative societies--Law and legislation--Illinois--Chicago--Cases.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_006, TRT: 0:31:00 ?

Ruth Wells remembers confronting her landlord about overcharging her for insurance. Wells also remembers a contract renegotiation in which the opposing lawyer's argument favored the Contract Buyer's League (CBL). The following day, the lawyer was hospitalized for a supposed eye problem. Wells describes failed attempts to make contact with Mayor Richard J. Daley and Cardinal John Cody. Wells talks about how they used shame to get realtors to renegotiate and how she was able to get Walter Cronkite to do a segment on CBL's efforts. In the early 1970s, CBL's efforts came to a close as the last homeowners renegotiated their contracts. She reflects on what might have moved people to agitate for greater change on Chicago's West Side after 1968 and talks about the importance of door-knocking and building community trust. In 1972, she began working for Citizens Alert, an anti-police brutality group. Through Citizens Alert, she called for psychological testing for potential policemen.

Contract Buyers' League (Chicago, Ill.).

Discrimination in housing--Illinois--Chicago.

Police brutality--United States.

Citizens Alert (Organization).

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_007, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Ruth Wells remembers an interaction with Chicago Police Superintendent James Rochford at a police board meeting. She refused to sit down after her allotted speaking time was up until Rochford answered her question. At further meetings, he never tried to cut her off again. During her time with the Contract Buyers League, the organization was infiltrated by a member of the Red Squad, the police department's Subversive Activities Unit, posing as an ordinary housewife. Wells talks about lawyer Bob Ming's prison sentencing in 1973 and her own involvement with Citizens Alert beginning in 1976. She describes her concerns for the African American community and reflects upon power, morality, black unity and the breakdown of the African American community. Wells also reflects upon her life, legacy, and how she would like to be remembered.

Police training--United States.

Ethics.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_008, TRT: 0:07:00 ?

Ruth Wells narrates her photographs.