

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with J. W. Lemon

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lemon, J. W., 1919-2011
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with J. W. Lemon,
Dates:	December 11, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:25:20).
Abstract:	Community activist and postal worker J. W. Lemon (1919 - 2011) was the founder of the Henry County, Georgia Chapter of the NAACP. He helped Georgia farmers to purchase land through the Federal Home Loans Administration. He was also instrumental in the Civil Rights legislation of the 1970s. Lemon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 11, 2006, in Locust Grove, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_157
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Postal worker and Georgia NAACP president James Windel Lemon was born on November 9, 1919 in Locust Grove, Georgia to Maggie Richie and James E. Lemon. Both of his parents were sharecroppers; as a result, Lemon and his five siblings worked the farm at a very young age. Lemon was accidentally shot by hunters in November of 1925, and lost his left eye. In 1935, his father went to work in the cotton mills when the dust bowl impacted their farming community. Lemon attended Shoal Creek Elementary School and graduated from Henry

County Training School in McDonough, Georgia in 1939.

After graduation, Lemon went to Atlanta and worked for his Uncle George in a pressing plant. Soon after, under the National Youth Administration, he attended Forsyth State Teacher's College in Forsyth, Georgia, where he studied to be a plumber. The cost to attend the school was ten dollars per month. In 1940, while attending the school, he met his future wife and they got married that same year. After leaving school, Lemon tried to get work in Detroit, Michigan, but was unsuccessful. He returned home to live with his parents in Georgia.

During the 1940s, Lemon became the founder and youngest chapter president of the Henry County NAACP, and found himself under regular threat by the Ku Klux Klan. He was actively involved in advocating for an improved education system in Henry County and successfully achieved the group's goal of better training for teachers in African American schools. Lemon was also heavily involved in fighting for the rights of African American farmers and helped them purchase land through the Federal Home Loans Administration. In addition, Lemon was instrumental in persuading then-Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge in enacting civil rights legislation during the 1970s. During this time, Lemon worked for the U.S. military at an Army Depot credit union, where he remained until 1945.

Lemon next worked for the mail department at the railroad at Terminal Station in Atlanta, a branch of the United States Post Office. He worked there for twenty-one years, after which he left to work directly for the U.S. Post Office, where he remained for another twenty years. Lemon was involved in supporting Jimmy Carter's run for the U.S. Presidency in the mid-1970s. Lemon retired from the U.S. Postal Service as a clerk and mail handler.

Lemon pass away on November 17, 2011 at the age of 92.

Lemon is the devoted husband of Mrs. Gladys Lemon, his wife of sixty-one years, the father of three sons, James, Jr., Kenneth and Wayman.

Lemon was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 11, 2006.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with J. W. Lemon was conducted by Denise Gines on December 11, 2006, in Locust Grove, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community activist and postal worker J. W. Lemon (1919 - 2011) was the founder of the Henry County, Georgia Chapter of the

NAACP. He helped Georgia farmers to purchase land through the Federal Home Loans Administration. He was also instrumental in the Civil Rights legislation of the 1970s.

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:

Lemon, J. W., 1919-2011

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Lemon, J. W., 1919-2011--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Community Activist

Postal Worker

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 J. W. Lemon, December 11, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral

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 J. W. Lemon, Section
A2006_157_001_001, TRT: 0:29:20 2006/12/11

J.W. Lemon was born on November 9, 1919 in Locust Grove, Georgia to Maggie Richie Lemon and James Lemon. His paternal grandfather was a successful gambler, and used his earnings to build a house and buy one hundred acres of land near Locust Grove. After boll weevils destroyed the town's cotton crop in the 1920s, and Lemon's uncle held three expensive funerals in 1927, the bank repossessed the family's property. Lemon's maternal grandparents separated when his mother was young. They planned for Lemon's mother to attend college, but because of the divorce, she only graduated from high school. Lemon's father was the family's disciplinarian, and a dedicated churchgoer. He oversaw Shoal Creek Baptist Church's Sunday school for thirty-six years, and never missed a class. Despite his only having a sixth grade education, he greatly valued education, and made it possible for Lemon's eldest sister to apply to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois on a work

study scholarship.

