

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Willie L. Wilson

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Wilson, Willie L., 1948-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 16, 2008
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2008
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:31).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Entrepreneur and gospel singer Willie L. Wilson (1948 - ) was among the first African Americans to own a McDonald's franchise, and was the creator and producer of the first nationally syndicated, black-owned gospel music television show, <i>Singsation</i> . Wilson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 16, 2008, in University Park, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2008_089
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Philanthropist, entrepreneur, and recording artist Willie Lee Wilson, grew up in impoverished conditions and rose to found multiple successful enterprises including *Singsation!*, the first nationally syndicated African-American owned and produced Gospel program on commercial television that broadcasts internationally on WGN-TV. Wilson is also one of the first black owners of a McDonald's restaurant.

Wilson was born on June 16, 1948 in Gilbert, Louisiana. In 1970, Wilson began his career with McDonald's doing custodial duties and mopping floors for \$2 an hour. He got the opportunity to run the establishment when disgruntled employees walked out and was asked to stay on when the former managers returned. After working with McDonald's for five years, he decided he wanted to open a McDonald's himself and resolved to meet with McDonald's founder Ray Kroc about the issue. Kroc agreed to give Wilson a McDonald's restaurant after a discussion at an annual shareholders' meeting in 1979, and with capital provided by South Shore Bank, Wilson took a suffering Chicago franchise and turned it around within a year. Wilson, while working at McDonald's, earned honors attaining the Outstanding Store Award and Top Sales Performer Award.

In 1987, Wilson decided to start a television production company, Willie Wilson Productions, and in 1988, he was moved to pursue his faith after hearing the song, "What Shall I Render Unto the Lord?" at his church. He sold his McDonald's restaurants to dedicate his life to Gospel music and started doing church solos and singing with the Norfleet Brothers. Ultimately, creating four albums: *I'm So Grateful*, *Lord Don't Let Me Fail*, *Just A Closer Walk With Thee*, *Through It All* and *I'll Fly Away*. The most recent album, *I'll Fly Away* is distributed by Universal and is available in stores throughout the United States. In 1989, Wilson's *Singsation!* premiered, a half-hour weekly program of Gospel music. The show's history, artists, producers and writers are produced by his television production corporation. *Singsation!* is regularly hosted by Wilson and is available in over sixty million households every Sunday.

Still holding entrepreneurial ambitions, in 1997, Wilson founded Omar Medical Supplies, one of America's fastest growing international medical supply companies and Gemini Electronics, a telecommunications company that provides competitive pricing to assist churches and non-profit community organizations in economic development and outreach.

Wilson is the recipient of a Doctor of Divinity degree from Mt. Carmel Theological Seminary, a Doctor of Humane Letters from Chicago Baptist Institute, Honorary Doctorate in Humanitarianism from Swisher Bible College and a Doctorate in Humanitarianism from Denver Institute of Urban Studies and Adult College. In November 2003, the Illinois State House of Representatives adopted resolution HR0491 in the 93rd General Assembly to honor Wilson's successes as a member of the National Black McDonald's Owner Operator Association and his contributions to his community.

Wilson resides in Chicago, with his wife of twelve years. He is the father of four grown children.

Wilson was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 16, 2008.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Willie L. Wilson was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 16, 2008, in University Park, Illinois, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entrepreneur and gospel singer Willie L. Wilson (1948 - ) was among the first African Americans to own a McDonald's franchise, and was the creator and producer of the first nationally syndicated, black-owned gospel music television show, *Singsation*.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject

terms.

## **Persons:**

Wilson, Willie L., 1948-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Wilson, Willie L., 1948---Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Entrepreneur

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Gospel Singer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

BusinessMakers|MusicMakers

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## **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 Willie L. Wilson, July 16, 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 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).

