Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Carl Spight

Overview of the Collection

Repository: The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616
info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com

Creator: Spight, Carl, 1944-

Title: The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Carl Spight,

Dates: July 23, 2004

Bulk Dates: 2004

Physical Description: 7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:19:40).

Abstract: Academic administrator, physicist, and physics professor Carl Spight (1944 - ) held high ranking administrative and teaching positions at a range of academic and private research institutions, including Southern University, Morehouse College, AMAF Industries, Sonicraft, Incorporated, Clark Atlanta University, Jackson and Tull Incorporated, City Colleges of Chicago, and Chicago State University. Spight was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 23, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.

Identification: A2004_108

Language: The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Academic administrator, physicist, and physics professor Carl Spight was born on September 8, 1944 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Erma Mae White and William Herman Spight. He was inspired to be a nuclear physicist from watching television shows like Watch Mr. Wizard, Flash Gordon, and Captain Video and His Video Rangers. His childhood nickname, Mr. Radio, was earned by fixing his neighbor’s electronics. He attended Frances W. Parker School 56 where he arrived early to read the encyclopedias, achieved top grades, and earned a trip from the Freedoms Foundation to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Despite encountering racism at Arsenal High School, he won the state science fair and graduated in 1962. At his father’s suggestion, he attended Purdue University and received his B.S. degree in electrical engineering with honors in 1966. In 1971, Spight earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in plasma physics from Princeton University in. He thrived in Princeton’s intellectual environment and began his activism, creating the Committee on Black Awareness with other black graduate students.

In 1971, Spight taught at Southern University for one year before joining the staff at Morehouse College in 1972, as a physics professor and department chair, where he worked until 1980. During 1977, he served as a visiting physics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. From 1980 to 1983, Spight then worked for AMAF Industries where he became director of research. At Sonicraft, Incorporated in Chicago, Illinois, he was chief of advanced technology programs, director of engineering, and chief scientist from 1986 to 1989. President Thomas Cole recruited Spight to assist with the consolidation of Clark College and Atlanta University into Clark Atlanta University in 1989, where he became the dean of the college of arts and sciences and executive assistant to the president. During the 1990s, he served as chief scientist and regional manager of information systems for Jackson and Tull, Incorporated. Spight served as manager of academic services for the Office of Information Technology at the City Colleges of Chicago from 1994 through 2000. Spight has taught at and assisted with academic programs at Chicago State University, Olive-Harvey College, Providence St. Mel High School, North Lawndale College
Preparatory Center, and Betty Shabazz Charter School. During the 2000s, he worked as a statistical consultant and vice president for Forté Development Corporation in Columbia, Maryland.

Spight has been a community leader and civic activist for many years. In Oak Park, Illinois, Spight co-authored the research study about the performance gap between black and white achievement at Oak Park and River Forest High School. His activism led him to be a featured presenter at the Olive-Harvey Black Studies Conference for over seventeen years. Among many other honors, Spight received the William F. Thornton Award for Professional Achievement from the National Technical Association in 1989 and the Distinguished Alumni Award from Princeton University. Spight is an avid percussionist and student of Africana music. He plays with his brother, Roy, who also makes African drums. He has been married to his wife, Marsha, since 1968 and they have three successful grown children.

Carl Spight was interviewed by The HistoryMaker’s on July 23, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Carl Spight was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 23, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Academic administrator, physicist, and physics professor Carl Spight (1944 - ) held high ranking administrative and teaching positions at a range of academic and private research institutions, including Southern University, Morehouse College, AMAF Industries, Sonicraft, Incorporated, Clark Atlanta University, Jackson and Tull Incorporated, City Colleges of Chicago, and Chicago State University.

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:

Spight, Carl, 1944-
Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Spight, Carl, 1944---Interviews

African American educators--Interviews

African American physicists--Interviews

Universities and colleges--Faculty--Interviews

Physics teachers--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Physicist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ScienceMakers

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 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 Carl Spight, Section A2004_108_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Carl Spight was born on September 8, 1944, in Indianapolis, Indiana to Erma Mae White and William Herman Spight. Both of his parents had been previously married. His mother never finished elementary school and was a social person. His father, the oldest of thirteen children, worked to help support his siblings during the Great Depression and was estranged from his family. Spight lived in a two-family house next door to his maternal grandparents and he remembers their house was always dark with the curtains drawn. Spight and his cousins traced their history on his father’s side to their great grandfather, Ephraim Spight, who was a slave in Ripley, Mississippi. After Ephraim Spight was freed, he became the sheriff of Ripley and served in the Calvary for the Union during the Civil War. After the war, Ephraim Spight became a minister and owned land in Ripley, Mississippi and in Memphis, Tennessee.

