

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Steven Roberts, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Steven C., 1952-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr.,
Dates:	December 7, 2007 and October 18, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:01:10).
Abstract:	Entrepreneur and city alderman Steven Roberts, Sr. (1952 -) was a St. Louis alderman who, along with his brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., founded The Roberts Companies. Roberts served as the company's president, as well as a board member for the Pulaski Financial Corporation of St. Louis. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 7, 2007 and October 18, 2007, in St. Louis, Missouri. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_294
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entrepreneur Steven Craig Roberts was born on April 11, 1952, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Delores Talley Roberts and Victor Roberts. Roberts grew up the second of four siblings, and was particularly close to his brother, Michael V. Roberts. The family was educated in the St. Louis Public School System, and Roberts began working early on, earning money working around the neighborhood and delivering newspapers.

Roberts attended Clark University in Massachusetts as a Danforth Fellow, and initially considered a career either in the ministry or in medicine. Roberts instead began studying at Washington University in St. Louis to get his law degree. In 1974, while he was attending law school, his brother Michael began Roberts-Roberts and Associates, which became a business and construction management firm in St. Louis.

Roberts graduated with dual J.D. and M.A. degrees in 1978, and the following year, ran to become an alderman in St. Louis, joining his brother Michael who had been elected two years previously. Roberts was the youngest person to become an alderman in St. Louis, where he served along with his brother, Michael, and longtime friends Mike Jones, Virvus Jones and Wayman Smith; he held this position until 1993. During his terms as alderman, Roberts was the chief sponsor of the St. Louis Center and Union Station developments in St. Louis, and was particularly involved with major redevelopment projects for the city.

In 1981, Roberts and his brother began Roberts Broadcasting, a new branch of the duo's business empire. After establishing WRBU-TV in St. Louis, the Roberts brothers would go on to build eleven more successful television stations across the country, from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Mobile, Alabama. During the building of these stations, the Roberts became more familiar with the business behind construction, inspiring the founding of Roberts Construction Company in 1989. This additional holding supplemented a growing commercial and residential development company the brothers established in 1982 known as Roberts Brothers Properties, an organization that has processed more than \$25 million in redevelopment.

In 1999, the first Sprint PCS-affiliated Roberts Wireless store opened in Jefferson City, Missouri, the only PCS company that is entirely African American-owned in the country. Today, the Roberts Companies are a \$460 million, thirty-four-company organization; these companies include an aviation division, a gated Bahamas community and real estate development. Roberts serves as president of the company, while his brother Mike serves as chairman of the board. Roberts has also served on the board of directors of Pulaski Financial Corporation, an independent, community-based bank based in St. Louis, since 2006.

Roberts is married to Eva Frazer, M.D.; the couple has three children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Steven Roberts, Sr. was conducted by Larry

Crowe on December 7, 2007 and October 18, 2007, in St. Louis, Missouri, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entrepreneur and city alderman Steven Roberts, Sr. (1952 -) was a St. Louis alderman who, along with his brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., founded The Roberts Companies. Roberts served as the company's president, as well as a board member for the Pulaski Financial Corporation of St. Louis.

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:

Roberts, Steven C., 1952-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Roberts, Steven C., 1952---Interviews

City council members--Missouri--Saint Louis--Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

St. Louis (Mo.)

Occupations:

Entrepreneur

City Alderman

HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers|PoliticalMakers

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 Steven Roberts, Sr., December 7, 2007 and October 18, 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 Steven Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_294_001_001, TRT: 0:30:00 2007/10/18

Steven Roberts, Sr. was born on April 11, 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri to Delores Talley Roberts and Victor Roberts. His maternal grandfather's parents met in the South following the Civil War; and his great-grandfather, who was Native American and African American, went on to establish a farm in southern Missouri. Roberts' maternal grandmother's father was a businessman and minister. In

the early 20th century, he moved his family from Dyersburg, Tennessee to St. Louis, one of the nation's largest industrial cities. There, he raised twelve children, including Roberts' maternal grandmother. In St. Louis, she met Roberts' grandfather, who worked in maintenance and drove a taxi. They raised Roberts' mother near The Ville, a predominantly black area in St. Louis. She graduated from St. Louis' Charles H. Sumner High School, as did Roberts' father, who was born in West Helena, Arkansas. They met and married after Roberts' father returned from World War II, and then opened a catering business in St. Louis.

City council members--Missouri--Saint Louis--Interviews.
African American businesspeople--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 2007/10/18

Steven Roberts, Sr. traced his paternal grandmother's ancestry to 19th century Virginia, where his great-great-grandfather was born into slavery. A relative of slave rebellion leader Nat Turner, he moved to Selmer, Tennessee, where Roberts' paternal grandmother later grew up. Roberts' paternal grandfather, Squire Victor Roberts, came from West Point, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee, where he attended Meharry Medical College. He met Roberts' grandmother, a teacher and graduate of Lane College, in Jackson, Tennessee. They initially lived in West Helena, Arkansas, where he established a medical practice. A few years after Roberts' father was born in 1922, they moved to The Ville area of St. Louis, Missouri. There, Roberts' father graduated from Charles H. Sumner High School and the Stowe Teachers College. Roberts' mother also earned a degree there, after it was integrated and renamed Harris-Stowe College. Roberts also recalls unexpectedly meeting his paternal cousin, Harold Lathon, in Mississippi.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_001_003, TRT: 0:24:40 2007/10/18

