

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Chester Higgins, Jr.

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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>	Higgins, Chester
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 26, 2005 and September 2, 2005
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:39:08).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photojournalist Chester Higgins, Jr. (1946 - ) has published his work with the New York Times and a variety of other publications. In addition to his photojournalistic activities, Higgins has published collections of his photographs in book form, and toured with several solo exhibitions of his work. Higgins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 26, 2005 and September 2, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_205
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Photographer and author Chester Higgins, Jr. was born in Fairhope, Alabama. Higgins's years attending Tuskegee University in the late 1960s served as his inspiration to pursue a career in photography; during this time, he saw the work of photographer P.H. Polk, a man who would become his first mentor. Polk's images powerfully impacted the viewer because of the way that they showed the dignity of African American life in the rural South during the 1930s. Hall's photography,

combined with Higgins acquiring his first camera just in time to bear witness to student unrest on the Tuskegee campus, provided the budding photographer with a strong motivation to document the African American experience in the United States as he saw it unfolding around him. Higgins would compile the work *Student Unrest at Tuskegee Institute* in 1968 about the events that he saw taking place on campus.

Higgins graduated in 1970 from Tuskegee University, and soon after moved to New York City to begin his professional career; his first assignment was to follow and document the political activities of Jesse Jackson, then a young civil rights activist. In 1975, Higgins began his work as a photographer for the *New York Times*, an association that would continue throughout his professional career. Over the years, Higgins's photographs were also published in *Look*, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Ebony*, *Essence* and *Black Enterprise* magazines.

In addition to his photojournalistic achievements, Higgins published several collections of his photography, including: *Black Woman* in 1970; *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa* in 1994; the *Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging* in 2000; and *Echo of the Spirit: A Photographer's Journey* in 2004. Higgins's work was featured in a variety of solo exhibits, including the traveling exhibition *Landscapes of the Soul*, which toured nationally at locations such as the Smithsonian Institution, and the Museum for African Art in New York City. Selections of Higgins's photography were acquired for the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Higgins has been the recipient of grants from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the International Center of Photography, the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, and the Andy Warhol Foundation, to carry out his work.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Chester Higgins, Jr. was conducted by Shawn Wilson on August 26, 2005 and September 2, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 10 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photojournalist Chester Higgins, Jr. (1946 - ) has published his work with the *New York Times* and a variety of other publications. In addition to his photojournalistic activities, Higgins has published collections of his photographs in book form, and toured with several solo exhibitions of his work.

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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:

Higgins, Chester

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Higgins, Chester--Interviews

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Photojournalists--Interviews

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African American photographers--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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New York Times Company

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## **Occupations:**

Photojournalist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

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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 Chester Higgins, Jr., August 26, 2005 and September 2, 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 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 Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:24 2005/08/27

Chester Higgins, Jr. was born in Fairhope, Alabama to Varidee Young Smith and Chester A. Higgins, Sr. Higgins's great-great-maternal grandfather, James Henry, a Union Army soldier, settled in Fairhope after the Civil War where he was able to acquire and bequeath land to his family. Orphaned at age three, Higgins's mother grew up with eight siblings in Fairhope. She graduated from Alabama State Teachers College. While teaching in Anniston, Alabama during World War II, she met Higgins' father, a soldier from nearby Fort McClellan, at a dance. They divorced after a year of marriage. Higgins and his mother moved to New Brockton, Alabama, where she taught at the first African American school in the county. The school was founded by Higgins' step-grandfather, Warren Smith, a prominent tailor and minister. When his step-grandfather paid the poll tax for himself and others in the community, white supremacists burnt his home in retaliation. Higgins shares insights he learned from artist

Romare Bearden.

Photojournalists--Interviews.

African American photographers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:30 2005/08/27

Chester Higgins, Jr.'s step-grandfather, Warren Smith, took in his mother, Varidee Young Smith, a divorced young mother, in 1946. Higgins' mother later married one of his sons. Growing up, Higgins enjoyed spending time at his step-grandfather's cleaners and with his Great-Aunt Shug McGowan, a midwife, and his Great-Uncle March Forth McGowan, who was named for his birthdate, March fourth. Higgins' interest in photography grew from wanting to capture portraits of his aunt and uncle. He accompanied his step-grandmother and aunt to the cotton fields, and later chopped and picked cotton and worked in peanut fields with his friends. He recalls the noise of horses pulling empty wagons from the cotton gin and his grandmother remarking on the noise as a lesson for how people's words may be empty of meaning. As a school teacher, Higgins's mother emphasized education and made him complete his school work. His elementary school teachers taught him African American history and the Negro National Anthem.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:41 2005/08/27

Chester Higgins, Jr., while growing up during segregation in New Brockton, Alabama, had to learn both the spoken and unspoken rules regarding interracial interactions. Higgins's mother feared for his safety after the murder of Emmett Till. Christmas, birthdays, and graduations were special events in his childhood. Growing up, Higgins admired community leaders like his social studies teacher and future Coffee County Commissioner Bernest Brooks, his high school principal P.A. Youngblood, and his step-grandfather, Warren Smith, who was the chairman of the board of education. At age nine, Higgins had a dream, which his step-grandfather interpreted as a call to ministry. After his step-grandfather counselled Higgins in Bible study, he began to enjoy scripture. Higgins was required to

attend church services that lasted most of the day and Sunday school. Higgins explains why he included the lyrics to 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' in his book 'Some Time Ago: A Historical Portrait of Black Americans from 1850-1950.'

