

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Littleton Mitchell

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Mitchell, Littleton Purnell, 1918-2009
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Littleton Mitchell,
Dates:	December 19, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:30:34).
Abstract:	Association branch executive, tuskegee airman, and civil rights activist Littleton Mitchell (1918 - 2009) led the Delaware State Branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as president for over thirty years until 1991 and was the first African American teacher of white children at Governor Bacon Health Center in Delaware City. Mitchell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 19, 2005, in Delaware City, Delaware. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_267
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Association branch executive, civil rights activist, and Tuskegee Airman Littleton Purnell Mitchell was born in the 1920s in Milford, Delaware, to Helen Ann Purnell and George Darnell Mitchell. His advocacy began at age thirteen, when he joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). During the late 1930s, he attended Howard High School, the state's only high school for African Americans. Upon graduation, he spent two years at

West Chester University of Pennsylvania on a track scholarship before joining the Tuskegee Airmen during War World II. While he was there, he witnessed the building of the airfield at Tuskegee in 1941. He taught future pilots the art of instrument flying. His duties sent him to the Link Trainer Facilities and Schools in New York, and Chanute Field in Chanute, Illinois, as well as the Base Instrument Command Flying School in Texas. In February 1946, he was discharged from the U.S. Army. Encouraged by his fellow Tuskegee Airmen, Mitchell returned to college, and earned his degree from West Chester University of Pennsylvania and began a career in the psychiatric treatment of children and civil rights advocacy.

Mitchell led the Delaware State Branches of the NAACP as president for over thirty years until 1991. During his years there, he led their efforts to secure fair housing, equal access to public accommodations, and equal education and employment opportunities for Delaware's African American community. He became the first African American teacher of white children at Governor Bacon Health Center in Delaware City. He retired from teaching in 1984. His wife, Jane Mitchell, now deceased, became one of Delaware's first African American nurses. For many years, she served as the director of nursing at the Delaware State Hospital and along with her husband led efforts to desegregate the state's hospitals.

Mitchell served on the Delaware Humanities Council from 1991 to 1997. In 1993, the University of Delaware awarded Mitchell its Medal of Merit for sustained community service. He was also awarded the Delaware Bar Association's 2004 Liberty Bell Award for community service. For the Brown v. Board of Education 50th Anniversary Commission, he served as a presidential appointee representing Delaware.

Mitchell resided in Delaware City, Delaware, with his family until his death on July 6, 2009.

Littleton Purnell Mitchell was interview by *the HistoryMakers* on December 19, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Littleton Mitchell was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 19, 2005, in Delaware City, Delaware, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Association branch executive, tuskegee airman, and civil rights activist Littleton Mitchell (1918 - 2009) led the Delaware State Branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as

president for over thirty years until 1991 and was the first African American teacher of white children at Governor Bacon Health Center in Delaware City.

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:

Mitchell, Littleton Purnell, 1918-2009

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Mitchell, Littleton Purnell, 1918-2009--Interviews

African American educators--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

Occupations:

Tuskegee Airman

Civil Rights Activist

Association Branch Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MilitaryMakers|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 Littleton Mitchell, December 19, 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).

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 Littleton Mitchell, Section A2005_267_001_001, TRT: 0:30:39 2005/12/19

Littleton Mitchell was born November 27, 1918 in Milford, Delaware to Helen Purnell Mitchell and Littleton Van Mitchell. His enslaved maternal great-grandmother escaped being sold by hiding herself in a barrel heading to Milford. Mitchell's parents were both born in Milford. His father contracted tuberculosis while fighting in World War I and died when Mitchell was young. Mitchell and his two sisters were raised by their severe mother. She worked as a janitor at the Bell Telephone Company and served dinner and parties for the wealthy. Occasionally, she brought home treats from her service job. As a child, Mitchell reacted against authority and racism. He refused to address

others as 'sir,' and once threw a brick through the mayor's car window after being called a racial epithet. He reflects upon his early encounters with racism and his responses. In school, Mitchell's teacher encouraged his curiosity and fostered his interest in bullfighting by recommending Ernest Hemingway's book, 'Death in the Afternoon.'

African American families--Delaware.

