

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ozell Sutton

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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>	Sutton, Ozell, 1925-2015
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 19, 2007 and September 10, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:05:45).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Civil rights activist and community leader Ozell Sutton (1925 - 2015 ) served as an escort for the " Little Rock Nine," director of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, as a field representative on the Community Relations Service, and a director of the Justice Department's Community Relations Service. Sutton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 19, 2007 and September 10, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_020
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights activist and community leader Ozell Sutton was born on December 13, 1925, on a plantation in southeast Arkansas in the city of Gould. Sutton's mother was a widow who raised eight children: six boys who worked as cotton sharecroppers, and two girls who cooked and did laundry. Despite grueling hours and backbreaking work on the cotton plantation, Sutton managed to graduate from Dunbar High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

In 1944, Sutton became one of the first African Americans to serve in the United States Marine Corps. After surviving bloody conflicts from the Solomon Islands to Saipan, Sutton enrolled in Philander Smith College where he received his B.S. degree in 1950. Sutton became the first black reporter for the white-owned publication *Arkansas Democrat*; he also served as one of the escorts for the Little Rock Nine in 1957. In 1961, Sutton became director of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations where he was part of the group that began the Community Relations Service (CRS). Sutton was given responsibility for the civil rights and opportunity groups that became known as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in 1964.

Sutton's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement included his role as a field representative for the Community Relations Service. Sutton was at the Lorraine Hotel in the room next door to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee when Dr. King was assassinated in 1968. Sutton then became Special Assistant to the late Governor Winthrop Rockefeller of Arkansas. In 1972, Sutton directed the Justice Department's Community Relations Service and was responsible for the department's racial and ethnic conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

In 1990, Sutton served on the board of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. In 1994, Sutton received the Distinguished Service Award from the United States Department of Justice. Sutton was a former national president of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and continued to be a civil rights activist.

Sutton Passed away on December 19, 2015.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ozell Sutton was conducted by Denise Gines on January 19, 2007 and September 10, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and community leader Ozell Sutton (1925 - 2015 ) served as an escort for the " Little Rock Nine," director of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, as a field representative on the Community Relations Service, and a director of the Justice Department's Community Relations Service.

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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:

Sutton, Ozell, 1925-2015

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Sutton, Ozell, 1925-2015--Interviews

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African American civic leaders--Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--Interviews

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African American civil rights workers--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:**

Civil Rights Activist

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Community Leader

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

CivicMakers

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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 Ozell Sutton, January 19, 2007 and September 10, 2007. 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 Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/01/19

Ozell Sutton was born on December 13, 1925 in Gould, Arkansas to Lula Belle Dowthard Sutton and Charlie Sutton, Sr., who were sharecroppers. When Sutton was three years old, his father died, leaving him and his seven siblings in his mother's care. They left the plantation when Sutton was twelve years old, after a dispute over a debt between his mother and the plantation owner, Claude Holthoff. His family moved to town, and worked for one dollar per day on various plantations. Sutton attended Gould Colored School, where he was taught by Principal William Oliver Fields, a graduate of New York City's Columbia University. While the school had no science laboratory or library, Sutton learned mathematics and English in detail. Sutton's mother encouraged him to pursue his education. She sent him to attend Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, as Gould had no high school for African Americans. In Little Rock, Sutton stayed in the living room of his oldest

brother's crowded four-room home.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:00 2007/01/19

Ozell Sutton memorized poetry at Arkansas' Gould Colored School, which he often recited for his mother. He missed one year of school after sustaining a severe burn while slaughtering hogs, and graduated the eighth grade a year late. Sutton lived at his oldest brother's home during his first year at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. After his mother and younger sister joined them, they lived in a boarding house, and Sutton worked as a cook and dishwasher to help support the family. In 1944, he was drafted into the U.S. Marine Corps, and deployed to the South Pacific in a segregated unit. Upon his return in 1946, Sutton completed high school, and enrolled at Little Rock's Philander Smith College. He served as president of the college's NAACP Youth Council with Daisy Bates. Sutton recruited the Little Rock Nine, and served as a decoy when they entered Central High School for the first time. He also established a tutoring program at Philander Smith College to assist the students.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:30 2007/01/19

