

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Billingslea

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Billingslea, Robert, 1937-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Billingslea,
Dates:	July 12, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:56:20).
Abstract:	Corporate executive Robert Billingslea (1937 - 2017) was the Director of Urban Affairs for Disney Worldwide Services. Through this work, he was closely involved with the NAACP, and he became chair of the Orlando Human Relations Board. Billingslea was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 12, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_160
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Robert Lee Billingslea, Corporate Director of Urban Affairs for the Walt Disney Company, was born on December 20, 1937, in Youngstown, Ohio. Billingslea's mother, Faye Stevenson Billingslea, had migrated with her family to Ohio from Georgia; his father and namesake, Robert Lee Billingslea, was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, though his father's family also had roots in Mississippi. Raised by his grandparents, Billingslea grew up on the south side of Youngstown, attending public schools and exhibiting strong musical talent. Billingslea began playing drums at the age of twelve and started playing professionally at sixteen; he was voted "most musical" in his 1956 South High School graduating class. After graduation, Billingslea went to California where he attended Vallejo Junior College and studied music while performing with West Coast regional acts.

Billingslea went back to Youngstown in 1958, but continued to tour the country playing drums with various bands; he subsequently enrolled at Kent State University in 1960. During his last year of school, Billingslea worked in juvenile court, and after graduating in 1964 with a B.A. degree in sociology, he took a job as a probation officer in Akron, Ohio's juvenile court system. Billingslea later worked in the Office of Economic Opportunity as a community organizer. Then, in 1966, Billingslea was hired as a wage and salary compensation analyst at Martin Marietta Corporation, (now Lockheed Martin), in Orlando, Florida. In 1969, he moved into a position at Disneyland in California that quickly led to his return to Orlando. There, Billingslea played a role in the establishment of Walt Disney World. In addition to his work at Disney, Billingslea became chair of the Orlando Human Relations Board, and went on to serve through four gubernatorial appointments on the Florida State Commission on Human Relations.

In 1985, Billingslea became involved with the NAACP through his work at Disney; the NAACP was reviewing Disney's employment practices for equal opportunities for African Americans, and he served as a liaison. Billingslea then began working with the NAACP's youth initiative, the Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics (ACT-SO), which was a program for African American youth to demonstrate academic,

artistic and scientific abilities. Billingslea's involvement with the NAACP included his service on the ACT-SO Industry Advisory Council as a Special Contributions Fund (SCF) Trustee, and on the NAACP Image Awards Committee.

Among Billingslea's most cherished awards are the National Service to Youth Award, presented in 2004 by the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, in honor of his thirty years of devoted service; and the 2003 Whitney M. Young Award presented by the Metropolitan Orlando Urban League in recognition of his personal contributions to founding and supporting the local Urban League chapter.

Billingslea and his wife, Deidre ("DeeDee") made their home in Central Florida; they had one son and two grandchildren.

Billingslea passed way on September 6, 2017 at the age of 79.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Billingslea was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 12, 2005, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Corporate executive Robert Billingslea (1937 - 2017) was the Director of Urban Affairs for Disney Worldwide Services. Through this work, he was closely involved with the NAACP, and he became chair of the Orlando Human Relations Board.

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:

Billingslea, Robert, 1937-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Billingslea, Robert, 1937-2016--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American civic leaders--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Walt Disney Company.

Occupations:

Corporate Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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 Robert Billingslea, July 12, 2005. 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).

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 Robert Billingslea, Section A2005_160_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10
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Robert Billingslea was born on December 20, 1936 to Faye Stevenson Billingslea and Robert L. Billingslea in Youngstown, Ohio. His maternal great-grandfather was the son of a slave from Georgia. Billingslea's maternal grandparents moved from Woodland, Georgia to Youngstown, where his grandfather worked at a steel mill and his mother grew up in the Westlake Terrace housing projects. Billingslea's father was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, although he also grew up in Youngstown. During World War II, he relocated to California where he was stationed at Fairfield Suisun Air Force Base. Although he briefly attended grade school in California, Billingslea was primarily reared by his maternal grandparents in Youngstown. He played the drums as a teenager at venues in Youngstown, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Billingslea describes Youngstown's racially divided neighborhoods, the prominent DeBartolo family who owned the San Francisco 49ers and Boardman, Ohio, a majority-white town that neighbored Youngstown.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Billingslea, Section A2005_160_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20
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Robert Billingslea's neighbors in Youngstown, Ohio included HistoryMaker Nathaniel R. Jones and Herbert L. Armstrong, the city's first black principal. Billingslea attended Delason and Monroe Elementary Schools, then Princeton Junior High School and South High School. His teachers encouraged his musical talent, but did not provide guidance otherwise. In addition to drumming for musicians in Youngstown, he was a member of the YMCA. He studied music at Vallejo Junior College in California where he played for a big band and a live radio program. After a year, he returned to Ohio and attended The Ohio State University before touring the surrounding states. After committing himself to his studies, he received his sociology degree from Kent State University. In Akron, he worked as a probation officer at Summit County Juvenile Court, then as a community organizer for the Office of Economic Opportunity. Pursuing his interest in Corporate America, he interviewed with the Orlando-based Martin Marietta Corporation.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Billingslea, Section A2005_160_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30
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Robert Billingslea worked in the wage and salary division for the Martin Marietta Corporation in Orlando. As the city's public schools were integrating, he worked on human relations and civil rights initiatives in the Orlando area. In 1969, he moved from Orlando to Anaheim, California where he worked at

Disneyland to develop his knowledge of theme parks, in preparation for the opening of Walt Disney World in Florida. When he returned to Orlando in 1970, he led the city's Human Relations Advisory Board to establish a human relations department and single-member district voting. He was then appointed to the Florida Commission on Human Relations, where he served for twelve years. In the 1980s, he became a liaison between The Walt Disney Company and the NAACP, which was investigating the company's employment practices, and the inclusion of African Americans in Walt Disney Studios and company boards and programs. He concludes by describing the company's ongoing relationship with the NAACP.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Billingslea, Section A2005_160_001_004, TRT: 0:27:20
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Robert Billingslea describes his efforts at The Walt Disney Company to prevent the release or distribution of racist depictions in Disney productions. As a member of the NAACP, Billingslea participated in multiple committees, including the Image Awards and the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics (ACT-SO). He describes ACT-SO's development, participants and sponsorship and acknowledges the program's need for better marketing. He describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and how he would like to be remembered. He also reflects upon his life and legacy. At the time of the interview, Billingslea and his wife, Deidre Billingslea, lived in Orlando, Florida, where his only son, a probation officer, also resided.