

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
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips,
Dates:	December 2, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	5 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:20:50).
Abstract:	State government appointee Vel Phillips (1924 -) is 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, 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®

Former Wisconsin Secretary of State, Velvlea Hortense Rodgers Phillips, was born on February 18, 1924, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her maternal ancestors were an A.M.E. bishop and African missionaries. Her parents, Russell Lowell Rodgers and Thelma Etha Payne Rodgers raised her without corporal punishment. Growing up on Milwaukee's South Side, she attended Garfield Avenue Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and the mostly white North Division High School. There, Phillips won a prize for outstanding oratory by speaking about "The Negro and the Constitution;" a speech she wrote for the Elks Lodge Competition from which she won a scholarship to Howard University in 1942. She married Dale Phillips in 1945 and earned her B.A. degree in 1946. Returning to Wisconsin, her husband graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School in 1950 and Phillips became the first black woman to earn an L.L.B. degree from the University in 1952.

Phillips and her husband 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, in 1968, Phillips led marches for fair housing, while riots swept the black community. Finally that same year, Milwaukee's open housing bill passed and Orville Pitts, another African American, is elected to the Common Council.

In 1971, Phillips was appointed as the first woman to the Milwaukee County Judiciary, but lost the

subsequent election to a white candidate. Teaching at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Phillips 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 Wisconsin's Secretary of State; 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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Vel Phillips was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 2, 2007, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 5 Betacam SP videocassettes. State government appointee Vel Phillips (1924 -) is 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:

Vel Phillips

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Vel Phillips--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

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. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/6/2013 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, December 2, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Vel Phillips, Section A2007_338_001_001, TRT: 0:30:40 2007/12/02

Phillips slates her interview and lists her favorites. She was born Velvlea (after a beloved aunt) Hartence Rodgers allegedly on February 18, 1924 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Phillips' mother Thelma Etha Payne was born on December 6, around 1906 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Thelma's brother Percy married a white woman in Beloit, Wisconsin and had four children; their daughter Vera (Victoria) lived with the Rodgers for a time. Thelma's family was fairly affluent and she was schooled exclusively by tutors. Thelma's father Richard was born on an Indian reservation and her mother's name was also Victoria. Victoria's father was a bishop with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. While in Africa with her parents, Victoria contracted an illness and died en route home. Upon their parents' early deaths Phillips' Aunt Cynthia ran their restaurant and estate but failed. She sent her sisters Naomi, Thelma, and Velvlea to relatives passing for white in Minocqua, Wisconsin. Velvlea was dark enough to be resented by the family.

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 2007/12/02

Naomi and Thelma left for Milwaukee while still teenagers. They eventually started a successful restaurant. Russell Lowell Rodgers was at least several years older than Thelma and born in Phoebus, Virginia; his father was probably Native American or Caucasian given his hair and skin. Russell and Thelma were very close and cordial with each other. Russell was quiet and Thelma was very controlling with their children. Thelma was very sensitive about money and class. Although

they were wealthy enough to own a large home and afford housekeepers on a single income during the Great Depression, she claimed the family was poor. As an adult Phillips observed that class mattered little when selecting qualified public servants. Although Thelma had previously consented to private college if the family did not pay for it, she initially forbade Phillips' enrollment at Howard despite her winning a full scholarship from her second Elks oratorical competition.

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 2007/12/02

Phillips partly saw Howard as an escape from Thelma's control. Thelma claimed any place where people congregated and exchanged money was filled with low class people. Organizational politics kept Phillips from winning the first Elks competition. Russell gently urged Thelma to allow Phillips to make her own decisions about re-entering the competition the following year and, after she won that time, about attending Howard. Phillips agreed to Thelma's three rules of good behavior unaware of social pressures awaiting her. In 1942 Thelma escorted Phillips to Howard for parents' weekend. She warned her about classmates on the train and forbade her association with dorm mates for behavior-based reasons. One such person was Mamie Hansberry whom Thelma caught smoking in her room. Phillips attended public school in Milwaukee. These included Garfield Avenue Grammar School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and North Division High School. Although they were integrated, the schools had few if any blacks.

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 2007/12/02

At a ceremony honoring teachers, Phillips spoke glowingly about elementary school teacher Margaret Borkowski. She was nineteen when she taught Phillips and was 89 years old at the ceremony. She was always pleasant but stern when necessary. Phillips told the audience that the memory of Ms. Borkowski prevented her from believing her advisors that Poles would never vote for a black Secretary of State. Ms. Roberts was a high school teacher and ally. The teacher managing an oratorical competition withheld serious scripts and urged Phillips to perform humorous ones since black people were naturally funny. Ms. Roberts, an older woman well liked by Phillips' family, encouraged Phillips to perform the original work she prepared for the

predominately black Elks.

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 2007/12/02

Phillips was eliminated but offered a place back into the competition following student protest for perceived racial bias in judging and intervention by Principal Werner. As Phillips suspected she would, Thelma discouraged her re-entering the competition but Russell supported any decision she made. The affair caused a minor stir in the media and the school responded by inviting an instructor from Marquette to serve as the sole judge. Phillips eventually won with her original piece on the Negro in the United States Constitution entitled "They Shall Not Pass."

Racism in education--United States.

Mentoring in education--United States.