

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Lewis Harris

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harris, Robert Lewis, 1944-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris,
Dates:	July 6, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:58:54).
Abstract:	Energy executive and civil rights lawyer Robert Lewis Harris (1944 -) worked for the Pacific Gas & Electric Company for over three decades. Throughout his career in the legal profession, Harris was involved with a wide variety of free speech, environmental, and community advocacy issues. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 6, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_195
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer, activist, and business executive Robert Lewis Harris was born to Lucy and Benjamin Harris on March 4, 1944, in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. After moving to California in 1960, Harris, a 1961 graduate of Oakland Technical High School, received his A.A. degree from Merritt College in Oakland in 1963 and his B.A. degree from San Francisco State University in 1965 (in 2007 he was inducted into the university's Hall of Fame). Harris worked as a probation officer for four years before entering the University of California Berkeley Law School (Boalt Hall).

Shortly after Harris's receipt of his J.D. degree in 1972, he joined the legal staff at Pacific Gas & Electric Co. (PG&E) where he spent thirty-four years as an attorney and business executive, retiring in January 2007.

In 1973, Harris became active with his local bar associations, serving in 1976 as President of the Charles Houston Bar Association (CHBA), an association of Black lawyers in Northern California. He made a name for himself in the legal community by leading a team of Black lawyers who successfully defended the NAACP against libel and slander charges in 1978. A year later, he made history by becoming the first lawyer from the West Coast to ever serve as President of the National Bar Association (NBA). A Founder of the California Association of Black Lawyers in 1977, Harris in 1982 served as a founding member of the board of the National Bar Institute, the funding component of the NBA. Later that year, he became the first President of the Wiley Manuel Law Foundation, the funding component of CHBA. In 1983, he became Chairman of the Legal Redress Committee of Oakland branch of the NAACP, and in 1986, he received the NAACP's highest legal honor, the W. Robert Ming Award for his advocacy on behalf of the NAACP. Harris has also received the highest honors of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (Laurel Wreath Award) and the NBA (C. Francis Stradford Award).

In 1985, Harris argued and won a landmark corporate free speech case in the U.S. Supreme Court protecting PG&E's First Amendment rights. In 1987, Harris married Glenda Newell, with whom he had two children. After completing the Harvard Business School's Advance Management Program in 1988, he began his ascension through the corporate ranks at PG&E, first as Vice President of Community Relations and later as Vice President of Environmental Affairs. In the latter position, Harris expanded and led PG&E's environmental stewardship endeavors to a new level. Harris has continued his involvement in community issues by serving in the highest ranking positions in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (Grand Polemarch) and in Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity (the Boulé) as Grand Sire Archon-Elect; serving on the board of the Port of Oakland; being involved with the United Negro College Fund of the Bay Area; working with the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area (Co-Chair); working with the California League of Conservation Voters; working with the American Association of Blacks in Energy (General Counsel); being involved with the African American Experience Fund of the National Parks Foundation; serving on the U.S. EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council; working with the California EPA Environmental Justice Advisory Committee; serving on the National Environmental Policy Commission; and being involved with the Oakland African American Chamber of Commerce, among many others.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Lewis Harris was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 6, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Energy executive and civil rights lawyer Robert Lewis Harris (1944 -) worked for the Pacific Gas & Electric Company for over three decades. Throughout his career in the legal profession, Harris was involved with a wide variety of free speech, environmental, and community advocacy issues.

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:

Harris, Robert Lewis, 1944-

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Harris, Robert Lewis, 1944---Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

African American executives--Interviews

African American civic leaders--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Pacific Gas and Electric Company.

Occupations:

Corporate Lawyer

Civil Rights Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Robert Lewis Harris, July 6, 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).

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 Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_001, TRT: 0:28:56 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris was born on March 4, 1944 in

Arkadelphia, Arkansas to Lucy Luster Harris and Benjamin Harris. Harris' paternal great-grandparents, Ailie Harris and James Harris, Sr., lived in North Carolina; and their son, Henry Harris, migrated in the late 1800s to Arkadelphia. There, he met Harris' paternal grandmother, Mary Harris, who came from a notable family of farmers in Arkansas. Harris' mother was born to a poor family in rural Arkansas, and worked as a domestic from a young age. After she married Harris' father, the couple raised five children on farm in rural Arkadelphia. There, Harris began his education at the Williams School, a two-room schoolhouse. Outside of school, Harris' responsibilities included picking cotton and baling hay. His family belonged to the Church of God in Christ, and his father founded and pastored several churches in Arkansas. Each Sunday, Harris attended church services with his family, and the Young People Willing Workers youth group.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

African American executives--Interviews.