African American families.
African American mothers--Education.
Great Depression.
Genealogy--Research.
Slaves--Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Spight, Section A2004_108_001_002, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Carl Spight describes how his grandfather, Elihu Spight, left his thirteen children, moved from Mississippi to Tennessee and changed his name to Earnest Vigil with no explanation. Spight’s father, William Spight, was a vocalist on the Chitlin' Circuit in Memphis, Tennessee and was a roving socialite, member of the Masons, and a golfer. Then around age forty, his father moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, entered his second marriage with Spight’s mother, Erma Mae White, and became a janitor at RCA, where he remained until his retirement. Spight was unable to find a reason for his father’s move and career change. He describes growing up on the poor east side of Indianapolis with his four siblings. Spight describes himself as a nerd during his childhood and how he was inspired to be a nuclear physicist from watching television shows like ‘Watch Mr. Wizard’, ‘Flash Gordon’, and ‘Captain Video and His Video Rangers’.

African American grandfathers--Mississippi.
African American singers--Tennessee.
African American fathers--Conduct of life.
Carl Spight remembers earning his childhood nickname, “Mr. Radio,” by fixing his neighbor’s electronics. He scavenged broken electronics and took them apart to see how they worked. He tested vacuum tubes on a device at the corner store to see if the tubes were still operational. For elementary school, he attended Frances W. Parker School 56 where he achieved top grades and earned a trip from the Freedoms Foundation to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, his first time outside of Indianapolis. Spight read the encyclopedias at school and one teacher facilitated his science interest, bringing him science books and magazines. He attended Arsenal Technical High School, a predominantly white high school on the other side of Indianapolis. Spight recalls racial tensions, fights, and discrimination. Often he was the only black student in math and science classes and despite winning math and science medals, he was not encouraged to participate in the science fair.

Appliances--Maintenance & repair.
Discrimination in education--Indiana--Indianapolis.
Science--Study and teaching--Social aspects.

Carl Spight recalls the racism at Arsenal Technical High School. Black students from different neighborhoods did not hang out together and there was some gang activity. Though Spight was an “A” student, his friends accepted him because he did not have a superiority complex. His high school guidance counselors advised him to go to Howard University. Spight was not interested in Howard University but his father convinced him to go to Purdue University for engineering after talking to the RCA engineers at work. Spight was the only black student in his engineering classes. He found the coursework quite challenging but worked hard to achieve top marks. Despite his excellent grades, his college advisors said he should consider Howard for graduate school instead of Princeton University or Stanford University, even though they had superior physics programs. He ignored their advice and applied to Stanford and Princeton.

Gangs--Indiana--Indianapolis.
Segregation--Indiana--Indianapolis.
African American students--Social conditions--Indiana--Indianapolis.
Purdue University--Students, Black.
Physics--Study and teaching (Higher).

Carl Spight attended Princeton University for graduate school and he thrived in Princeton’s intellectual environment. Spight became an activist at Princeton, creating the Committee on Black Awareness with other black graduate students. The committee tried to force Princeton to have responsible African investments that did not support the Apartheid. The investments went unchanged, but Princeton created a partnership with an African university. Morehouse College physicist, James Mayo, inspired Spight to support the black community by teaching at a HBCU instead of in a laboratory. He taught at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for one year before replacing Mayo at Morehouse as a dean and professor from 1972 to 1980. Spight continued his activism with the Atlanta University Center Community and Institute of the Black World. After
1980, Spight worked for various black businesses to try to create a connection between HBCU students and black enterprises.

Princeton University--Students, Black--Political activity.
Universities and colleges--Faculty--United States.
African American business enterprises--Engineering firms.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Spight, Section A2004_108_001_006, TRT: 0:30:40

Carl Spight met his wife, Marsha, at Princeton mixer and they were married one year later in 1968 and have three children. He explains Jackson and Tull’s development of hyper-spectral sensing and why it was never widely adapted. While he worked at AMAF Industries, an optical robotic vision system patent was named for him. In 1989, President Thomas Cole invited Spight to help consolidate Clark College and Atlanta University into Clark Atlanta University. There Spight became the dean of the college of arts and sciences and executive assistant to the president. He is a sought after public speaker and has spoken at Olive-Harvey College’s Black Studies Conference for over seventeen years. Spight is a percussionist and a student of Africana music. As a community activist and leader in Oak Park, Illinois, Spight has worked toward education equality with the hopes that the black community can be empowered by knowledge.

African Americans--Husband and wife.
Robotics--Patents.
Clark Atlanta University.
African American universities and colleges--Deans (Education)--Georgia--Atlanta
Education equalization--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Carl Spight, Section A2004_108_001_007, TRT: 0:21:30

Carl Spight reflects on his career and his life choices. He questions whether he should have chosen a more stable career path that would provide more opportunities as he approaches retirement. Unfortunately, Spight has found his age and experience to not be respected or valued by potential employers. Overall, he is satisfied with his choices and his career as a physicist and activist. He would like his legacy to be that he was a bold, courageous intellectual. Spight hopes to be remembered as a black master of technology and a futurist.

Physics--Vocational guidance.
African Americans--Activists.