Ozell Sutton graduated from Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas, and joined the staff of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He was the first African American reporter at a major white Southern newspaper, and covered *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. Unable to advance at the newspaper due to racial discrimination, Sutton became a butler for Winthrop Rockefeller in 1957. He briefly worked at the Little Rock Housing Authority before returning to manage Rockefeller's home staff. Sutton later joined the Arkansas Council on Human Relations as its associate director, and became the director during his five-year tenure. He attended the March on Washington in 1963, and the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965. Following the passage of

the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Sutton was thrown out of a cafeteria in Little Rock, and subsequently organized a sit-in that prompted federal legal action. Sutton later joined the staff of the Community Relations Service, where he worked to enforce the Civil Rights Act.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/01/19

Ozell Sutton's employer, Winthrop Rockefeller, matched the funds he raised for the Arkansas Council on Human Relations. Nonetheless, civil rights organizations were severely underfunded, and Sutton paid for his own travel to demonstrations such as the second Selma to Montgomery March. Sutton was offered a position at the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relations Service; and, in 1966, became a field representative based in Little Rock, Arkansas. His first assignment was to investigate discrimination in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. His findings were met with hostility by Mayor Victor H. Schiro, so Sutton leveraged Schiro's request for federal funds in his push for reform. Next, Roger Wilkins, Roy Wilkins' nephew and the head of the Community Relations Service at the time, assigned Sutton to investigate the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike in Tennessee. He stayed in the Lorraine hotel, in the room beside that of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when King was assassinated.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:00 2007/01/19

Ozell Sutton was a field representative of the Community Relations Service, although he introduced himself to law enforcement as an officer of the U.S. Department of Justice to gain credibility. In this role, he accompanied Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from the Bessemer jail to the Birmingham jail for his safety. After King's assassination in Memphis, Tennessee, Sutton assisted with Attorney General Ramsey Clark's investigation. He also helped Bayard Rustin organize a march in Memphis by convincing a judge to alter the march's court order, in defiance of Sutton's instructions from the U.S. Department of Justice. Then, Sutton was hired as Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller's special assistant at the demand of

Little Rock's black community. In this role, he selected five African Americans for government appointments in Arkansas. In 1970, Sutton returned to the Community Relations Service as the state supervisor for Arkansas, and in two years was promoted to director of the Atlanta, Georgia region.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/09/10

Ozell Sutton and his team from the Community Relations Service were once surrounded by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) while staying at the Holiday Inn in Clarksdale, Mississippi. To escape, Sutton called the attorney general's office, and communicated in code using Pig Latin. Sutton also faced hostility from a militant African American group in Jackson, Mississippi when he attended one of their meetings. Later, following a violent clash between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and KKK members in Decatur, Alabama, Sutton appealed to Governor George Wallace for increased police presence at the groups' upcoming marches, and successfully avoided further violence. As a regional director of the Community Relations Service, Sutton was required to protect the civil rights of the KKK as well, and once convinced the City of Atlanta, Georgia to permit the KKK to demonstrate. Later in his term, he was asked to mediate a dispute regarding the equal employment of African American and white police officers in Atlanta.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_002\_007, TRT: 0:29:10 2007/09/10

Ozell Sutton mediated the decision to hire and promote more African Americans within the Atlanta Police Department. He continued mediating in 1987, when the Ku Klux Klan reacted violently to a march led by Hosea Williams in Forsyth County, Georgia. Sutton encouraged Williams to postpone the march for demonstrators' safety, and approached the governor for more police protection. Five years later, Sutton was sent to defuse the riots in Los Angeles, but was abruptly called back to Atlanta to mitigate tension between Clark Atlanta University students and the city police. Sutton retired from the Community Relations Service in 2002, and he describes



its history. In retirement, he became a public speaker, and shared his life story on national tours. Sutton was also president of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and led the organization's efforts to erect a statue of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_002\_008, TRT: 0:28:40 2007/09/10

HistoryMaker Ozell Sutton and Ernie Allen organized a conference in response to the Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children cases, which led to the founding of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Sutton also served as national president of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. During his tenure, the fraternity donated thousands of dollars to the NAACP, the Urban League and the United Negro College Fund. After attending a meeting of 100 Black Men, Inc. in New York City, Sutton helped found 100 Black Men of Atlanta, Inc., and formed the organization's national conference. Sutton published 'A Civil Rights Legend: Eyewitness to History,' and was writing his autobiography, 'From Yonder to Here: The Life and Work of Dr. Ozell Sutton,' at the time of the interview. He describes his wife and three daughters, and the impact of his mother's encouragement on his life. Sutton also shares a message for future generations, and reflects upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Ozell Sutton, Section  
A2007\_020\_002\_009, TRT: 0:10:55 2007/09/10

Ozell Sutton narrates his photographs.