

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert R. Lavelle

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Lavelle, Robert Roselle, 1915-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle,
Dates:	August 15, 2008
Bulk Dates:	2008
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:20:40).
Abstract:	Banker and real estate agent Robert R. Lavelle (1915 - 2010) was the owner and operator of Lavelle Real Estate and Dwelling House Savings and Loan. Lavelle was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 15, 2008, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2008_109
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Realtor and banker Robert Roselle Lavelle was born on October 4, 1915 in Cleveland, Tennessee, to Franklin Pierce Lavelle, a pastor, and Mary Anderson Lavelle, a domestic. Lavelle's father passed away when he was nine years old, and Robert, his mother and his four brothers and three sisters met difficult times during the Great Depression, leading to Lavelle dropping out of high school to work several odd jobs.

In 1935, Lavelle reached a turning point when, while working as a dishwasher in a department store restaurant, he was approached by the president of the black-

owned *Pittsburgh Courier*, who offered him a job. It would be the start of Lavelle's life-changing twenty-one-year career with the paper, where he worked in the office, mailroom and later, in accounting. Lavelle met his future wife, Adah Moore, while working at the courier. The two wed in 1942. Lavelle left the paper for four years when he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II, during which time, the *Courier* adopted the "Double V" campaign, signifying victory for African Americans at home and abroad. Lavelle pursued his education in night school while working at the *Courier*, and received both his B.S. and M.A. degrees from the prestigious University of Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh Katz Graduate School of Business in 1951 and 1954, respectively. Lavelle started his own real estate business in 1951, and in 1956, he left the *Pittsburgh Courier* to work full-time at Lavelle Real Estate. In 1957, Lavelle was made an executive at a savings and loan business. Both Lavelle Real Estate and the savings and loan business focus on the poor black community. Lavelle maintains both of his businesses in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, where he continues to provide loans to black clients who would not otherwise qualify for bank loans.

Lavelle is a longtime member of Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church, where he is an elder, and he also serves on the Board of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He is currently a member of the Board of Visitors at the Katz Graduate School of Business, where the Robert Lavelle Scholarship is named in his honor. In 2008, Lavelle notably switched his voting registration from Republican to Democratic so that he could vote for Barack Obama in the Pennsylvania primary election. He resides in the Hill District of Pittsburgh with his wife, and the couple has two grown sons, Robert Moore Lavelle and John Franklin Lavelle.

Lavelle was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 15, 2008.

Mr. Lavelle passed away on July 4, 2010.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert R. Lavelle was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 15, 2008, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Banker and real estate agent Robert R. Lavelle (1915 - 2010) was the owner and operator of Lavelle Real Estate and Dwelling House Savings and Loan.

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:

Lavelle, Robert Roselle, 1915-2010

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Banker

Real Estate Agent

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Robert R. Lavelle, August 15, 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).

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 Robert R. Lavelle, Section
A2008_109_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle was born on October 4, 1915 in Cleveland, Tennessee to Mary Anderson Lavelle and Franklin Lavelle. His paternal grandfather was a judge and his paternal grandmother, whom he called Grandma Stigger, was half Native American and half African American. Lavelle's maternal grandparents died when his mother was a young girl, and she was raised by relatives. At sixteen years old, she married Lavelle's father; and together, they moved from their hometown of Hopkinsville, Kentucky to Chicago, Illinois. There, Lavelle's father became a Church of God minister. When Lavelle was five years old, he accompanied his father to a tent meeting revival in St. Louis, Missouri. There, he was enrolled in the all-black school, but returned to Chicago after refusing to begin his education in a segregated environment. Lavelle's father struggled as a minister, and sought a janitorial position, but was denied due to his race. He remembers his parents' illnesses.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section
A2008_109_001_002, TRT: 0:30:50 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle and his family moved to the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he attended Lincoln Elementary School and Westinghouse