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section A2005\_205\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:06 2005/08/27

Chester Higgins, Jr. attended the Selma Seminary in Alabama. With the support of Reverend T.A. Henderson, he became a licensed minister at age ten. He preached at his childhood church, Springfield Baptist Church in Brundidge, Alabama, and guest ministered at other churches and summer revivals. In 1964, Higgins graduated from Warren Smith High School in New Brockton, Alabama, which was named after his step-grandfather, an advocate for education. Higgins gave up pastoring to mature socially and focus on his studies at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. While there, he took a world religion course that sparked his interest in different religions. Higgins shares his spiritual philosophy, his method for writing sermons, and his thoughts about the conservativeness of the Baptist church. In noting the lack of support Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. received from conservative ministers during the Civil Rights Movement, Higgins explains why he believes contemporary churches should be more responsive to social issues.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section A2005\_205\_001\_005, TRT: 0:19:05 2005/08/27

Chester Higgins, Jr. narrates his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section A2005\_205\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:43 2005/09/02

Chester Higgins, Jr. was a business major, a part of student government and on the student newspaper, The Campus Digest, at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Higgins approached photographer P.H. Polk to develop better business ads for the local business spread in the newspaper. As an admirer of Polk's portraits of sharecroppers in the 1920s and 1930s, Higgins asked Polk to teach him the basics of photography, and Polk became

Higgins' mentor. During a visit to Kansas State University in Manhattan, Higgins bought his first camera, a Praktica, and later saved enough to buy a Nikkormat. Higgins learned about designing questionnaires while working with Dr. Edgar G. Epps at the Behavioral Science Research Institute at Tuskegee Institute. In 1969, Higgins conducted a research project about African Americans' attitudes toward community leaders during a business internship with Harvard Student Agencies of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He worked with Dustin M. Burke and Andrew Tobias, who ran the agency.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_002\_007, TRT: 0:30:59 2005/09/02

Chester Higgins, Jr., while protesting in Montgomery, Alabama, was upset by the media's negative portrayal of protestors. His industrial relations professor, Michael Ryder, taught him a memorable lesson about the power of storytelling. Wanting to portray stories that were being overlooked, Higgins turned to photojournalism. In 1968, Higgins published the book 'Student Unrest at Tuskegee Institute,' which documented civil rights protests at Tuskegee Institute, including a sit-in that turned into a hostage situation and led to the school temporarily shutting down. Higgins describes his mentors, Dr. Bert Phillips, P.H. Polk, and Dustin M. Burke. Higgins first published his photographs in Black World magazine and met its editor, Hoyt W. Fuller. After graduating from Tuskegee, Higgins moved to New York City to continue learning about photography. While meeting with picture editor Sam Young at Look magazine, Higgins was introduced to Arthur Rothstein, who provided him with valuable lesson about photojournalism.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_002\_008, TRT: 0:30:20 2005/09/02

Chester Higgins, Jr. met Orde Coombs, an African American editor at Doubleday & Company, through Ebony magazine editor HistoryMaker A. Peter Bailey. After seeing Higgins's portfolio of urban and southern African American women, Coombs advised Higgins to turn the collection of photographs into a book. This developed into 'Black Woman,' published in 1970 with



text provided by Harold McDougall. After signing with Doubleday & Company, Higgins published 'Drums of Life,' which featured photographs of HistoryMaker Amiri Baraka and Romare Bearden, and 'Some Time Ago: A Historical Portrait of Black Americans from 1850-1950.' Through his friendship with Bearden, Higgins met and photographed Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Al Murray. Mentor Arthur Rothstein introduced Higgins to Cornell Capa, founder of the International Center of Photography. Chester Higgins remembers Yousuf Karsh, Ansel Adams, and other popular photographers of the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_002\_009, TRT: 0:29:44 2005/09/02

Chester Higgins, Jr. learned about photography from Cornell Capa, who helped establish photography as a serious medium in the 1970s and founded International Center of Photography in New York City. Dedicated to his craft, Higgins often concentrated on improving his photography skills over partying. Upon being hired as a photographer for the New York Times in 1975, Higgins used his position to provide positive images of African Americans to counter the negative ones often shown in the media. He shares his thoughts about depicting photographic subjects in a humanizing way and how photographers' perspectives shape images. To write his 1994 book, 'Feeling the Spirit,' Higgins travelled to Africa and studied African culture and religions. Higgins talks about African Diaspora and the fractioning of the African American culture. Higgins also shares the message he gives students when he is invited to high schools to speak.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_002\_010, TRT: 0:19:36 2005/09/02

Chester Higgins, Jr. talks about ancient religions in Africa and the importance of understanding their historical context. In 2000, Higgins published 'Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging' to honor the beauty of older people, especially in a society where aging is feared. Higgins held a gallery exhibition for the book at the New York Historical Society in Manhattan. Higgins explains why he does not like to talk about his works in progress, reflects

upon his legacy and describes his hopes for the African American community. In sharing why he agreed to be interviewed by The HistoryMakers, Higgins notes that his story may be useful to others as learning about the life stories of others was enlightening for him.

Video Oral History Interview with Chester Higgins, Jr., Section  
A2005\_205\_HIGGINS\_CHESTER\_06\_MED\_001, TRT: 0:03:00  
2005/08/27

This tape contains a clip from Chester Higgins' HistoryMakers interview.

In the clip, Higgins' talks about America's negative view on aging and the elderly.