

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Vel Phillips

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Phillips, Vel, 1924-2018
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips,
Dates:	December 2, 2007 and February 25, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2007 and 2017
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:20:59).
Abstract:	State government appointee Vel Phillips (1924 - 2018) was the former Wisconsin Secretary of State, the first woman and first non-white to be elected to the position. Phillips was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 2, 2007 and February 25, 2017, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_338
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

State government appointee Velvlea Hortense Rodgers Phillips was born on February 2, 1924 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Russell Lowell Rodgers and Thelma Etha Payne Rodger. Growing up on Milwaukee's South Side, she attended Garfield Avenue Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and North Division High School. There, Phillips won a prize for outstanding oratory for her speech, "The Negro and the Constitution," which she wrote for the Elks Lodge Competition. She subsequently won a scholarship to Howard University in 1942. She earned her B.A. degree from Howard in 1946. Phillips became the first black woman to earn an L.L.B. degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1952.

Phillips became active in the NAACP and supported a redistricting referendum in 1950. Phillips lost a close race for a seat on the Milwaukee Common Council in 1953, but came back to become the first woman to win a council seat in 1956. Frequently involved in civil rights activities, Phillips introduced Milwaukee's first open housing ordinance in 1962. In 1967, resistance to civil rights agitation turned violent when the NAACP headquarters was firebombed and the non-violent Phillips was the only city official arrested at a rally the next day. Joined by Catholic Father James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council, Phillips led marches for fair housing in 1968, while riots swept the black community. Finally, that same year, Milwaukee's open housing bill passed. In 1971, Phillips was appointed as the first woman to the Milwaukee County Judiciary, but lost the subsequent election to a white candidate. She then taught at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and became mentor to Black Student Union president and future member of the Common Council, Fred Gordon. In 1978, she became the first woman and first non-white to be elected as Wisconsin's Secretary of State, making her the highest ranking female Wisconsin official in the 20th century. In 2002, Phillips was appointed "Distinguished Professor of Law" at Marquette University School of Law. She also chaired the successful congressional campaign of Gwen Moore in 2004 at age eighty. In 2006, Phillips founded the Vel Phillips Foundation which supports the work of people who are engaged in projects of social justice and change. She is also active on numerous civic boards in Milwaukee.

Phillips passed away on April 17, 2018.

Vel Phillips was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 2, 2007 and February 25, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Vel Phillips was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 2, 2007 and February 25, 2017, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. State government appointee Vel Phillips (1924 - 2018) was the former Wisconsin Secretary of State, the first woman and first non-white to be elected to the position.

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:

Phillips, Vel, 1924-2018

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Phillips, Vel, 1924-2018 --Interviews

African American politicians--Interviews

Women politicians--Interviews

African American political activists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Wisconsin

Occupations:

State Government Appointee

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Vel Phillips, December 2, 2007 and February 25, 2017. 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 Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_001, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Vel Phillips was born on February 2, 1924 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Thelma Payne Rodgers and Russell Lowell Rodgers. Phillips' maternal great-grandparents were African Methodist Episcopal missionaries, and died while working in Africa. Her mother's parents, Victoria Payne and Richard Payne, owned a large house in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, where they raised five children. Her maternal family also owned a successful restaurant, and accumulated significant wealth in the oil industry. As a child, Phillips' mother was privately tutored at home. After her parents' deaths, Phillips' mother and aunts, Velvlea Payne and Naomi Payne, were sent to live in northern Wisconsin with relatives who passed for white. Velvlea Payne was unable to pass, and soon married an older man in the community. Phillips describes her maternal uncle, Percy Payne's marriage to a white woman, and their daughter, who lived with Phillips' family while growing up.

Family--History.

Passing (Identity)--Wisconsin.

Interracial marriage--Wisconsin.