Delaware--Race relations.

Teachers--Influence.

Racism in education--Delaware.

Video Oral History Interview with Littleton Mitchell, Section
A2005_267_001_002, TRT: 0:29:53 2005/12/19

Littleton Mitchell attended Howard High School in Wilmington, Delaware, the only high school in the state available to African Americans. Because the school's sports teams could not play against white students, they traveled out of state to compete. Mitchell's teacher, Mrs. Polk, encouraged his interest in aviation. He applied to aviation schools, but was rejected because of his race. Although his mother wanted him to attend a historically black college, Mitchell matriculated at West Chester State Teacher's College in Pennsylvania. He reflects upon his experience as the only African American in his college class and how racism impacted his interactions with white students. He only began to socialize after friends forced him to attend the school dance. Mitchell recounts how he was almost expelled for his role in a prank. When the U.S. Air Force desegregated during his second year of college, Mitchell enlisted and went to Tuskegee Army Airfield. He remembers being honored at a bull fight in Spain later in life.

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

African Americans--Education (Secondary)--Delaware.

West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

Video Oral History Interview with Littleton Mitchell, Section
A2005_267_001_003, TRT: 0:30:58 2005/12/19

Littleton Mitchell arrived at Tuskegee Army Airfield in 1941 while it was still under construction. As the airfield was built by the African American firm McKissack &

McKissack, Mitchell was able to see black craftsmen for the first time. Mitchell's instructors were all white, despite many of the African Americans being more experienced aviators. He witnessed extreme racism in Alabama, and had to flee Montgomery after he tried to defend a pregnant woman from a racist bus driver. Although his status as an airman provided Mitchell some protection, he was still the target of discrimination and violence. Mitchell remembers tense racial relations in Alabama and a narrowly avoided riot in Tuskegee. He never saw combat, and instead was sent to work at instrument flying schools in Binghamton, New York and Biggs Army Airfield in El Paso, Texas before returning to Tuskegee Army Airfield to teach instrument flying. Mitchell also describes learning about his Native American ancestry.

United States. Army Air Forces. Fighter Group, 332nd.

United States--Race relations.

Racism--Alabama.

Video Oral History Interview with Littleton Mitchell, Section
A2005_267_001_004, TRT: 0:29:43 2005/12/19

Littleton Mitchell became involved with labor rights as a teenager when he witnessed the living conditions of migrant laborers in his hometown. In 1946, Mitchell returned to West Chester State Teacher's College to complete his bachelor's degree. He was hired to teach at Delaware City's Governor Bacon Health Center, where his wife worked as a nurse. Mitchell remembers the health center's head doctor ensuring that Mitchell and his wife received housing accommodations equal to those for whites. Mitchell taught white students at Governor Bacon Health Center, even though it was against Delaware state law at the time. He became president of the NAACP Delaware branch in 1961, and used the position to advocate for migrant laborers. Governor Charles L. Terry, Jr. angered Mitchell when he abandoned his promises to the African American community. Mitchell later exposed Terry's racism at the 1964 governor's conference. Mitchell also recalls Wilmington, Delaware after Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination.

Public institutions--Delaware.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--Delaware.

Social activism--Delaware.

Discrimination in medical care--Delaware.

Video Oral History Interview with Littleton Mitchell, Section A2005_267_001_005, TRT: 0:29:21 2005/12/19

Littleton Mitchell advocated for migrant laborers while serving as president of the Delaware branch of the NAACP. He often risked his own safety, like when he rescued a boy being held against his will at a migrant labor camp. He also tells how he helped another migrant laborer access healthcare. Mitchell used his contacts among local news reporters and with people such as Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr., the NAACP Washington, D.C. contact, to expose and stop racist legislation. Mitchell fought to desegregate Delaware hospitals, where African Americans were given sub-standard care. Mitchell describes racial segregation in Delaware and reflects on the progress made for civil rights. He explains why he does not have a preferred term for his racial identity. Mitchell considers his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered. In sharing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, Mitchell describes the importance of younger generations learning about the history of civil rights.

Social problems--Delaware.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--Delaware.

Public institutions--Delaware.

Discrimination in medical care--Delaware.