

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Spencer Leak, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Leak, Spencer, 1937- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., |
| Dates: | January 21, 2004 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2004 |
| Physical Description: | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:45:16). |
| Abstract: | Funeral director and state government official Spencer Leak, Sr. (1937 -) was president and CEO of Leak and Sons Funeral Home and has worked in a series of government public service positions. Leak was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 21, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2004_004 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Spencer Leak, Sr. was born April 15, 1937, to pioneering Chicago mortician A.R. Leak, an insurance salesman from Arkansas who opened Unity Funeral Home in Chicago in 1933 and A.R. Leak Funeral Chapels in 1938. Leak and his three brothers grew up near 37th and State Streets. Attending Raymond Elementary School, he graduated from Hyde Park High School in 1956. Leak went on to Wilson Junior College, and graduated from Worsham College of Mortuary Science in 1959.

Serving in the United States Army in 1960, Leak was stationed in West Germany.

He was married briefly to R&B singer Mavis Staples, and later became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1964, Leak joined 10,000 activists led by his father and Reverend Clay Evans to protest the racially segregated Oak Woods Cemetery. That same year, A.R. Leak Funeral Home would open its doors to thousands who wanted to view the body of singing legend Sam Cooke. Leak became president and funeral director of Leak and Sons Funeral Chapel in 1970, assuming a major role in running the family business. He returned to school, earning his B.S. degree from Daniel Hale Williams College in 1979 and his M.S. degree in criminal justice from Chicago State University in 1981. Leak then held a series of positions in public service: Consumer Affairs Chief, Illinois Attorney General (1982-1985); Executive Director, Cook County Department of Corrections (1987-1991); Deputy Chief Inspector-General, Illinois Secretary of State (1991-1993); Manager, Illinois Vehicle Services (1993-1999); Deputy Director, District 1, Illinois Department of Corrections (1993-1999); and Commissioner, Illinois Human Rights Commission (1999-present). Since 1993, Leak has served as President and CEO of Leak and Sons Funeral Home. He also coordinates the radio program, *It's Time Truth Speaks*, on WGCI-FM.

Leak lives in Chicago with his wife, Henrietta Leak, to whom he has been married for several decades; they have three sons.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Spencer Leak, Sr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 21, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Funeral director and state government official Spencer Leak, Sr. (1937 -) was president and CEO of Leak and Sons Funeral Home and has worked in a series of government public service positions.

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:

Leak, Spencer, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Leak, Spencer, 1937---Interviews

Civil servants--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Undertakers and undertaking--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

Occupations:

Funeral Director

State Government Official

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|PoliticalMakers

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 Spencer Leak, Sr., January 21, 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 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 Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_001, TRT: 0:29:50 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr. was born on April 15, 1937 in Chicago, Illinois. Leak's maternal grandfather was a wealthy landowner near Huntsville, Alabama. He leased his land to both black and white tenants before he lost most of it in the 1929 stock market crash. Leak's mother, Dorothy Steger Leak, who was very fair-skinned, grew up on her family's farm. Leak's father, Andrew Leak, Sr., grew up in a large household in Hensley, Arkansas. He moved to Chicago in the late 1920s and found work as a burial insurance salesman. Leak's parents married in Huntsville and following their marriage, Leak's mother joined his father in Chicago. After working as a washroom attendant at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, Leak's father attended Worsham College of Mortuary Science and became a partner of Unity Funeral Home in Chicago. In 1938, he founded A.R. Leak Funeral Home, but continued working various jobs to support his wife and three sons. Leak grew up in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood where he attended Raymond Elementary School.

Civil servants--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Undertakers and undertaking--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr. attended Raymond Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois' Bronzeville neighborhood. At eleven years old, he began working at his father's business, A.R.

Leak Funeral Home. Leak attended Englewood High School until his family moved to Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in the early 1950s. He graduated from Hyde Park High School in 1956, where the majority of students were Jewish or East Asian and included HistoryMakers Reverend Dr. Leon Finney, Jr. and Conrad Walter Worrill. Despite early encouragement from elementary school teachers, Leak put little effort into studying and instead, focused on working in the family funeral business. After graduating from high school, Leak briefly attended Woodrow Wilson Junior College in Chicago before transferring to Worsham College of Mortuary Science. Leaks talks about the advent of public housing projects in Bronzeville, the keys to running a successful funeral home business and Emmett Till's funeral in 1955.

Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr. viewed Emmett Till's dead body in Chicago, Illinois in 1955 and remembers precinct captains collecting names from funeral directors which later appeared on the voting lists in the 1960 presidential election. In 1959, Leak was drafted into the U.S. Army. He completed basic training at Fort Riley, Kansas and was transferred to Fort Knox, Kentucky for training as a high speed radio operator. From 1961 to 1962, he was stationed in Karlsruhe, West Germany. Upon returning to Chicago, Leak married R&B legend Mavis Staples of the Staples Singers and began to operate A. R. Leak Funeral Homes. He describes the public inquests coroners held at funeral homes over the bodies of homicide victims and the courtesy limousine service provided by funeral homes for black celebrities. He chauffeured Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on several of King's Chicago trips. In 1964, Leak's father and HistoryMaker Reverend Clay Evans led a protest against Oak Woods Cemetery for its discriminatory burial practices.

Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr.'s family's business, A.R. Leak Funeral Homes, relocated to South Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago, Illinois's Chatham neighborhood in 1959, after

the city seized their former property for construction of the Robert Taylor Homes public housing projects. Chatham had a bustling business district in the 1960s and 1970s. In the summer of 1966, Leak chauffeured Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Freedom Sunday Rally at Soldier Field and heard him preach at various South Side Baptist churches. Leak earned his B.S. degree from Daniel Hale Williams University in 1979 and his M.S. degree in corrections and criminal justice from Chicago State University in 1981. He held multiple municipal and state government positions in the 1980s and 1990s including director of the Cook County Department of Corrections; deputy director of the Illinois Department of Corrections; and commissioner of the Illinois Human Rights Commission. He shares his views on the prison-industrial complex in Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_005, TRT: 0:30:51 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr. was appointed director of the Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC) in 1987. He knew many of the inmates from his work at A.R. Leak Funeral Home in Chicago, Illinois. In the mid-1980s, the Blackstone Rangers' leader, Jeff Fort, was transferred to the CCDOC, and Leak brokered peace at the jail by promising to maintain Fort's detainee privileges. Leak prohibited the use of profanity at CCDOC. Leak resigned as director in 1991, and became chief inspector general for Illinois Secretary of State George Ryan, Sr. Leak founded Mothers Opposed to Murder to address Chicago's gun violence issues. He also joined the board of Black on Black Love, a nonprofit founded by HistoryMaker Edward Gardner. Leak describes how A.R. Leak Funeral Home arranged Sam Cooke's funeral in 1964 and Willie "The Wimp" Stokes, Jr.'s funeral in 1984. Leak describes his concerns for the African American community. Leak has three sons.

Video Oral History Interview with Spencer Leak, Sr., Section
A2004_004_001_006, TRT: 0:17:05 2004/01/21

Spencer Leak, Sr. talks about fellow Chicago, Illinois mortician A.A. "Sammy" Rayner's political party affiliation. He reflects upon his life, how he would like to

be remembered and his legacy. Leak concludes by narrating his photographs.