

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with John Matthews

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Matthews, John, 1910-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews,
Dates:	December 17, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:45:19).
Abstract:	Salesman and labor activist John Matthews (1910 - 2013) was the co-coordinator of the first picket line against the Transport Workers Union and became a founding member of the Harlem Labor Union. Matthews also founded a restaurant workers' union that broke open employment barriers in Harlem, New York, and was named chairman of the NAACP Labor and Industry department. Matthews was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 17, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_176
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Labor activist and union organizer John Alderman Matthews, Sr. was born on March 3, 1910 in the Panama Canal Zone to Theresa and Christopher Sylvester Matthews, a homemaker and a school teacher from Jamaica. One of seven siblings, Matthews grew up and attended high school in Kingston, Jamaica. After high school, Matthews moved to New York City, where over the years, he studied at New York University, the New School of Social Research, City Colleges of New York, and Bronx Community College.

Matthews began working in the field of civil rights in 1935 when he and four other workers formed the first picket line against the Transport Workers Union. At the same time, he became a founding member of the Harlem Labor Union, forcing the union to accept African American as bus drivers. In 1943, Matthews attended military school in New Jersey and served in the 92nd United States Infantry Division in Europe.

After returning from the war, Matthews went to work as a salesman, but continued his community activism. He founded a bartenders' and restaurant workers' union that broke open employment barriers in Harlem and the rest of New York City in the mid-1950s. In 1963, he worked as a campaign secretary to U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell. In the mid-1960s, Matthews spearheaded efforts that ended discriminatory hiring or membership practices by Bond Clothing Stores, Bronx State Hospital, Park Sheraton Hotel, Borden's, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. This work culminated in Matthews, who had earlier become the first Vice President of the New York Chapter of the NAACP, being named chairman of the NAACP Labor and Industry Department in 1967.

Throughout the late 1960s, Matthews continued his political activism, founding the Kennedy Democratic Club. He was recognized for his accomplishments in *Newsweek* magazine in 1995. Throughout his life, Matthews continued

to organize communities under tenants and youth organizations.

Matthews was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 17, 2006.

Matthews passed away on March 28, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with John Matthews was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 17, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Salesman and labor activist John Matthews (1910 - 2013) was the co-coordinator of the first picket line against the Transport Workers Union and became a founding member of the Harlem Labor Union. Matthews also founded a restaurant workers' union that broke open employment barriers in Harlem, New York, and was named chairman of the NAACP Labor and Industry department.

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:

Matthews, John, 1910-2013

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Matthews, John, 1910-2013 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Labor Activist

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 John Matthews, December 17, 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 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 John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_001, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

John Matthews was born on March 7, 1910 in the Panama Canal Zone to Theresa Matthews and Christopher Matthews. His parents were born in Jamaica, and immigrated to work on the Panama Canal. Shortly after Matthews' birth, they returned to live in Kingston, Jamaica, near his paternal family's businesses in Clarendon Parish. When Matthews was nine years old, his family briefly lived in Cuba, but he spent most of his childhood in Jamaica, surrounded by Jamaican food, calypso music and Kingston's opera house. He played cricket and soccer. Matthews attended the Jones Town school in Kingston. After moving with his parents and six siblings to New York City's Harlem neighborhood, he worked as a delivery man for a suit shop, and studied at night at Wadleigh High School with the hope of becoming a lawyer. Matthews also chauffeured Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.; frequented the Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom; and saw Althea Gibson play tennis in one of the neighborhood parks.

Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_002, TRT: 0:29:22 ?

John Matthews initially learned boilermaking at a Jamaican trade school, and eventually graduated from New York City's Wadleigh High School in the 1940s. He was introduced to labor organizing by Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew, who led meetings at New York City's Hotel Theresa about employment discrimination against African Americans. After they successfully picketed the Transport Workers Union of America to hire black drivers, Matthews organized the demonstrators to form the Harlem Labor Union. Around this time, he listened to boxer Joe Louis' fights on the radio, and recalls the discrimination Louis faced at Madison Square Garden. During World War II, Matthews was drafted into the U.S. Army, and trained at Fort Dix, New Jersey and Fort McClellan, Alabama in the 92nd Infantry Division. Upon being discharged, Matthews joined the 15th New York National Guard Regiment; and, after picketing the Liquor Salesmen's Union, became one of New York City's first African American liquor storeowners.

Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_003, TRT: 0:29:12 ?

John Matthews founded the Liquor Salesmen's Union Local 2 to help black waiters and bartenders obtain work in New York City. The union's first demonstration targeted the mafia-owned Frank's Restaurant. The protest was successful, and the union went on to picket Bond Clothing store and Bronx State Hospital. While African American ministers and politicians like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. were credited with organizing the picket lines, Matthews attributes their success to the picketers, who were often injured during demonstrations. Matthews also fought the discriminatory practices of the American Federation of Labor alongside John L. Lewis, who founded the Congress of Industrial Labor. Later, Matthews founded the Robert F. Kennedy Democratic Club, and served as its president. He was also the vice president of New York City's NAACP chapter, where he worked with Jeff Greenup and Constance Baker Motley. Matthews was unable to participate in the Montgomery Bus Boycott due to his union involvement in New York.

Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_004, TRT: 0:29:18 ?

John Matthews was inspired to organize community events for New York City's Harlem neighborhood after attending the March on Washington, and formed the 156th Street Tenants and Friends Block Association the following year. Later, Matthews served as the first president of the Francis Delafield Hospital Community Board. In this role, he uncovered discrimination against African American workers at Columbia University Medical Center, and pressured the hospital to improve its policies. After moving to Harlem's 161st Street,

Matthews formed the Concerned Citizens Block Association to address changes in the neighborhood, including an increase in drug use. Matthews was an active member of the Prince Hall Masons, through which he coordinated a community food program in Harlem. Due to his civic work, Matthews was acquainted with leaders like Malcolm X and Fidel Castro, whom he met at Harlem's Hotel Theresa. Matthews also developed a rivalry with David N. Dinkins during their race for election as district leader.

Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_005, TRT: 0:30:05 ?

John Matthews served as a chapter vice president and the chairman of labor and industries for the NAACP in New York City. While fighting employment discrimination at local institutions, he often negotiated with members of the mafia. Matthews also owned a liquor store in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where his patrons included Harry Belafonte. He frequented Sidney Poitier's Ribs in the Ruff restaurant on 7th Avenue, and knew politician Charles B. Rangel, who worked as a bus boy at the Hotel Theresa. In his free time, Matthews played alto saxophone in a band. He was also the first African American boat owner in Freeport, New York, where he made friends among the white boating community. Matthews was recognized for his service to the Harlem community by The Amsterdam News and the Pittsburgh Courier. Matthews shares his concerns about the United States, and his hopes for the election of an African American president. He also reflects upon his life and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with John Matthews, Section A2006_176_001_006, TRT: 0:17:58 ?

John Matthews served as president of the Bottle and Cork Club, an association of African American liquor salesmen in New York City. He was also acquainted with newspaper reporter Evelyn Cunningham, who once interviewed him. Matthews reflects upon his life, and the importance of history. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.