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

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells,

Dates: January 15, 2004

Bulk Dates: 2004

Physical Description: 8 Betacam SP videocassettes (3:38:25).

Abstract: Community leader Ruth Wells (1934 - 2009 ) was a member of the Contract Buyers League and assisted black homebuyers fight discrimination in housing 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 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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Community leader Ruth Wells (1934 - 2009) was a member of the Contract Buyers League and assisted black homebuyers fight discrimination in housing 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:

Ruth Wells.
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer).
Stearns, Scott (Videographer).

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews.
Ruth Wells--Interviews.

Organizations:
HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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


Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 7/27/2011 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, January 15, 2004

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_001, TRT: 0:31:03
2004/01/15

Ruth Wells slates the interview and lists her favorites. She provides information about the history of her parents, Mettie Johnson and George Darnell. Wells talks about how sharecropping was a different form of slavery and reflects on the experiences of her father’s family, who were sharecroppers in the South. She gives her view on the importance of the responsibilities and commitment necessary to be a parent.

African American families-Southern states.
Ruth Wells discusses her childhood, specifically during the time that she was sick with the measles, mumps and pneumonia. She gives credit to her middle school teachers at Lamont County Training School in Caledonia, Mississippi, for providing her with the values of good-living, and provides anecdotes about them. Wells talks about how important her siblings were to her well-being as a child.

Ruth Wells talks about moving to Gary, Indiana at thirteen years old, and her educational and social experiences at Theodore Roosevelt High School. She married her husband at age twenty-one and they remained married until his death in 1981. Wells talks about working at Standard Oil in Indiana after leaving high school, and the racial discrimination that occurred. She goes on to talk about the tensions during the 1950s between the black communities living in the South and West sides of Chicago.

Ruth Wells explains how African Americans struggled during the 1950s to attain bank mortgages. She talks about how she became involved in the Contract Buyers League, which was founded by Jack Macnamara, and what the organization aimed to do. Wells says that one of the goals of the organization was to prevent blockbusting.

Ruth Wells talks about Robert Ming, a lawyer who helped out at the Contract Buyers League, and the lawsuits against F&F Investment and Universal Builders.

Ruth Wells reflects on her own experience with discriminatory housing.
practices and the man who would not sell her a mortgage for her house. Wells also describes some of the organizational tactics used by the Contract Buyers' League and as well as her involvement with Citizens’ Alert, which worked towards psychological testing as part of the police training process, to prevent police brutality.

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: 0:28:25
2004/01/15

Ruth Wells recounts her attendance at police board meetings, where she advocated for the psychological testing of police officers. She also discusses the government's creation of an organization called the Red Squad in order to infiltrate Citizens’ Alert. Wells provides her perspective on the status of the African American community in the present and in the future, and on the relationship between power and morality.

Police training--United States.
African Americans--forecasting.
Ethics.

Video Oral History Interview with Ruth Wells, Section A2004_002_001_008, TRT: 0:06:54
2004/01/15

Ruth Wells narrates personal photographs.