

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Comer Joseph Cottrell

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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>	Cottrell, Comer Joseph, 1931-2014
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 27, 2004
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2004
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:43:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Personal care entrepreneur Comer Joseph Cottrell (1931 - 2014 ) was the cofounder of Pro-Line hair products company, best known for creating the popular Pro-Line Curly Kit. Cottrell was also part owner of professional baseball's Texas Rangers, founder of FCC Investment Corporation, and responsible for restoring the 131-acre Bishop College campus and transferring it to A.M.E. based Paul Quinn College. Cottrell passed away on October 3, 2014. Cottrell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 27, 2004, in Dallas, Texas. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2004_218
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Founder of Pro-Line and philanthropist Comer Joseph Cottrell was born December 7, 1931 in Mobile, Alabama. His parents, Comer J., Sr. and Helen Smith Cottrell were black Catholics. As a youngster, Cottrell and his brother, Jimmy, turned a pair of bunnies into a business, including selling their progeny as Easter bunnies, meat and fur. Cottrell attended Heart of Mary Elementary and Secondary Schools. At age seventeen, Cottrell joined the United States Air Force where he attained the rank of First Sergeant and managed an Air Force PX in Okinawa. Cottrell attended the University of Detroit before leaving the service in 1954. He joined Sears Roebuck in 1964 and rose to the position of division manager in Los Angeles, California.

In 1968, with an initial investment of \$600.00, Cottrell and a friend got into the black hair care business. Then, with his brother, Jimmy, Cottrell manufactured strawberry scented oil sheen for Afro hairstyles and founded Pro-Line Corporation in 1970. By 1973, he made his first million dollars in sales. In 1979, Cottrell took the \$200.00 "Jerry Curl" out of the beauty shop and into black homes with his \$8.00 Pro-Line "Curly Kit", which increased his sales from one million dollars a year to ten million dollars in the first six months. Shortly thereafter Cottrell moved Pro-Line to Dallas, Texas. At the top of the ethnic hair care business, Cottrell became a part owner, with George W. Bush of the Texas Rangers professional baseball team in 1989; turning a \$3 million dollar profit on a \$500,000.00 investment. He also founded FCC Investment Corporation.

In 1990, he purchased and restored the 131-acre, HBCU, Bishop College campus for \$1.5 million and transferred it to A.M.E. Paul Quinn College. Cottrell is a trustee of Northwood University and a member of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce, the North Texas Commission, and the Dallas Citizens Council. He was the former chairman of the Texas Cosmetology Commission and vice chair of the Texas Youth Commission. He was a board member or

officer of NAACP, National Urban League, YMCA, Dallas Family Hospital, Better Business Bureau, Compton College Foundation, Paul Quinn College and Baylor University Foundation. Cottrell was former vice chair of the Dallas Black Chamber of Commerce. Recipient of scores of awards, Cottrell hosted a yearly “Taste of Cottrell” event in Dallas.

Cottrell passed away on October 3, 2014.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 27, 2004, in Dallas, Texas, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Personal care entrepreneur Comer Joseph Cottrell (1931 - 2014 ) was the cofounder of Pro-Line hair products company, best known for creating the popular Pro-Line Curly Kit. Cottrell was also part owner of professional baseball’s Texas Rangers, founder of FCC Investment Corporation, and responsible for restoring the 131-acre Bishop College campus and transferring it to A.M.E. based Paul Quinn College. Cottrell passed away on October 3, 2014.

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## 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®.

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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:

Cottrell, Comer Joseph, 1931-2014

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Cottrell, Comer Joseph, 1931-2014--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Personal Care Entrepreneur

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|StyleMakers

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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 Comer Joseph Cottrell, October 27, 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).