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## **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.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson, Section  
A2008\_089\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:54 2008/07/16

Willie L. Wilson was born on June 16, 1948 in Gilbert, Louisiana to Lulla Baker Wilson and Douglas Wilson. His maternal grandparents, Sarah Baker and Charlie Baker, were cotton sharecroppers on a farm near Gilbert, where Wilson's mother was born in 1929. She later worked as a nanny for a white family in town. Wilson's father was born around 1917 in Wisner, Louisiana, where Wilson's paternal grandparents, Sarah Wilson and Frank Wilson, were sharecroppers as well. Wilson spent his childhood in

Gilbert, a strictly segregated town where black sharecroppers were prevented from raising livestock or hunting game. When he was around ten years old, two of his black peers were publically beaten by Jimmy Guice, a white man from Winnsboro, Louisiana. Wilson ran away from home a few years later, at the age of thirteen years old. He went on to become an entrepreneur, and created the 'Singsation' gospel music television program. He also remembers his paternal grandfather's ghost stories.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson, Section  
A2008\_089\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:18 2008/07/16

Willie L. Wilson grew up as a sharecropper in Gilbert, Louisiana, where he raised cotton and corn with his family, including his ten brothers and sisters. He rarely saw his father, Douglas Wilson, who spent most of his time working the fields. His mother, Lulla Baker Wilson, canned foods like butter beans and peaches, and occasionally brought the family to services at the Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Wisner, Louisiana. Wilson worked on the farm from the age of three years old, and attended school for two months each year. He began his education at the Oakley School, where he excelled as a student until the fourth grade, when he became more interested in playing basketball and dice. Wilson left home at the age of thirteen years old. He moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he was eventually joined by his parents, whom he financially supported through his career as a gospel singer. Wilson's father passed away fifteen years after moving to Chicago, and was buried in Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson, Section  
A2008\_089\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:31 2008/07/16

Willie L. Wilson was educated through the fourth grade at the Oakley School, and then transferred to Gilbert Elementary School in Gilbert, Louisiana. At thirteen years old, Wilson left his home in Gilbert to become a migrant farmworker in Thibodaux, Louisiana, and then in Florida. He later moved to his maternal aunt's home in Chicago, Illinois, and worked for nine months at a piano factory in Melrose Park, Illinois. After quitting that job, he was forced to leave his aunt's house, and moved to Chicago's West Side. He initially earned a living as a gambler, and

then obtained a position at the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, where he worked until 1968. That year, Wilson moved to Ford Heights, Illinois. He was hired at a McDonald's restaurant; and, shortly afterwards, was asked to serve as the store's interim manager during a strike. Five years later, Wilson was fired for requesting a wage increase. He subsequently received job offers at eighteen McDonald's franchises in Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson, Section  
A2008\_089\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:55 2008/07/16

Willie L. Wilson was fired by his first McDonald's employer after requesting a raise. He accepted a position at another McDonald's franchise, and worked there until 1973, when he became dissatisfied with the store's poor management. He attended a McDonald's Corporation shareholders meeting, where he shared his frustrations with the company's founder, Ray Kroc. Immediately afterwards, Kroc met privately with Wilson, and gave him a McDonald's franchise for free. Wilson also received \$50,000 from his friend, banker Jimmy Fletcher, which he used to purchase inventory. Wilson went on to acquire four more McDonald's locations. In 1972, Wilson joined the Christ Temple Missionary Baptist Church, where he met a gospel group called the Norfleet Brothers. He began touring with them a few years later. During this time, Wilson had four children with his first wife, whom he divorced in 1973. Wilson sold his McDonald's franchises around 2004, in order to focus on his other entrepreneurial ventures.

Video Oral History Interview with Willie L. Wilson, Section  
A2008\_089\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:53 2008/07/16

Willie L. Wilson began rehearsing with the Norfleet Brothers around 1974, and first joined the gospel group on stage in 1979. Wilson left the Norfleet Brothers in 1987; and, two years later, became the creator of 'Singsation,' a gospel music television show. He was inspired to create the program while worshiping at the Friendship Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois. At this point in the interview, Wilson describes the production process for 'Singsation,' which featured both amateur singers and nationally recognized musical artists, including Al Green and Luther

Vandross. He also talks about the show's distribution to international television markets. Wilson was the founder of Omar Medical Supplies, Inc., a medical supply company whose clientele included several major restaurant chains and department stores. The company was named in memory of Wilson's late son, Omar Wilson. Wilson also talks about his second marriage; and his diagnosis with cancer, which was in remission at the time of the interview.