

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch

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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>	Betsch, MaVynee, 1935-2005
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 20, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:24:47).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Environmental activist and opera singer MaVynne “Beach Lady” Betsch (1935 - 2005 ) was known for her full time efforts to preserve to preserve the history and ecology of American Beach, Florida, the oldest African American beach and her great-grandfather’s legacy. Betsch was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 20, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_168
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Environmental activist and opera singer MaVynne “Beach Lady” Betsch was born on January 13, 1935 in Jacksonville, Florida. She was raised in one of the most preeminent black families in the South. Betsch is the daughter of Mary and John Betsch, and the great-granddaughter Abraham Lincoln Lewis, who founded Florida’s oldest African-American beach, and Anne Kingsley, the African American wife of plantation owner Zephaniah Kingsley. Betsch was educated at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio. Upon completion of her bachelors’

degree in 1955, she moved to Europe where she was an opera singer for ten years.

Since 1975, Betsch made it her full-time mission to preserve and protect American Beach, her great-grandfather's investment, from development and destruction. She was famously named "Beach Lady," for her many efforts and dedication to the beach and its inhabitants. 'Beach Lady' gave her life savings, some \$750,000, to sixty environmental organizations and causes, ten of which she was a lifetime member, and most of them involved animals. 'Beach Lady' was featured on CBS and CNN and in such publications as Coastal Living, Essence, Southern Living, Smithsonian and over twenty-five others. Betsch also dedicated part of her life in convincing others that nature and natural things are fine. 'Beach Lady' had natural hair that was grown for over twenty years and measured over seven feet long in some areas; she also had one foot long finger nails on one of her hands, trying to prove that things can grow naturally without protein from meat.

Even after being diagnosed with cancer in 2002, which caused the removal of her stomach, 'Beach Lady' continued working hard for causes that benefitted others. She developed plans for the American Beach Museum, opened in 2014, which contains the history of American Beach, the town where she lived many of the years of her life. Betsch never married and never had children. She was the older sister of Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, the first female African American president of Spelman College, and president of Bennett College.

Betsch passed away on September 5, 2005 at age 70.

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## **Scope and Content**

This life oral history interview with MaVynne "Beach Lady" Betsch was conducted by Jodi Merriday on September 20, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Environmental activist and opera singer MaVynne "Beach Lady" Betsch (1935 - 2005 ) was known for her full time efforts to preserve to preserve the history and ecology of American Beach, Florida, the oldest African American beach and her great-grandfather's legacy.

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## **Restrictions**

### **Restrictions on Access**

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The

## 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:

Betsch, MaVynee, 1935-2005

Merriday, Jodi (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Betsch, MaVynee, 1935-2005--Interviews

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## Organizations:

## **Occupations:**

Environmental Activist

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Opera Singer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers|MusicMakers

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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 MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, September 20, 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).

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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 MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, Section A2004\_168\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 2004/09/20

MaVynee “Beach Lady” Betsch was born in Jacksonville, Florida on January 13, 1935, the same year that her maternal great-grandfather, Abraham Lincoln Lewis, founder of Afro American Life Insurance Company and Florida’s first African American millionaire, established American Beach, Florida. Her mother, Mary Lewis Betsch, grew up in Jacksonville, attended Wilberforce University in Ohio, played the organ at Mount Olive A.M.E. Church in Jacksonville and was vice president of Afro American Life. Betsch is maternally descended from Anna and Zephaniah of the Kingsley Plantation in Jacksonville. Her father, John Betsch, had German ancestry and was born in Henderson, Tennessee. He attended Knoxville College, then directed Afro American Life. After a temporary move to Washington D.C., Betsch attended Boylan-Haven School in Jacksonville and studied at Oberlin Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio. Betsch remembers family trips to American Beach and speculates about the year 2005 based on the significance of the number five.

Video Oral History Interview with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, Section A2004\_168\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:40 2004/09/20

MaVynee “Beach Lady” Betsch grew up with her two siblings in the all-black Sugar Hill community in Jacksonville, Florida. They lived on the same block as their great-grandfather, near the historic George A. Brewster Hospital and School of Nurse Training. Summer Sundays, her great-grandfather took the children to their

family's mausoleum and instilled in them respect for African history and spirituality. Though her family's wealth insulated her from racism, Betsch's great-grandfather emphasized responsibility to the African American community and to the history of marginalized peoples in the United States. Betsch's great-grandfather envisioned American Beach, Florida as a democratic community and ensured that African Americans of all economic strata were welcome. Betsch and her sister studied music and dance as children and were influenced by seeing famous African American performers in Jacksonville. Betsch graduated from Oberlin Conservatory at the top of her class and moved to Paris, France to study opera.

Video Oral History Interview with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, Section A2004\_168\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:02 2004/09/20

MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch studied opera in Paris, France. She went to Germany to play Salome in Strauss' opera, one of the most difficult roles in the opera world, at the age of twenty. While in Europe, she met famous jazz musicians and starred in 'Madama Butterfly' and 'Carmen' before her return to Jacksonville upon news of her grandfather's illness. After his death, Betsch ended her opera career and inherited his home and fortune. Since that time, Betsch has worked to preserve the history and ecology of American Beach against the encroachment of white resort developers. At the time of the interview, Betsch led historical tours of American Beach and supported local whale researchers and Ghanaian ethnobotanist Dr. Anthony Kweku Andoh. She was a subject of Russ Rymer's 'American Beach: A Saga of Race, Wealth, and Memory.' Betsch tells stories about Ku Klux Klan infiltrator Stetson Kennedy and African pirate Black Caesar. She explains the meanings behind her adornments and reflects the importance of history.

Video Oral History Interview with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, Section A2004\_168\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:40 2004/09/20

MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch moved to a house on a marsh on Ribault Scenic Drive in Jacksonville, Florida in the early 1970s, after the family was pushed out of their home by the growth of Interstate 95 and a nearby hospital.

Betsch developed a love and appreciation for butterflies, nature and African religion while living there. She has contributed to the Xerces Society, which works to protect butterflies, and received a dedication in the 'The National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies' by Dr. Robert Michael Pyle. Betsch reflects upon the current state of American Beach, her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her family's place among Jacksonville's African American community, the value of social contribution, the importance of history, her life and legacy, and how environmental activism helps to achieve racial justice. At the time of the interview, Betsch was composing an opera about a pirate and planned to tour the country to advocate for environmental issues.

Video Oral History Interview with MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch, Section A2004\_168\_001\_005, TRT: 0:24:55 2004/09/20

MaVynee "Beach Lady" Betsch reflects upon her experiences living in both predominately black and predominately white communities. She describes her experiences as an opera singer in Paris, France and Germany. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.