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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 Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell was born in Mobile, Alabama on December 7, 1931. His mother, Helen Josie Smith Cottrell, was also born in Mobile. Her ancestors were entrepreneurs in the oyster industry who lost their land on prime property due to racially motivated taxation. His father, Comer Joseph Cottrell, Sr., was born in Jackson, Mississippi where his great-grandmother, Mama Williams, had been a slave. Cottrell's paternal family moved to Mobile after his father's uncle was lynched for requesting the right to vote. Cottrell's parents met in high school. His mother worked as a domestic and managed the Country Club of Mobile. His father worked as an insurance salesman before founding Booker T. Washington Insurance Company in Birmingham. Cottrell and his one brother were raised in Mobile and were acquainted with HistoryMaker Bishop Joseph Howze during his childhood. Like his mother before him, Cottrell attended Lillie B. Williamson High School for elementary school before entering Dunbar High School in Mobile.

Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell excelled academically and enjoyed the social sciences during his elementary school years in Mobile, Alabama. During this time, he encountered Hank Aaron, Willie McCovey, Tommie Agee and Cleon Jones while they were developing their baseball skills as youths in Mobile. He attended the all-black Dunbar High School and became interested in algebra. From 1948 to 1949, Cottrell attended the University of Detroit, a Jesuit school in Detroit, Michigan, but realized he did not want to enter the priesthood as he originally planned. In 1949, financial problems forced him to leave school and enlist in the U.S. Air Force. Cottrell was deployed to Air Force electronics school in Biloxi, Mississippi where he trained as a radar and radio operator. While stationed at Lockbourne Air Force Base in Columbus, Ohio, he entered The Ohio State University. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Cottrell was deployed to Okinawa, Japan, where he rose quickly to become the youngest first sergeant in the Air Force.

Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell served as first sergeant in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. He was stationed in Okinawa, Japan where he had to confine a soldier who was being dishonorably discharged for an unauthorized shooting into a nearby village. He also worked additional jobs at the Air Force base's post exchange and post office and was an instructor at the Armed Forces Institute, which allowed him to save money for college. Upon his return from the war, Cottrell served on Project Blue Book at the Oakland Filter Center in California. Cottrell enrolled at Alabama A&M University in Huntsville, but returned to Oakland to marry his girlfriend, who was pregnant with their first child. Following his divorce, Cottrell relocated to Los Angeles and worked in sales at Sears, Roebuck and Co. In 1970, he started the hair care company Pro-Line Corporation to fill a demand for African American hair care products. Cottrell describes Pro-Line's early product development and its successful marketing and sales strategies.

Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell's hair product company, Pro-Line Corporation,

introduced the Curly Kit in 1979. This product enabled the country's black population to fashion their own curls for under eight dollars, as opposed to a hundred and fifty dollar visit to the salon. Over its years of production, Curly Kit grossed over fifty million dollars in revenue, besting its competitors in quality and price. Cottrell relocated Pro-Line from Los Angeles, California to Dallas, Texas with the plan of benefitting from the city's business friendly incentives and proximity to a larger number of Pro-Line's target customers. His practice of reinvesting profits kept Pro-Line debt free throughout his ownership. In 2001, following a failed bid at acquiring African Pride, Cottrell sold Pro-Line to Alberto-Culver. His employee-friendly policies earned him a loyal staff that continued at Pro-Line following its sale. Cottrell talks about his decision to become a Republican and his decision to return to the Democratic Party in 2004.

Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell purchased and restored the Bishop College campus in 1991 and transferred it to Paul Quinn College in Dallas, Texas. Cottrell did so to revive Bishop College from its demise after bankruptcy, but the continued challenges with its transfer to Paul Quinn College have kept the College from operating as planned. As a member of the Republican Party, Cottrell hoped to bring financial support from the black business community to President Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign, but Reagan made it clear that he was uninterested in forming such a connection. In 1989, Cottrell became part-owner with President George W. Bush of the Texas Rangers baseball team. Cottrell remained involved in the black community, serving as vice chair of the Texas Youth Commission and founding Federal Communications Commission Investment, a loan program for African Americans. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, talks about his family, and reflects upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Comer Joseph Cottrell, Section A2004\_218\_001\_006, TRT: 0:11:23 ?

Comer Joseph Cottrell wants to be remembered as a good husband, a good father and a good provider for his family. In this closing section of his interview, he also narrates his photographs.