Video Oral History Interview with J. W. Lemon, Section
A2006_157_001_002, TRT: 0:29:10 2006/12/11

J.W. Lemon attended Shoal Creek Elementary School in Locust Grove, Georgia six months of the year. He was taught to cross the street to avoid white people while walking to school. In the summer, he worked on his family's farm with his five siblings, and picked blackberries to sell in town. Lemon attended Shoal Creek Baptist Church with his father, who was the church's deacon and Sunday school superintendent. For a few years, Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. pastored the church, and Lemon babysat Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The church formed connections with Atlanta's historically black schools, and sent youth from the congregation to study at Morehouse College. Upon graduating from Henry County Training School in 1939, Lemon worked briefly at his uncle's printing press in Atlanta. He then enrolled at the State Teachers and Agricultural College of Forsyth, where he studied plumbing and carpentry through the National Youth Administration's work study program. He also met his wife, Gladys Prince Lemon.

Video Oral History Interview with J. W. Lemon, Section
A2006_157_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2006/12/11

J.W. Lemon was hired at Conley Army Depot after he married Gladys Prince Lemon. Noticing the pay disparities between the Army depot's black and white workers, Lemon approached his boss, Colonel Stevenson. He gained Stevenson's approval to found a credit union to assist African American employees, but Lemon was fired after Stevenson was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Knobbs. He moved to Atlanta, Georgia to work for the railroad's mail department. There, he met A. Philip Randolph, and consulted with him regarding the conditions for railroad workers. Lemon recalls the Atlanta community's reaction to Randolph's failed march in 1941. After twenty-one years, Lemon began working directly for the U.S. Postal Service, where he remained for another two decades. In 1943, Lemon founded the Henry County chapter of the NAACP, becoming the organization's

youngest chapter president. In this role, he met with the McDonough Board of Education to advocate for African American teachers facing employment discrimination.

Video Oral History Interview with J. W. Lemon, Section
A2006_157_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30 2006/12/11

J. W. Lemon became a target of the Ku Klux Klan after forming the Henry County chapter of the NAACP, but was shielded from harm by his family, church and some members of the white community. When Lemon discovered that white postal workers were intercepting NAACP members' mail, he informed Walter White, and began distributing the mail himself. Lemon befriended Georgia Senator and Governor Herman Talmadge, who introduced him to President Harry S. Truman. Lemon describes the reaction of the African American community when Truman desegregated the U.S. Armed Forces. Governor Herman Talmadge helped Lemon ensure that sharecroppers received their fair share of government subsidies from the Farmers Home Administration, which enabled African Americans in Henry County to purchase land. Lemon compares Talmadge to his father, Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge, who had little respect for African American farmers. Lemon also worked with the NAACP to raise funds for Georgia Governor James Earl "Jimmy" Carter's campaign.

Video Oral History Interview with J. W. Lemon, Section
A2006_157_001_005, TRT: 0:28:40 2006/12/11

J. W. Lemon coordinated voter registration drives in Henry County, Georgia, and held seminars on voting in the local churches. His NAACP chapter eventually disbanded due to lack of funds, as white landowners pressured their sharecroppers to avoid participating in the organization. Lemon was congratulated on his work with the NAACP by Thurgood Marshall when Marshall was a newly appointed federal judge. Lemon was a good friend of Georgia Senator and Governor Herman Talmadge, and convinced Talmadge to build Wheat Street Towers, a housing complex for seniors in Atlanta. A few months before his death, Talmadge offered Lemon the position of postmaster in Locust Grove, Georgia. Lemon refused, as he did not want to attract further threats. Lemon also

describes the murder of Emmitt Till, and the assassinations of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He offers advice to young people, and reflects upon his life, family and how he would like to be remembered.