

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mary Mitchell

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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>	Mitchell, Mary, 1949-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 21, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:43:37).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Newspaper columnist Mary Mitchell (1949 - ) was an award-winning writer for the Chicago Sun Times. Mitchell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 21, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_023
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

*Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Mary A. Mitchell was born Mary A. Duncan on May 23, 1949, in Clarksdale, Mississippi. Mitchell's mother, Carrie Williams Duncan, and father, Joseph Duncan, struggled to raise ten children in Chicago Public Housing's Dearborn Homes and Clarence Darrow Homes. Mitchell, the eldest and a twin loved to read as she helped raise her siblings. Mitchell attended Einstein Elementary School and Wendell Phillips Upper Grade Center. At Dunbar Vocational High School, Mitchell joined a girls group called the Exquisite Ladies Club, which put emphasis on good grades, not having babies and service. Graduating from Dunbar in 1967, Mitchell was hired by Peoples Gas as a mailroom clerk. Starting at Wilson Junior College in 1968, Mitchell transferred to

Chicago Teacher's College (Chicago State University) that same year.

Mitchell became the first African American legal secretary at a major Chicago law firm, Seyfarth Shaw, LLP; she eventually quit her job as a secretary after twenty years of service. Taking writing courses at Columbia College and encouraged by Carol Holtz and P.J. Bednarski, Mitchell landed a successful internship with the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1990. Graduating with her B.A. degree in journalism from Columbia College in 1991, Mitchell was hired full time by the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Covering educational issues, Mitchell's five part series on Chicago Vocational High School earned her an award from the National Association of Black Journalists. From 1993 to 1995, Mitchell covered City Hall reporting on Operation Silver Shovel. Since the start of her column in 1996, Mitchell, like Carl Rowan and Vernon Jarrett before her, has attracted a large and diverse readership. Mitchell also cultivated a substantial national following via the Internet, receiving an average of 900 e-mails per week from readers.

Mitchell was the recipient of numerous journalism awards, including the Award of Excellence from the National Association of Black Journalists, the Studs Terkel Award from the Chicago Media Workshop, and the Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headliner Club. Mitchell was a frequent guest panelist on television and radio programs; a president of the Chicago Association of Black Journalists; and a member of the Association of Women Journalists.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mary Mitchell was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 21, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Newspaper columnist Mary Mitchell (1949 - ) was an award-winning writer for the Chicago Sun Times.

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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:**

Mitchell, Mary, 1949-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Mitchell, Mary, 1949---Interviews

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African American women journalists--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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Chicago sun-times.

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## **Occupations:**

Newspaper Columnist

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

MediaMakers

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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 Mary Mitchell, January 21, 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 Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:57 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell was born on May 23, 1949 in Clarksdale, Mississippi to Carrie Williams Duncan and Joseph Duncan. Mitchell's maternal grandmother, Bessie Namble Williams, was born in Clarksdale to a family of cotton sharecroppers. Mitchell's mother left school after the third grade, and eventually moved to Chicago, Illinois. Mitchell's father was born in Slidell, Louisiana, and raised by his grandfather, Moses Duncan. He joined the U.S. Navy during World War II. After an altercation in the South, Mitchell's father moved to Chicago, where he met her mother. He worked as a dishwasher at the Blackhawk restaurant while studying to become an electrician, and later became the first African American manager at the Max Sterns Sons Company. Mitchell was the oldest of her parents' ten children, who were raised in Chicago's Dearborn Homes and Clarence Darrow Homes. She attended Einstein Elementary School, and enjoyed reading 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn' by Betty Smith.

African American women journalists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:14 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell grew up in public housing in Chicago, Illinois, where she was once accosted by female gang members. She was the oldest of ten children, and cared for her younger siblings alongside her twin sister. Mitchell attended the Wendell Phillips Upper Grade Center, where she was a strong student, and enjoyed reading. She went on to study secretarial skills at Dunbar Vocational High School. There, Mitchell and her friends formed a social group, the Exquisite Ladies Club, to encourage one

another to excel in school. Upon graduating, Mitchell entered the workforce to provide for her family, as her father, Joseph Duncan, had fallen ill. Because of her focus on work, Mitchell was unaware of Chicago's local politics and community programs. However, she watched the Civil Rights Movement on the news with her family, and once saw Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahalia Jackson at Chicago's Soldier Field. She also remembers President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Dr. King's assassinations.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:11 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell's parents, Carrie Williams Duncan and Joseph Duncan, divorced in 1965. From that time, Mitchell helped care for her younger siblings. Unable to secure a full time secretarial position due to her race, Mitchell worked in the mailroom at a gas company, and as a substitute secretary at a telephone company. She eventually continued her education at Woodrow Wilson Junior College and the Chicago Teachers College. After her son was born, Mitchell attended school part time, and became the first black secretary at the law firm of Seyfarth Shaw. Turned down for a promotion due to racial discrimination, Mitchell quit her job, and pursued creative writing and journalism at Columbia College Chicago, where she had difficulty balancing her coursework and family life. At the time, her favorite newspaper columnists were Roger Simon and Vernon Jarrett. She also remembers Primus Mootry, who led the Black Power movement on Chicago's college campuses; and the murder of Fred Hampton in 1969.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:45 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell studied journalism at Columbia College Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. While a student, she covered Melrose Park's town hall meetings; and, with the encouragement of Professor P.J. Bednarski, applied for the Chicago Sun-Times' minority internship program. During her internship, she wrote about the electrical blackouts on Chicago's West Side, and the Chicago Board of Education. Upon graduating from Columbia College

Chicago, Mitchell joined the staff of the Chicago Sun-Times, which included journalists Vernon Jarrett and Leonard Pitts. While working with education reporter Maribeth Vander Weele, Mitchell learned about the politics of the Chicago Public Schools, and wrote a five-part series on Cregier Vocational High School. The piece prevented the school's closure, and earned her the National Association of Black Journalists' Salute to Excellence National Media Award. Mitchell also uncovered the FBI's Operation Silver Shovel while writing about the illegal trash heaps in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_005, TRT: 0:28:36 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell worked as a journalist at the Chicago Sun-Times, where she covered Operation Silver Shovel and the trial of Larry Hoover in 1995. Then, the Chicago Sun-Times tapped Mitchell to write a column for the Sunday paper, in an effort to compete with the Chicago Tribune. She initially wrote about her personal experiences, and eventually published three columns per week. Rather than cover high profile news, Mitchell wrote about everyday issues, including racial discrimination. In 2001, she wrote an editorial about her experiences at a Chicago Cubs baseball game, where she endured racist remarks from passersby. Mitchell also faced backlash for her criticism of African American leaders like U.S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun and Reverend Jesse L. Jackson, with whom she disagreed over the treatment of several black high school students involved in a violent incident in Decatur, Illinois. In addition, she talks about Larry Hoover's political organization, 21st Century VOTE.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Mitchell, Section  
A2007\_023\_001\_006, TRT: 0:17:54 2007/01/21

Mary Mitchell was an award-winning journalist at the Chicago Sun-Times, and also served as a guest panelist on 'Chicago Tonight.' Mitchell reflects upon her racial identity, including the criticism she faced as an African American journalist and her indirect approach to writing about racism. She also talks about President Barack Obama, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community. Mitchell concludes the interview by

reflecting upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.