

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marjorie Witt Johnson

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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>	Johnson, Marjorie Witt
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 22, 2006
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2006
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:37:59).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dance instructor and dancer Marjorie Witt Johnson (1910 - 2007 ) formed a dance group that became part of Karamu House. Johnson has been celebrated by the City of Cleveland and numerous organizations for her more than 70 years of service in promoting arts in education. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 22, 2006, in Cleveland, Ohio. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2006_048
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer, social worker, dance instructor and daughter of a Buffalo Soldier, Marjorie Witt Johnson was born on March 18, 1910 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Her father, William Henry Brown Witt, served in the United States 10th Cavalry under Colonel Charles Young at Fort D.A. Russell. Growing up, Johnson lived in Taylorville and attended Corlett School. Johnson transferred to Churchill School, Cheyenne Junior High School and graduated from Cheyenne High School in 1929. That summer Johnson's mother, Pearl Melvina Pryor, took her to New York

City where she saw her uncle Hayes Pryor perform with the Lafayette Players. High School history teacher, Eldridge Hubbard helped her gain admission into Oberlin College in 1930. Her education was donated by Cheyenne's Women's Club and the Searchlight Club. At Oberlin, Johnson was introduced to modern dance by Margery Schneider, and she was influenced by the work of Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham.

Graduating from Oberlin with a B.S. degree in social work in 1935, Johnson served as a dance counselor for Camp Chippewa where she developed a talent for working with inner city girls. She formed a group called the Playhouse Settlement Dance Group. Eventually they became the Karamu Dancers as part of Karamu House. The group gained notoriety and was selected to perform at the 1940 World's Fair in New York City. Johnson, building on Grace Coyle's study, *Democracy and Group Work*, taught the girls modern dance by incorporating their own life experiences with oral history and music. Among her notable dance works are "Barbeque," "Tea Time," "Braham's Rhapsody in G Minor," "The Sermon," and the underground railroad play, *From House to House*, which was performed in Nigeria as *Lati Ile' si Ile'*. Two of her notable students are Royce Wallace and Roger Mae Johnson. In Atlanta, Johnson inspired Morehouse College student body president, Michael Babatunde Olatunji to play his drums in public.

Johnson has been celebrated by the City of Cleveland and numerous other organizations for her more than 70 years of service in promoting arts in education. Recently, Karamu House showcased *Daughter of a Buffalo Soldier*, which was directed and choreographed by Dianne McIntyre.

Johnson, who was married to the late actor, Bill Johnson, has a daughter and is still active as a community activist, role model and innovator in Cleveland. She is the author of the book, *Moving Images of Courage*. Johnson passed away on July 19, 2007.

Johnson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 22, 2006.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 22, 2006, in Cleveland, Ohio, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Dance instructor and dancer Marjorie Witt Johnson (1910 - 2007 ) formed a dance group that became part of Karamu House. Johnson has been celebrated by the City of Cleveland and numerous organizations for her more than 70 years of service in promoting arts in education.

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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:

Johnson, Marjorie Witt

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Johnson, Marjorie Witt--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:**

Dancer

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Dance Instructor

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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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 Marjorie Witt Johnson, March 22, 2006. 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 Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section A2006\_048\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:45 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson was born on March 18, 1910 in Cheyenne, Wyoming to Pearl Pryor Witt and William Witt. Her mother was born in Indiana, the sister of actor Hayes Pryor who was a member of the Lafayette Players. Johnson's father was born in Norfolk, Virginia and courted her mother during his U.S. Army training. Against Johnson's maternal grandmother's wishes, Johnson's parents married. Johnson's father served in the 10th Cavalry Regiment, known as the Buffalo Soldiers. He fought in the Spanish-American War and was stationed in the Philippines. Though not formally educated, Johnson's father became fluent in Spanish from his travels. Johnson recalls her parents' acquaintance, Colonel Charles Young. After the death of Johnson's oldest sibling, the family settled in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where Johnson grew up with four siblings in the barracks at Fort David A. Russell. She describes her father's fair complexion and red hair, her childhood home in Cheyenne and the mountain landscape of the West.

Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section A2006\_048\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:02 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson describes the mountains of Wyoming and the diversity of the residents at Fort David A. Russell. Johnson attended Corlett School, Churchill Public School, Cheyenne Junior High School and Cheyenne High School in Cheyenne, Wyoming. While trying to impress a friend, Johnson accidentally set fire to the prairie where her family lived near Taylorville, Wyoming. Johnson recalls seeing buffalo at Wild West shows in Taylorville, and the interracial marriages between African Americans and Native Americans. When a teacher questioned Johnson's parentage because of her brown complexion compared to her sister's fairer complexion, her mother confronted the school's principal. Johnson also endured teasing from the other children because of her darker skin tone. She attended Cheyenne's Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church as a child. Johnson describes differences of class between Cheyenne's African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist congregations, as well as her mother's attitude toward Johnson's Baptist friends.

Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section A2006\_048\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:35 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson used Palmer's Skin Success, a skin lightener, at her mother's urging. In junior high school, Johnson often socialized at dances and did not focus on her grades, but improved as a student at Cheyenne High School. For her high school graduation skit in 1929, she wanted to portray her white counselor, but her teacher, Ralph Hubbard, dissuaded her. Realizing that Johnson was uninformed about racial history, Hubbard gave Johnson a book on slavery. Johnson worked for a year and visited her uncle, Hayes Pryor, in New York City, then attended Oberlin College in Ohio with financial assistance from the General Federation of Women's Clubs of Wyoming and the Searchlight Club. There, dance instructor Margery Schneider taught Johnson modern techniques and encouraged her to pursue a career in dance. Although Johnson's parents were disappointed by her aspirations, Johnson committed to her dreams upon learning of Cleveland, Ohio's Playhouse Settlement, which later became Karamu House.

Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section

A2006\_048\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:43 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson worked as a dance instructor at Camp Chippewa after graduating from Oberlin College, and continued to instruct the same students upon returning to Cleveland, Ohio. Dancer Eleanor Frampton introduced Johnson to Rowena Woodham Jelliffe and Russell Jelliffe, the founders of Playhouse Settlement, where Johnson met her husband, actor Bill Johnson. Impressed with Johnson's choreography, the couple welcomed her and her dancers to their company. The dance troupe's first performance at Central High School in Cleveland was initially met with teasing from their peers, but they continued their African inspired performance, which was soon well received. After the Playhouse Settlement was renamed Karamu House, the group became the Karamu Dancers, performing in 1940 at the New York World's Fair, which was photographed by Gjon Mili and featured in Life magazine. Johnson depicted everyday life in her dances, and introduced the troupe to African dance and the music of Duke Ellington and Johannes Brahms.

Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section A2006\_048\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:50 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson's accompanist was Lois A. Perry, a student of Cleveland Institute of Music. Johnson was introduced to African music during an orchestra concert at Oberlin College. While earning her master's degree in social work at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Johnson learned about group dynamics from Grace Coyle. Johnson met African drummer Babatunde Olatunji in the 1950s while teaching at Atlanta University, and he accompanied a few of Johnson's dances. She mentored dancer Roger Mae Johnson and actress Royce Wallace. Later, Johnson worked briefly in Charlotte's Spirit Square theatres in North Carolina before moving back to Cleveland, Ohio to serve as a social worker at Bellefaire Orphanage. Dianne McIntyre and Michael Metcalf developed the dance 'Daughter of a Buffalo Soldier' in honor of Johnson's life. Johnson reflects upon her life and legacy, and shares her philosophy of art.

Video Oral History Interview with Marjorie Witt Johnson, Section A2006\_048\_001\_006, TRT: 0:11:04 2006/03/22

Marjorie Witt Johnson talks about William E. Smith, an artist at Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio. She describes his carved linoleum artwork, including pieces that were inspired by Harriet Tubman and the poetry of Langston Hughes. Johnson's daughter, Corrine Johnson Falope, concludes the interview by narrating her mother's photographs.