African American civic leaders--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_002, TRT: 0:29:55 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris attended the all-black Williams School and Peake High School in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. He excelled in English and history, and acted in the school theater productions. During the summer before his senior year, Harris' older sister, Jean Harris Blacksher, invited him to live with her and her husband, Artis Blacksher, in Oakland, California. Wanting to escape the rural South, Harris agreed; and, the following day, travelled by bus to Oakland. He was initially seated in the back of the bus; but, after leaving the segregated South, sat at the front for the remainder of the trip. Harris enrolled at the integrated Oakland Technical High School, where he was initially denied entry into the college preparatory courses because he came from Arkansas, which was perceived to have low educational standards. However, after his uncle visited the counselor, Miriam Hillegas, Harris was permitted to enroll in the advanced classes.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section

A2007_195_001_003, TRT: 0:29:32 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris completed his senior year at Oakland Technical High School in Oakland, California, where he was one of the few African American students enrolled in the college preparatory track. Upon graduating, he matriculated at the nearby Oakland Junior College, where his classmates included Black Panther Party cofounders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. After two years, Harris transferred to San Francisco State College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. He was hired in 1965 as a deputy officer of the Alameda County Probation Department. While working as a probation officer, Harris' coworker persuaded him to apply to the University of California Berkeley School of Law, which was attempting to recruit more African American students at the time. Harris was accepted into the law school; and, in 1969, matriculated with twelve other African American law students. While earning his J.D. degree, Harris studied under John R. Hetland and Stephen Barnett, and wrote for the California Law Review.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_004, TRT: 0:30:15 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris attended the University of California Berkeley School of Law in Berkeley, California. After his first year, he worked during the summer for the Alameda County Probation Department. In his second year, he joined the Black American Law Students Association, and was selected as a writer and editor for the California Law Review. Upon graduating, Harris became the third black attorney to join the legal staff of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, where he was supervised by Richard Clarke and general counsel Frederick Searls. Harris' first case was a wrongful death suit in Redding, California. The legal department considered the company liable, and expected to lose the case; but it was dismissed after Harris cross-examined the opposing counsel's expert witness. Harris went on to represent the company in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of Pacific Gas and Electric Company v. Public Utilities Commission of California, which set a precedent in favor of corporate free speech in 1986.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_005, TRT: 0:29:30 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris represented the Pacific Gas and Electric Company before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1986, during the landmark case of Pacific Gas and Electric Company v. Public Utilities Commission of California. At the time, the commission was working to prevent public utility companies from promoting their political beliefs. With Malcolm H. Furbush and William Cohen, Harris argued that corporations had a right to free speech, and won by a 5-3 decision. In addition, Harris defended the NAACP, which was repeatedly sued by the National Association of Police Organizations after filing complaints about police brutality. As a member of the Charles Houston Bar Association, he completed this work pro bono, and was honored with NAACP's William Robert Ming Advocacy Award for his efforts. Harris also talks about the history of the Charles Houston Bar Association, which was founded in 1955 as a social club for black lawyers. Harris joined the club in 1973, and was instrumental in its formalization as bar association.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_006, TRT: 0:29:24 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris joined the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity while enrolled at San Francisco State College in San Francisco, California. He continued his involvement after graduation, serving as one of the fraternity's youngest grand polemarchs. His fraternity brothers included attorneys Earl B. Dickerson, who argued against racially restrictive covenants at the U.S. Supreme Court; and Johnnie Cochran, who defended many prominent African Americans. From 1973 to 1977, Harris served as the secretary and then the president of the Charles Houston Bar Association, and successfully lobbied California Governor Jerry Brown to appoint more African American judges. In 1975, Harris became the assistant secretary to the National Bar Association's Secretary Arnette Hubbard. One year later, Harris was elected to the third vice presidency of the National Bar Association, becoming the first lawyer from California to hold office in the organization. He served as the National Bar

Association's president from 1979 to 1980.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_007, TRT: 0:30:07 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris transferred from the legal department of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company to a managerial role in the operations division in 1988. During this time, he also served as president of the National Bar Association, which was founded in 1924 in response to the American Bar Association's discriminatory practices. The organization's former presidents included William Borders and Arnette Hubbard. Harris was also affiliated with the National Bar Institute and the Wiley Manuel Law Foundation, both of which functioned as the funding arm of larger bar associations. Harris became a member of the Boule through the Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity, and was named the grand sire archon in 2008. In this role, he focused the organization on the importance of education in African American communities. Harris reflects upon the educational legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, the leadership skills he gained through the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and his concerns about the state of African American organizations.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Lewis Harris, Section
A2007_195_001_008, TRT: 0:31:15 2007/07/06

Robert Lewis Harris became the central division manager of the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) in 1989. In this role, he was responsible for all operations in the central region, which included California's San Francisco Bay Area. During his tenure, Harris supervised the restoration of power after several natural disasters, including the Loma Prieta earthquake and the Oakland firestorm of 1991, when his team succeeded in restoring power after only five days. Harris was promoted to the vice presidency of community relations in 1994, and then became the vice president of environmental issues in 1998. Two years later, the company faced a scandal following the release of the film 'Erin Brockovich,' which revealed that PG&E dumped wastewater tainted with chromium near the town of Hinkley, California. Harris describes how he would like to be remembered, and his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

He concludes the interview by reflecting upon the importance of history.