

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

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Michael V., 1948-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr.,
Dates:	December 6, 2007 and October 18, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (4:25:25).
Abstract:	City alderman Michael Roberts, Sr. (1948 -) was a former alderman of St. Louis, Missouri; and former campaign manager for Jimmy Carter. He and his brother Steven Roberts, Sr. co-founded the Roberts Companies, which included an aviation division, a gated Bahamas community and real estate development. He served as the company's board chairman. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 6, 2007 and October 18, 2007, in St. Louis, Missouri. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_295
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entrepreneur Michael Victor Roberts, Sr. was born on October 24, 1948, in St. Louis, Missouri to Delores Talley Roberts and Victor Roberts. He grew up the first of four siblings. The Roberts family was educated in the St. Louis Public School System, and Roberts began working as a youth, earning money doing chores around the neighborhood and delivering newspapers. Roberts heard St. Louis'

Dick Gregory talk about the Civil Rights Movement and was inspired. Graduating from Northwest High School in 1967, where he played the trombone and tennis, Roberts attended Central Missouri State University and Forest Park Community College. He met Jack Danforth at Camp Minnewanka and finished Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri as a Danforth Fellow. He began his first business selling dashikis and other African merchandise to area bookstores. Roberts studied law at St. Louis University School of Law, and in 1974, earned his J.D. degree and began Roberts-Roberts and Associates, a business and construction management firm headquartered in St. Louis.

In 1976, Roberts worked as St. Louis campaign manager for Jimmy Carter, and after Carter's election as U.S. President, he was a regular guest at the White House. One year later, Roberts was elected the youngest alderman in St. Louis. His brother, Steven C. Roberts, would claim this title two years later, serving along with Mike Jones, Virvus Jones and Wayman Smith. Roberts was the chief sponsor of the St. Louis Center and Union Station developments, and he was involved in major redevelopment efforts for the City of St. Louis.

In 1981, Roberts and his brother began Roberts Broadcasting. After establishing WRBU-TV in St. Louis, the Roberts Brothers would build eleven more television stations across the country, from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Mobile, Alabama. While building these stations, the Roberts Brothers founded Roberts Construction Company in 1989. This additional business enterprise supplemented the commercial and residential developments the brothers had established in 1982 known as Roberts Brothers Properties.

In 1999, the Roberts Brothers opened the first Sprint PCS-affiliated wireless store in Jefferson City, Missouri. It was the only PCS-affiliated company owned by African Americans. The Roberts Companies include a \$460 million thirty-four-company organization, with an aviation division, a gated Bahamas community and other real estate developments. Roberts serves as chairman of the board, while his brother Steven serves as president.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Michael Roberts, Sr. was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 6, 2007 and October 18, 2007, in St. Louis, Missouri, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. City alderman Michael Roberts, Sr. (1948 -) was a former alderman of St. Louis, Missouri; and former campaign manager for Jimmy Carter. He and his brother Steven Roberts, Sr. co-founded the

Roberts Companies, which included an aviation division, a gated Bahamas community and real estate development. He served as the company's board chairman.

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, Michael V., 1948-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Roberts, Michael V., 1948---Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

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

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

City Alderman

Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers|BusinessMakers

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 Michael Roberts, Sr., December 6, 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 Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 2007/10/18

Michael Roberts, Sr. was born on October 24, 1948 in St. Louis, Missouri to Delores Talley Roberts and Victor Roberts. His paternal grandfather was born in the 1890s in West Point, Mississippi, and worked as a Pullman porter before attending Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. He met Roberts' paternal grandmother in Jackson, Tennessee, where she graduated from Lane College; and went on to practice medicine in West Helena, Arkansas, where Roberts' father was born in 1922. Soon after, they moved to St. Louis. Roberts' maternal great-grandfather was an engineer, and died at a young age. Roberts' mother was born in 1931 in St. Louis, where she

grew up near The Ville neighborhood. A graduate of the segregated Charles H. Sumner High School, she married Roberts' father when he returned to St. Louis from his U.S. Army service in World War II. She graduated from St. Louis' Harris-Stowe College later in life. Roberts also recalls meeting his paternal cousin, Harold Lathon.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

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

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_295_001_002, TRT: 0:29:40 2007/10/18

Michael Roberts, Sr.'s paternal grandfather, Squire Victor Roberts, died in 1937, when Roberts' father, Victor Roberts, was a teenager. A graduate of the Stowe Teachers College in St. Louis, Missouri, Roberts' father had a long career at the U.S. Post Office Department, and was a founding member of the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity's Beta Nu chapter. In St. Louis, Roberts moved with his family from Vernon Avenue, where they shared a two-unit building with Roberts' grandmother and aunt; to San Francisco Court, a new development in a predominantly white neighborhood. There, he attended Scullin Elementary School, where he was one of the few black students. During this time, Roberts was influenced by his mother, Delores Talley Roberts, with whom he attended rallies, museums and clubs like Jack and Jill of America. He also served as an acolyte at the All Saints Episcopal Church. Roberts completed one semester at the mostly black Beaumont High School, before transferring to the majority white Northwest High School.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section
A2007_295_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 2007/10/18