Racially mixed people--Wisconsin.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_002, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Vel Phillips' father, Russell Rodgers, was born in Phoebus, Virginia. He had no formal education, and was raised by his single mother, a dressmaker. Even so, Rodgers was highly intelligent, and became a talented car mechanic. He owned a mechanic's shop on the majority white South Side of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Phillips' parents met and married. Her parents never spoke unkindly, or used corporal punishment. Phillips' upper middle class upbringing was unusual during the Great Depression. Her mother did not work and retained housekeepers, and her parents owned their five bedroom home. Phillips describes Clara's Restaurant on Walnut Street, where her mother worked when she first moved to Milwaukee. Phillips' parents managed the restaurant while Phillips attended Howard University on a scholarship. Phillips also describes her admiration of Gwendolynne Moore, alongside whom she received an award from the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council.

Racially mixed people--Wisconsin.

Family--History.

Class consciousness--Wisconsin--Milwaukee.

Elks (Fraternal order)--Funds and scholarships.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Vel Phillips' mother was a strict disciplinarian, and gave Phillips a sheltered childhood. She was not allowed to attend any event in which money was exchanged, so she participated in the Milwaukee Urban League and the Girl Reserves of the YWCA. Phillips recalls her early education at Garfield Avenue Elementary School and Roosevelt Junior High School, where she and her sister were often the only African American students in their classes. At Milwaukee's North Division High School, Vel Phillips competed for a scholarship in the Elks Oratorical Contest, but lost. Despite her mother's objections, Phillips returned the next year, and won a full scholarship to Howard University for her

outstanding oratory. From 1942, conditional upon her mother's rules, Phillips was allowed to attend Howard University. Despite her mother's admonitions, she befriended her classmates, including Mamie Hansberry, the sister of Lorraine Hansberry.

Howard University--Students.

African American families--Discipline of children.

Class consciousness--Wisconsin--Milwaukee.

Elks (Fraternal order)--Funds and scholarships.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_004, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Vel Phillips experienced racial discrimination from a high school teacher, who said that Phillips was suited to the comedy category of the Elks Oratorical Contest because of her race, likening her to Stepin Fetchit. Guided by another teacher, Ms. Roberts, Phillips won the oratory category with her original speech, *The Negro and the Constitution*. Phillips talks about her childhood mentor from the Milwaukee Urban League, Jean Young, who inspired her to serve as a mentor at Howard University's Delta Sigma Sorority. In 1978, Phillips was the first African American woman elected to serve as Wisconsin's secretary of state. She attributes this achievement to Margaret Borkowski, her third grade teacher at Garfield Avenue Elementary School, whom Phillips selected to be honored at a teachers' tribute event hosted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Phillips describes the opposition she overcame while running for secretary of state, and the assistance she received from the League of Women Voters of Milwaukee County.

Mentoring in education.

Howard University--Students.

Racism in education--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_005, TRT: 0:18:30 ?

Vel Phillips was initially disqualified from the Elks Oratorical Contest due to the racial discrimination of a judge, who was also her teacher at North Division High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Phillips recalls her devastation upon learning that she was eliminated. Several of her fellow students petitioned for her reentry, citing her unfair disqualification, although other African American students were upset with her for drawing attention at the predominantly white school. Phillips recounts her conversation with the principal, who decided to allow her to compete based upon the merits of her original speech, *The Negro and the Constitution*. A judge was appointed from the faculty of Milwaukee's Marquette University, and Phillips' father encouraged her to continue. The story caught the attention of the Milwaukee Journal, which published an article about the competition. Phillips won the Elks Oratorical Contest, earning a full scholarship to Howard University in 1942.

Racism in education--United States.

Mentoring in education--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_002_006, TRT: 6:46:07 ?

Vel Phillips was the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School in Madison, Wisconsin. Afterwards, she became politically involved in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was the first woman and African American to be elected to the Common Council of Milwaukee. There, she was ostracized by the white councilmembers, and encountered unfair hiring practices that favored uneducated white applicants over college educated African Americans. In 1967, Phillips drafted the Phillips Housing Ordinance to end

housing discrimination, and led marches with Father James Groppi until the ordinance passed in April of the next year. At this point in the interview, Phillips reflects upon her political career. Additionally, she talks about the lack of African American representation in television media, and the governorship of Scott Walker.

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_002_007, TRT: 7:14:02 ?

Vel Phillips' son, Dale Phillips, Jr., attended Cornell University in New York City, and went on to be a lawyer. At this point in the interview, Phillips reflects upon her life, political legacy and her mother's life lessons.