

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Verna Holley

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Holley, Verna
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Verna Holley,
Dates:	February 29, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:57:00).
Abstract:	High school music teacher and choral director Verna Holley (1936 -) served as the fine arts director at J.W. Sexton High School in Lansing, Michigan and worked in the Lansing Public School System until she retired. She was also the pianist and music director of the Earl Nelson Singers. Holley was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 29, 2008, in Lansing, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_039
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Retired choral music teacher Verna Dorsey Holley was born on April 29, 1936 in Detroit, Michigan to Pearl Richardson Dorsey and Henry Dorsey. Holley attended Dwyer Elementary School in 1948 before graduating from Northern High School in 1952. Holley completed her B.A. degree in music education at Wayne State University in 1956 and went on to earn her M.A. degree in music at Michigan State University.

Holley was hired as the fine arts director at J.W. Sexton High School in Lansing, Michigan and worked in the Lansing Public School System until she retired. She then continued to give piano lessons in her home. Holley became the pianist and music director of the Earl Nelson Singers. Founded in 1963, by Earl Nelson, The Earl Nelson Singers Company is an integrated ensemble of singers from the Lansing, Michigan area. As the company's musical director, Holley selects the sacred songs of slaves for them to perform. The group's repertoire included songs reflective of the early "gospel" style. Holley's work has also been associated with the Okemos String Program.

Holley is a member of the Religious Conference Planning Association, United Conference for Women and the Capital Area Music Teachers Association. She lives in Lansing, Michigan with her husband, Melvin Holley. They have three adult children: Mark, Timothy and Millicent.

Holley was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on February 29, 2008.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Verna Holley was conducted by Larry Crowe on February 29, 2008, in

Lansing, Michigan, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. High school music teacher and choral director Verna Holley (1936 -) served as the fine arts director at J.W. Sexton High School in Lansing, Michigan and worked in the Lansing Public School System until she retired. She was also the pianist and music director of the Earl Nelson Singers.

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:

Holley, Verna

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Holley, Verna--Interviews

African American music teachers--Interviews.

African American choral conductors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Choral Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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 Verna Holley, February 29, 2008. 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 Verna Holley, Section A2008_039_001_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Verna Holley was born on April 29, 1936 in Detroit, Michigan to Pearl Richardson Dorsey and Henry Dorsey. Her paternal grandparents were sharecroppers in Americus, Georgia, and her father left home at eighteen years old in search of better employment. He traveled the country as a migrant worker, and met Holley's maternal uncle, who likely introduced him to Holley's mother.

Holley's mother grew up in a sharecropping family in Tallassee, Alabama, where she attended school until the eighth grade. She left Alabama to work as a domestic in West Virginia, where she suffered eye damage from exposure to the fire from her employer's oven. After marrying, Holley's parents migrated to Detroit, Michigan in 1928, where Holley's father worked at Chevrolet Gear and Axle Plant. Many of Holley's relatives stayed with her parents temporarily after migrating to Detroit. Her family lived near Hastings Street, the city's historically African American business district; and in 1941, moved to the city's North End neighborhood.

African American musicians--Michigan--Detroit.

African American families.

Education--Racial aspects.

African American women household employees.

African American tramps.

Video Oral History Interview with Verna Holley, Section A2008_039_001_002, TRT: 0:27:40 ?

Verna Holley grew up near the African American business district and Paradise Valley entertainment district in Detroit, Michigan. She began her education at Trowbridge School, and transferred to Dwyer Elementary School in 1941. She was released from school early during the 1943 race riots, and forbidden to play outside until the violence passed. Holley took piano lessons at a young age, and played for the choir at Bethany Tabernacle church. She attended her first concert at nine years old when her piano teacher brought her to see a performance by pianist Vladimir Horowitz. Holley also occasionally went on school field trips to attend concerts at the Detroit Masonic Temple. Disenchanted by the limited number of African American concert pianists, Holley aspired to teach music education. She attended Northern High School, where Opera Singer George Shirley and Lansing Superintendent of Schools Eva Evans were also students. After graduating in 1952, she matriculated at Wayne State University to study music.

Black Bottom (Detroit, Mich.)

Franklin, Aretha.

Detroit (Mich.)--Church history--20th century.

Detroit (Mich.)--Riot, 1943.

Piano--Instruction and study.

Video Oral History Interview with Verna Holley, Section A2008_039_001_003, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Verna Holley met her husband, Melvin J. Holley, when she served as the pianist for his family choir. The couple married in 1957, following her graduation from Wayne State University in 1956. Holley taught music at her alma mater, Dwyer Elementary School, followed by William T. Sampson Elementary School. When Holley returned to teaching in 1966 after the birth of her second son, Timothy Holley, she was hired as the first African American teacher at A.L. Holmes Elementary School, and taught at George W. Balch School during the next year. In 1970, the family moved to Lansing, Michigan, where Holley and her husband joined the Earl Nelson Singers. Holley worked as an aide at Harley Franks Elementary School, followed by Oak Park and Cedar Street Schools. Over the ensuing years, Holley taught at Barnes School, and C.W. Otto Junior High School, and became director of fine arts at J.W. Sexton High School. She remembers the 1967 riots and the aftermath of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968.

Wayne State University.

Shirley, George.

Old Fashioned Revival Hour (Radio program).

Atwood, Rudy.

Video Oral History Interview with Verna Holley, Section A2008_039_001_004, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Verna Holley joined the Earl Nelson Singers after moving to Lansing, Michigan with her husband, Melvin J. Holley. The choir was founded in 1963 by Earl Nelson, who was a vocal music teacher at C.W. Otto Junior High School. Their first concert was a tribute to President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and the group's annual concerts often featured guest soloists from around the state. In 1978, Holley became director of the Earl Nelson Singers. At the time of the interview, she lived with her husband in Lansing. Their oldest son, Mark Holley, worked in computer assisted design; their second oldest son, Timothy Holley, was a cellist and music professor; and their youngest child, Millicent Holley, worked at the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Holley describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community, and her religious faith. She reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered. Holley concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Choirs (Music).

Spirituals (Songs).

Nelson, Earl, 1928-2008.

Dett, R. Nathaniel, 1882-1943.

Wedding anniversaries.