Steven Roberts, Sr.'s paternal grandparents met in Jackson, Tennessee, and moved together to West Helena, Arkansas. After Roberts' father, Victor Roberts, was born in 1922, they relocated to St. Louis, Missouri. Roberts'

grandfather died when Roberts' father was a teenager, so he found work as a tailor to support his mother and sister. Roberts' father attended Charles H. Sumner High School and the Stowe Teachers College in St. Louis, and then served with the U.S. Army in the European Theater of World War II. After delisting, he married Roberts' mother, Delores Talley Roberts; and began a thirty-nine year career at the U.S. Post Office Department. In St. Louis, Roberts lived with his parents and older brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., in a two-unit flat on Vernon Avenue, where his grandmother and aunt shared the neighboring apartment. He later relocated with his family to the mostly black San Francisco Court subdivision. As a child, Roberts and his mother went on frequent outings to St. Louis' Forest Park.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_004, TRT: 0:27:50 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr. spent his early childhood in The Ville area of St. Louis, Missouri. There, he and his family lived on Vernon Avenue, in a two-unit building they shared with his paternal grandmother and aunt. During this time, Roberts' father worked the night shift at the U.S. Post Office Department. After his parents attained greater financial security, they moved to a new home in St. Louis' San Francisco Court, a majority black subdivision that was surrounded by a predominantly white community. At that time, Roberts and his older brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., transferred from Cupples Elementary School to Scullin Elementary School, where they were initially the only African American students. While living in San Francisco Court, Roberts experienced racial discrimination for the first time, when a friend was forbidden from playing with him because of his race. Additionally, Roberts describes the destinations he visited as a boy in St. Louis, like Forest Park and the Saint Louis Zoological Park.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_005, TRT: 0:28:10 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr. attended Northwest High School in St. Louis, Missouri from 1966 until 1970, when it was a predominantly white institution. There, Roberts edited the

school newspaper and yearbook. He also joined the student government, and clubs such as the Model United Nations. With the human relations club, Roberts organized conferences for inner city African American students and suburban white students. He remembers the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968; and the civil rights activities that followed, including a march organized by St. Louis' African American leadership, including Alice Windom. During this time, Roberts' older brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., assisted in the founding of Helping Other Men Emerge (HOME), a student activist group akin to SNCC. Roberts also talks about the mismanagement of the St. Louis Public Schools during the desegregation process; and the efforts to integrate the Veiled Prophet Organization, an all-white secret society in St. Louis.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_006, TRT: 0:28:40 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr. attended Northwest High School in St. Louis, Missouri; and, during the summers, took part in the leadership program at Camp Miniwanca. Located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, the camp was established by the American Youth Foundation in the 1920s for children of diverse social backgrounds. While in high school, Robert aspired to continue his education on the East Coast. He read an article in Jet magazine about the scholarship opportunities for black students at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and went on to matriculate there. During his sophomore year, he studied abroad in Ghana, where he learned about African history and culture while visiting Accra, Kumasi, Elmina and Cape Coast. Roberts also pledged Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, and graduated with a degree in economics and sociology in 1974. He also talks about Clark University alumnus D'Army Bailey, whose pressure on the school to increase black enrollment led to the creation of minority scholarships.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_007, TRT: 0:30:50 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr.'s mother, Delores Talley Roberts, was raised as a Baptist; while his father, Victor Roberts, came

from a Methodist family. After moving to St. Louis, Missouri, they joined the All Saints Episcopal Church, where Roberts was baptized. He also served as an acolyte and choir singer alongside his older brother, Michael Roberts, Sr. At this point in the interview, Roberts recalls his brother's interest in seminary school; and describes his relationship with his brother, with whom he later founded The Roberts Companies. Upon graduating from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, Roberts enrolled at the Washington University School of Law in St. Louis with funding from the Danforth Foundation. He studied under Professor Peter Mutharika, who advocated for student diversity; and became interested in urban law and development. He went on to attend an LL.M. degree program created by Daniel R. Mandelker, one of the leading housing legislation scholars in the United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_008, TRT: 0:30:00 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr. received his J.D. and LL.M. degrees from the Washington University School of Law in St. Louis, Missouri in 1977. During his law studies, Roberts worked as a legal clerk at the St. Louis Board of Aldermen. Then, from 1979 to 1991, he served as the alderman for the 20th Ward of St. Louis. His older brother, Michael Roberts, Sr., was also an alderman, and represented the 19th Ward for eight years. In the early 1980s, Roberts and his brother founded Roberts-Roberts and Associates, which became the consulting branch of The Roberts Companies. Their father, Victor Roberts, helped manage their office after retiring from the U.S. Post Office Department. Roberts remembers applying for the firm's first Federal Communications Commission license, which led to the acquisition of the WRBJ-TV station in Jackson, Mississippi in 1986. He also talks about meeting future U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and politician Alan Keyes while attending college in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Video Oral History Interview with Steven Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_294_002_009, TRT: 0:10:40 2007/12/07

Steven Roberts, Sr. narrates his photographs.