Junior High School. In 1925, his father, Franklin Lavelle, died, and his mother, Mary Anderson Lavelle, became ill, which forced Lavelle and his seven siblings to maintain the household. He left Westinghouse High School in the tenth grade, and obtained a position as a dishwasher at Boggs and Buhl Department Store, while continuing his education at Schenley High School. After his graduation in 1935, the Pittsburgh Courier editor Ira Lewis offered Lavelle a position at the newspaper. On his first day, Lavelle quickly learned the newspaper's delivery system to meet the increased circulation demand after the Joe Louis and Max Baer boxing match. At the Pittsburgh Courier, Lavelle became acquainted with editors Bill Nunn and Robert Lee Vann, and vice president Daisy Lampkin, who convinced him to join the NAACP.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section A2008_109_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle was hired at The Pittsburgh Courier in 1935, where his responsibilities included delivering messages and transferring money between banks. He was also mentored by editors Robert Lee Vann and Ira Lewis. Through his work, he met his wife, Adah Moore Lavelle, who was also employed at the newspaper, and celebrities like boxer Joe Louis and jazz singer Cab Calloway. Lavelle attended the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, and paid his tuition with funds secured from life insurance policies. In 1943, he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II, and completed his service in 1947. He returned to the university, where obtained his bachelor's degree in accounting in 1951. With assistance from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, Lavelle pursued a master's degree in business administration and accounting, and considered earning a Ph.D. degree, but decided to spend more time with his family instead. He recalls the multiple burglaries at his home during the 1970s.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section A2008_109_001_004, TRT: 0:29:30 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, and completed basic training at Fort Indiantown Gap Military Reservation in Pennsylvania. Soon after his

arrival, Lavelle was promoted to sergeant major, and tasked with managing the clerical work for his outfit. Then, he gained admission to the quartermaster's school at Camp Lee, Virginia. On the way there, he visited his wife, Adah Moore Lavelle, and newborn son, Robert M. Lavelle, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Lavelle went on to attend the Information Education School at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. In 1946, he retired from the Army as a first lieutenant, and returned to the Pittsburgh Courier as an accountant. During this time, Lavelle took real estate courses at the University of Pittsburgh, and became a licensed broker. Two years later, he opened Lavelle Real Estate, Inc. In 1957, he founded the Dwelling House Savings and Loan Association, which sought to increase homeownership among Pittsburgh's low-income residents.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section
A2008_109_001_005, TRT: 0:30:00 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle founded the Dwelling House Savings and Loan Association, which served the African American community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As the owner of Lavelle Real Estate, Inc., Lavelle sued the Greater East End Multilist, Inc., a real estate listing agency who denied him membership because of his race. He argued that they were excluding African American realtors from the majority of the Pittsburgh real estate market, which violated the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. During the trial in 1968, Lavelle's family received threats, and his bank account was seized. At this point the interview, Lavelle talks about his positions as elder and head of the financial department at Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, which he joined after the death of his mother, Mary Anderson Lavelle. Lavelle also talks about receiving a passing grade in his math course, despite his discontent with a difficult professor at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section
A2008_109_001_006, TRT: 0:31:10 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle reached a settlement in his lawsuit against the Greater East End Multilist in 1968, which mandated the admittance of Lavelle and other African

Americans to the organization. In 1970, Lavelle was able to insure his business, Dwelling House Savings and Loan Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which increased its revenue and reserves. During this time, he also served as the vice president of the NAACP and the Urban League for Greater Pittsburgh. In 1978, Lavelle joined the board of directors of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, after serving as an elder at Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church. Lavelle and his wife, Adah Moore Lavelle, had two sons; Robert M. Lavelle, who after graduating from New York University, joined his father's business, and John Lavelle, who went on to attend Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Lavelle reflects upon his life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert R. Lavelle, Section
A2008_109_001_007, TRT: 0:17:50 2008/08/15

Robert R. Lavelle's son, John Lavelle, left Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in protest of the Vietnam War. Although Lavelle was initially disappointed by the decision, he supported his son's display of activism. Lavelle talks about the scientific museum exhibit, 'Bodies: The Exhibition.' He also describes how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.