

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mary Ellen Butler

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Butler, Mary Ellen, 1940-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler,
Dates:	April 13, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:37:33).
Abstract:	Newspaper editor Mary Ellen Butler (1940 -) was the former speechwriter for U.S. Senator Alan Cranston and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. She also served as a metro and feature reporter for the Washington Star, and the lifestyle editor for the Oakland Tribune. Butler was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 13, 2007, in Concord, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_136
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Journalist Mary Ellen Butler was born Mary Ellen Rose on May 8, 1940 in Berkeley, California. Her mother, Virginia Craft Rose, is the niece of Harvard University graduate and editor/activist Monroe Trotter. Her grandfather was Henry Kempton Craft (d.1974), an early black YMCA executive and a direct descendent of William and Ellen Craft, famous for their daring escape from slavery in 1848. Butler's father, Joshua Richard Rose, headed the Northwest branch of the YMCA in Oakland, California, where she attended Durant Elementary School, Herbert Hoover Junior High School and Oakland Technical High School. Butler, who was mentored by journalism teacher Crystal Murphy, graduated in 1957. She attended the University of California at Berkeley where she earned her B.A. degree in journalism. Butler covered the school's refusal to let Malcolm X speak for the *Daily Californian*.

Graduating in 1961, Butler was hired as a writer by Blue Cross of Northern California and then by Bank of America World Headquarters to write business reports. In 1964, Butler joined the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* as a reporter covering the Free Speech Movement, City Hall, desegregation in the Berkeley public schools, and the Black Panther Party. Butler also taught the history of black journalism at Laney College in Oakland. From 1971 to 1972, she served as reporter and editor of the *Berkeley Post*. Entering the Congressional Fellowship Program, Butler wrote speeches, press releases and position papers for United States Senator Alan Cranston and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm in 1972 and 1973. She was a metro and feature reporter for the *Washington Star*, from 1973 to 1978.

In 1979, Butler returned to Oakland as writer and public information officer for the Oakland Unified School District. In late 1979, she joined the *Oakland Tribune* as "Lifestyle" editor. There, Butler managed a staff of thirty, producing eight newspaper sections per week including the "Sunday Lifestyle" and "Entertainment" sections. Moving to editorial writer in 1983, Butler wrote daily editorials and managed the political endorsement process.

From 1990 to 1994, Butler was named Editorial Page editor. After fifteen years with the *Oakland Tribune*, she opened Butler Communications.

In 1992, Butler received the Best Editorial Award from the Contra Costa Press Club and first place for editorial writing from the California Newspaper Publishers Association. In 1995, she won first place for her essay “Leadership in a Changing World” from the Center for Creative Leadership. Butler was a member of the National Conference of Editorial Writers and is a founding member of the National Association of Black Journalists. She is the author of several books including *Oakland Welcomes the World* and *Prophet of the Parks: The Story of William Penn Mott* and edited *Black Women Stirring the Waters*.

Butler was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 13, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Mary Ellen Butler was conducted by Larry Crowe on April 13, 2007, in Concord, California, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Newspaper editor Mary Ellen Butler (1940 -) was the former speechwriter for U.S. Senator Alan Cranston and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. She also served as a metro and feature reporter for the Washington Star, and the lifestyle editor for the Oakland Tribune.

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:

Butler, Mary Ellen, 1940-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Butler, Mary Ellen, 1940---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Editor