Michael Roberts, Sr. grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. There, he was involved in Jack and Jill of America; and, as a teenager, mowed his neighbors' lawns and bagged groceries. He also joined a cultural exchange program at St. Louis' Northwest High School, which paired his school with a suburban high school in Clayton, Missouri. After completing one year at Central Missouri State College in Warrensburg, he attended St. Louis' Forest Park Community College. Around this time, Roberts became a

state tennis champion, and received a scholarship to Camp Miniwanca, an American Youth Foundation camp in Michigan. Then, he enrolled at the Lindenwood College for Men in St. Charles, Missouri, where he studied English literature and communications, and developed an interest in existentialism. He went on to attend the Saint Louis University School of Law. Roberts was a founding member of HOME, a civil rights group in St. Louis. He also talks about his mentor, Jewish businessman Sam Lapp.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_004, TRT: 0:28:20 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr. studied abroad at The Hague Academy in the Netherlands while a student at the Saint Louis University School of Law. After graduating in 1974, he founded the Roberts-Roberts and Associates consulting firm. Roberts also helped manage James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr.’s presidential campaign in 1976. He mobilized black voters in places like Des Moines, Iowa; and worked with politicians like Alexis Herman, Hamilton Jordan and Ernest Green in Washington, D.C. He also participated in a tennis tournament hosted by the Congressional Black Caucus. While attending the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City, Roberts became the first African American guest of the New York Athletic Club. He also integrated the Missouri Athletic Club with the support of St. Louis Mayor John Poelker. In 1977, Roberts was elected to St. Louis’ Board of Aldermen as the representative of the 19th Ward. He also recalls meeting F.W. de Klerk, the last president of apartheid South Africa, in 2007.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_005, TRT: 0:28:00 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr. was elected in 1977 to the St. Louis Board of Aldermen, where he represented the 19th Ward of St. Louis, Missouri for eight years. During this period, he and his younger brother, Steven Roberts, Sr., applied for a Federal Communications Commission license, and acquired St. Louis’ WRBU-TV station. In 1981, they purchased the Sears, Roebuck and Co. building in St. Louis, which they renamed the Victor Roberts Building in

honor of their father. Roberts also worked on President James Earl “Jimmy” Carter, Jr.’s reelection campaign in 1980, organizing African American voters in Iowa and New Orleans, Louisiana. Roberts’ unsuccessful run for the presidency of the Board of Aldermen in 1987 led to the voting rights case of Roberts v. Wamser. In 1989, the case was decided in Roberts’ favor, after he argued that the punch card system caused discrimination against the majority black wards, where many votes were discounted.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_006, TRT: 0:30:10 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr. and his brother, Steven Roberts, Sr., founded the Roberts Broadcasting Company in St. Louis, Missouri. They applied for a license from the Federal Communications Commission in 1981, and went on to develop WRBU-TV, an affiliate of the Home Shopping Network. The Roberts Broadcasting Company later acquired stations in Denver, Colorado; Jackson, Mississippi; and Salt Lake City, Utah. At this point in the interview, Roberts describes the company’s use of automation to minimize the staffing needs of their stations. In response to the increase in wireless technology in the mid-1990s, The Roberts Companies established Roberts Wireless Communications, an affiliate of the Sprint PCS Group. The company partnered with Lucent Technologies, Inc. to build twenty-three stations in Missouri, and then merged with three other Sprint PCS Group affiliates in anticipation of their parent company’s acquisition by WorldCom. The Roberts brothers began pursuing hotel redevelopment projects in 2005.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_007, TRT: 0:29:50 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr. and his younger brother, Steven Roberts, Sr., founded The Roberts Companies, whose holdings included over seventy distinct firms in industries ranging from wireless communications to hotel development. The brothers’ commitment to the black community informed their real estate projects in St. Louis, Missouri, like The Shops at Roberts Village, a strip mall located at Kingshighway Boulevard and Dr. Martin Luther King Drive. Through the Roberts Hotels Group, LLC, the

brothers developed the Roberts Mayfair Hotel in St. Louis and the Roberts Crowne Plaza Hotel in Marietta, Georgia, in addition to hotels in Dallas, Texas; Fort Myers, Florida; and Memphis, Tennessee. At the time of the interview, Roberts was negotiating the redevelopment of the historic A.G. Gaston Motel with Mayor Larry Langford of Birmingham, Alabama. Roberts also talks about his role as the board chairman of the National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators and Developers, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_008, TRT: 0:27:50 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr.'s mother, Delores Talley Roberts, graduated from Harris-Stowe College in St. Louis, Missouri around the time that Roberts earned his law degree, and his brother, Steven Roberts, Sr., graduated from college. Later, Roberts had four children, Michael Roberts, Jr., Jeanne Roberts Johnson, Fallon Roberts and Meaghan Roberts Johnson; all of whom went on to earn degrees in law. At the time of the interview, The Roberts Companies employed 823 workers at 74 firms, one of which, The Roberts Hotels Group, LLC, was the recipient of Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2007. Roberts also talks about the challenges he faced during his business career, such as the failed launch of a United States Basketball League team in St. Louis. He also reflects upon the opportunities for African Americans in business, his advice to young people and his hopes and concerns for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Michael Roberts, Sr., Section A2007_295_002_009, TRT: 0:31:15 2007/12/06

Michael Roberts, Sr.'s wife, Jeanne Gore Roberts, was a graduate of Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis, Missouri. She worked as teacher and flight attendant before marrying Roberts in 1978. In addition to her teaching career, she was once involved in film production in California. Her father and grandfather, Herman W. Gore, Jr. and Herman W. Gore, Sr., were both Baptist preachers, and founded the Christ's Southern Mission Baptist Church in St. Louis. In 2005, Roberts published his book, 'Action Has No Season: Strategies and Secrets to Gaining Wealth and Authority,' in which he coined the

term Actionaire to describe a person who actively pursues their aspirations. Roberts describes how he would like to be remembered, and then concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.