

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Charles Stewart, III

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Stewart, Charles Vernon, 1910-2006
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III,
Dates:	December 13, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:06:20).
Abstract:	Labor activist Charles Stewart, III (1910 - 2006) and associates formed the first African American electrical workers' union in the United States, with a charter that permitted African Americans to legally practice as electricians and legally stopped white electricians from destroying African American electricians' work. Later, Stewart was instrumental in the desegregation of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 134. Stewart was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 13, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_256
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Electrician and organizer Charles Vernon Stewart was born August 7, 1910, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and Chicago, Illinois, Stewart attended Dore Elementary School, Phillips High School and was the first African American admitted into Greer College, a trade school for electricians. Determined

to succeed, Stewart, at eleven years of age, alongside his stepfather, Sam Taylor, formed an underground educational effort to learn the trade of electricians, a trade that blacks were not allowed to practice. Stewart and Taylor had a Greek friend who helped them by ordering electrical home study magazines for them because the publishers refused to mail copies to blacks. The group successfully completed each test they took and soon began working alongside other black electricians in Chicago. In 1922, Stewart helped his stepfather establish Taylor Electric Company, and in 1927, he graduated from Greer College.

In 1929, black electricians in Illinois were not allowed to join the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 134. Competing white electricians often vandalized Stewart's and other black electricians' electrical jobs at night, forcing them to redo their work at their own expense. As a result, Stewart helped organize twenty other black electricians, and together they persuaded U.S. Congressman Oscar DePriest and a black state senator to grant them a charter that permitted them to legally practice as electricians, contract for electrical jobs, and legally stopped white electricians from destroying black electricians' work. Stewart and his associates formed the first black electrical union in the United States. In 1943, the government forced the Local Union 134 to desegregate by making three percent of their members black. Stewart and his stepfather were among those who left the black union (primarily because the black union was not allowed to bid on major electrical contracts) to desegregate Local Union 134.

Stewart was hired by Berry Electric in 1942 and soon became the first black foreman for one of the largest electrical contractors in Chicago. Stewart built a racially integrated team of electricians capable of completing large jobs, such as the Jewell Grand Bazaar. Stewart also built the electrical source box for the River Oaks Shopping Mall in Calumet City, Illinois. Stewart, who retired from Berry Electric after thirty-seven years, remained a resident of Chicago's south side.

Charles Stewart passed away on February 13, 2006 at the age of ninety-five.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Charles Stewart, III was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 13, 2004, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Labor activist Charles Stewart, III (1910 - 2006) and associates formed the first African American electrical workers' union in the United States, with a charter that permitted African Americans to legally practice as electricians and legally stopped white electricians from destroying African

American electricians' work. Later, Stewart was instrumental in the desegregation of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 134.

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:

Stewart, Charles Vernon, 1910-2006

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Stewart, Charles Vernon, 1910-2006--Interviews

African American labor leaders--Interviews

Labor unions--United States--Officials and employees--Interviews

Electricians--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Labor Activist

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

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III, December 13, 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 Charles Stewart, III, Section A2004_256_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 2004/12/13

Charles Stewart, III was born on August 7, 1910 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His mother, Mary Annie Knox, was from Alabama and her mother, Molly, was the enslaved daughter of a cook on a plantation. Stewart's maternal grandmother was likely the daughter of the plantation owner. She was light enough to pass for white, learned to read and write, and grew up in the same household as her white sisters until she was thirteen. Stewart's father, Cleveland Stewart, was also from Alabama and had several brothers, three of whom moved to Omaha, Nebraska, where Stewart's parents moved to farm. Stewart had one sister, Iola Toler; their childhood was largely spent outdoors in Omaha. Stewart befriended Native

American children on a nearby reservation and loved to hunt. His parents divorced when he was six or seven years old and his mother moved to Chicago, Illinois. Stewart moved there in 1920, as a ten year old. His mother remarried an electrician, Sam Taylor, who took Stewart hunting and whom he remembers has a good father.

African American labor leaders--Interviews.

Labor unions--United States--Officials and employees--Interviews.

Electricians--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III, Section A2004_256_001_002, TRT: 0:29:30 2004/12/13

Charles Stewart, III often hunted with his father in Omaha, Nebraska and with his stepfather near Chicago, Illinois. He witnessed the Omaha race riot of 1919 while living there. Stewart was raised Catholic and learned the violin and piano as a child. In 1920, he moved to Chicago, where he attended Dore Elementary School and Wendell Phillips Academy High School and took a number of jobs, including shoe shining, newspaper delivery, and electrical work. At Phillips, Stewart had an electrician teacher who occasionally gave him insight into the work. Stewart did not graduate from Phillips, but went to work as an electrician with his stepfather, who owned his own business, Taylor Electric. He studied electricity at Greer College in Chicago for two and a half years, until he was seventeen years old. At Greer, he was one of two black students, and he was helped by a teacher who had witnessed the race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Stewart remembers electricity in the 1920s and organizing black electricians.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III, Section A2004_256_001_003, TRT: 0:28:20 2004/12/13

Charles Stewart, III studied a set of electrician's books as a teen; although the advertisers refused to sell the books to his stepfather when they realized he was black, a local businessman purchased the books for them. Stewart studied the books astutely as a teen. After leaving Greer College in Chicago, Illinois and working with his stepfather, who owned Taylor Electric Company, Stewart

organized a group of fifty black electricians to try to integrate I.B.E.W. Local 134, the local electrical workers' union that was all-white at the time. White electrical workers often destroyed their black counterparts' work. When the black electricians began receiving work permits by which they served as apprentices for the union, it lessened the chance of destroyed work; in 1943, they gained full union status. Some of Stewart's electrical work included large projects in Chicago, namely Jewel-Osco Grand Bazaar, Goldblatts department store and for notorious gangsters Al Capone and Denny Cooney.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III, Section A2004_256_001_004, TRT: 0:30:10 2004/12/13

Charles Stewart, III worked as a foreman for Berry Electric Contract Company in the Chicago, Illinois area. As foreman, he supervised a number of white electricians, some of whom refused to work under him. Stewart maintained a team attitude, phrasing his orders as collaborative work rather than as orders. The contract company often took his side in instances of racist insubordination, moving and releasing electricians who did not want to work under him. Stewart did the electrical work for his sister's home in South Holland, Illinois. The home builders tried to prevent him from doing so, presumably on account of his race or union status, but Local 134 union representatives aided him in obtaining the necessary permissions. Stewart tried to help other black electricians enter Local 134. He reflects upon his life, describes his hopes and concerns for the black community and talks about his family, including his sister, Iola Toler, who was known for her work in desegregating schools in Chicago's south suburbs.

Video Oral History Interview with Charles Stewart, III, Section A2004_256_001_005, TRT: 0:09:00 2004/12/13

Charles Stewart, III's stepfather, Sam Taylor, started his own business, Taylor Electric Company, which was still open and performing electrical work at the time of the interview. Taylor's son, Rufus Taylor, took over the family business until his murder. Rufus Taylor's widow and children continued to run the business after his death, and Taylor Electric Company continued to do work for a

number of places including senior citizen homes, shopping malls and fire departments. Stewart reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. He offers advice to potential electricians and contractors and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.