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Ellen Butler, April 13, 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 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 Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_001, TRT: 0:29:37
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Mary Ellen Butler was born on May 8, 1940 in Berkeley, California to Virginia Craft Rose and Joshua Rose. Butler's maternal grandfather, Henry Kempton Craft, graduated from Harvard University, and was a descendant of William Craft and Ellen Smith Craft, who escaped slavery by posing as white in 1848. They later published a memoir, 'Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,' and founded the Woodville Co-operative Farm School for freed slaves in Bryan County, Georgia. Butler's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth "Bessie" Trotter Craft, was the daughter of Virginia Isaacs Trotter, whose heritage traced back to President Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Plantation in Charlottesville, Virginia; and James Monroe Trotter, a soldier in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment during the American Civil War. Butler's great uncle was William Monroe Trotter, a newspaper editor and civil rights activist who opposed Booker T. Washington. Butler's maternal grandparents married in 1912, against their family's wishes.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_002, TRT: 0:29:20
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Mary Ellen Butler's maternal grandfather, Henry Kempton Craft, worked as a YMCA secretary in Chicago, Illinois; St. Louis, Missouri; and Washington, D.C. At sixteen years old, her mother enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There, she met Butler's father, Joshua Rose, who worked at the local YMCA. From the 1930s, Butler's maternal grandfather directed the Harlem YMCA in New York City, where Butler's parents married after a long courtship. In 1939, Butler's father moved to Oakland, California to establish the Northwest Branch YMCA in the black community. There, Butler attended St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, and studied at Durant Elementary School and Herbert Hoover Junior High School. At eight years old, she accompanied her parents on a road trip to visit her maternal grandparents, aunt and uncle in New York City. On the way, her father attended a YMCA conference in Wilberforce, Ohio. Butler also talks about her family tree and her family's naming traditions.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_003, TRT: 0:29:05
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Mary Ellen Butler grew up near a train yard in Oakland, California, where she attended Durant Elementary School. She enjoyed reading and writing, and her favorite book was 'The Black Stallion' by Walter Farley. At Herbert Hoover Junior High School, she played the violin in the orchestra. She also helped create the Girls Athletic Association's newsletter, which piqued her interest in journalism. On the recommendation of her father, Joshua Rose, Butler attended Oakland Technical High School instead of her neighborhood school, McClymonds High School, which was the alma mater of major league baseball players Vada Pinson and Frank Robinson. During Butler's junior year at Oakland Technical High School, she joined the student newspaper and yearbook under the tutelage of journalism teacher Crystal Murphy. Butler attended Oakland Oaks games with her brother, Richard Rose, and father; and listened to Oakland Athletics games on the radio. She also talks about Oakland's racial demographics and Mayor Ronald Bellums.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_004, TRT: 0:30:44
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Mary Ellen Butler worked on the newspaper and yearbook at Oakland Technical High School in Oakland, California. She enjoyed reading black publications like The San Francisco Sun Reporter and the Boston Guardian, which was founded by her great-great uncle, William Monroe Trotter. Butler's father encouraged her to become a teacher, but she aspired to become a journalist. Upon graduating in 1957, she matriculated at the University of California, Berkeley, where her peers included William Byron Rumford, the first African American state representative in California; and Lionel Wilson, Oakland's first black mayor. In her sophomore year, she joined The Daily Californian, and covered events like the cancellation of a lecture by Malcolm X on campus. In 1960, she studied abroad in Poland for six weeks through the Experiment in International Living program. Butler also talks about her parents' professions, and the protests against segregated housing and employment discrimination during the Civil Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_005, TRT: 0:29:34
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Mary Ellen Butler studied abroad in Poland, where she visited the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and listened to jazz music. Upon graduating college, Butler experienced gender discrimination while searching for work as a newspaper reporter. After an unsuccessful interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, she worked in public relations at the Blue Cross of Northern California, and then as a business writer at the Bank of America in San Francisco, California. In 1964, Butler was hired by the Berkeley Daily Gazette at the insistence of local black activists. There, she covered the Free Speech Movement led by Mario Savio at the University of California, Berkeley; as well as Black Panther Party press conferences and the Free Breakfast for School Children Program, which was headed by Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver. Butler briefly taught black journalism history at Laney College in Oakland, California before returning to reporting at the Oakland Post, a black newspaper founded by Thomas L. Berkley.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_006, TRT: 0:29:13
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Mary Ellen Butler covered Oakland Mayor Ronald Dellums' and California State Assembly Speaker Willie L. Brown's visit to San Quentin State Prison after the death of civil rights activist George Jackson. In 1972, Butler received the American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship in Washington, D.C., where she wrote speeches for Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. Then, Butler became a metro and features reporter at the Washington Star, and covered the federal investigation of Patty Hearst; and author Alex Haley's visit to Jufureh, Gambia. Upon returning to San Francisco, California in 1978, Butler briefly taught in the Oakland Unified School District, before becoming the first black woman to head an editorial page at the Oakland Tribune under owner Robert C. Maynard. She remembers the assassination of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, the Jonestown massacre and Huey P. Newton's release from prison. She also talks about journalist Gary Webb's investigative series for the San Jose Mercury News.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_007, TRT: 0:29:36
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Mary Ellen Butler left the Oakland Tribune in 1994, following the death of its owner, African American journalist Robert C. Maynard. She then worked as a

freelance reporter for ten years. One of her news articles featured three African American sisters who went into unconventional fields like the fire department, dentistry and piloting. Butler also wrote 'Prophet of the Parks' about National Park Service Director William Penn Mott, Jr., and 'Oakland Welcomes the World' for the Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce. Butler remembers the career of hip hop artist MC Hammer, who was an Oakland native. She shares her aspiration to write her maternal grandparents' history, and her hopes and concerns for the African American community. She also talks about her life, legacy and children, including stepson Christian Butler, and daughters Stephanie Perry and Allegra Perry Aldridge. Butler concludes this part of the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Mary Ellen Butler, Section A2007_136_001_008, TRT: 0:10:24
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Mary Ellen Butler narrates her photographs.