

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with William "Sonny" Walker

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Walker, William "Sonny", 1933-2016 |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, |
| Dates: | April 21, 2011 and March 18, 2012 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2011 and 2012 |
| Physical Description: | 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:22:33). |
| Abstract: | Management consulting entrepreneur, civil rights activist, and nonprofit chief executive William "Sonny" Walker (1933 - 2016) fought for integration during the Civil Rights Movement, worked to promote increased economic opportunity through various federal agencies and programs. He also served as an important member of the board of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, and worked as Coretta Scott-King's speech writer. Walker passed away on June 15, 2016. Walker was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 21, 2011 and March 18, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2011_029 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights activist, nonprofit chief executive, and management consulting entrepreneur William “Sonny” Walker was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He received his B.A. degree from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and went

on to teach in Arkansas public schools. In 1956, in the wake of the *Brown vs. Board* U.S. Supreme Court decisions, Walker helped to prepare the Little Rock Nine to integrate Little Rock Central High School. Walker went on to manage the campaign of T. E. Patterson, the first African American elected to the Arkansas School Board.

In 1965, Walker started the Crusade for Opportunity, one of the first Head Start programs in the U.S. and then began serving as director of the Economic Opportunity Agency of Little Rock and Pulaski County. Throughout this time, Walker worked to promote integration of everything from television news anchors to the local chapter of the United States Junior Chamber. In 1969, Walker began serving as Governor Winthrop Rockefeller's head of the Arkansas State Economic Opportunity Office. He was the first African American to hold such a position in a Southern governor's cabinet.

Walker moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1972, and began serving as a division director for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Renewal. In 1976, Walker became a member of the Board of Directors for the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Walker eventually became Coretta Scott-King's speech writer and in 1994, he served as interim director of the King Center. Walker went on to found the consulting company the Sonny Walker Group, which specializes in networking, marketing, and employee training.

Walker was a member of the board of trustees of Morris-Brown College, the board of directors of the Butler Street YMCA, the EduPac Action Committee, and the Georgia Partnership for Education Excellence. He was heavily involved with many other community organizations and received numerous awards, including the Community Service Award from the Atlanta Business League, the Distinguished Community Service Award from the National Urban League, the Outstanding Public Servant in the State of Georgia Award from the Georgia Senate and House of Representatives, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Award from the National Association of Community Action Agencies.

William "Sonny" Walker was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on April 21, 2011.

Walker passed away on June 15, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with William "Sonny" Walker was conducted by

Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on April 21, 2011 and March 18, 2012, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files.

Management consulting entrepreneur, civil rights activist, and nonprofit chief executive William "Sonny" Walker (1933 - 2016) fought for integration during the Civil Rights Movement, worked to promote increased economic opportunity through various federal agencies and programs. He also served as an important member of the board of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, and worked as Coretta Scott-King's speech writer. Walker passed away on June 15, 2016.

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:

Walker, William "Sonny", 1933-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Walker, William "Sonny", 1933-2016--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

Nonprofit Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|CivicMakers

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 William "Sonny" Walker, April 21, 2011 and March 18, 2012. 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 William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_001, TRT: 1:27:53 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker was born on December 13, 1933 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas to Mary Coleman and James Walker, Sr. His paternal great-great-grandfather, Alf Williams, was a successful entrepreneur who founded a sand and gravel company in Pine Bluff. He purchased a parcel of land, on which he built homes for himself and his children, including Walker's great-grandmother,

laundress Rachel Collins. She later married Richard Collins, who was deaf and nearly blind. Walker's paternal grandmother, Annie Blackwell, was born around 1898, and worked as a laundress and sold cosmetics. She married J.O. Walker, with whom she raised two sons, musician Levi C. Ross and Walker's father, who was born in 1913 in Pine Bluff. There, he was the valedictorian of his graduating class at Merrill High School, and went on to attend Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College. He then worked as an insurance agent for Universal Life Insurance Company and as a Baptist minister in several Pine Bluff churches.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_002, TRT: 2:28:30 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker's paternal great-great-grandfather, Alf Williams, was a businessman in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. However, due to his lack of education, he was often swindled by his white business associates. Walker's mother, Mary Coleman, was born in 1915 in Shaw, Mississippi, and lived in Pine Bluff before moving to Chicago, Illinois when Walker was less than two years old. He remained in Pine Bluff with his father, James Walker, Sr., and stepmother, Nettie Harris Walker, who was a practical nurse and domestic worker. Over the years, Walker and his mother stayed in contact via letters, but met for the first time during his junior year of high school. He then spent summers with her family in Chicago, where he became close to his cousins L.C. Cooke and Sam Cooke. Even though Walker was raised in an integrated neighborhood, the school system was segregated. He began his education at Greenville Elementary School and Missouri Street School, where he developed an interest in literature.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_003, TRT: 3:28:03 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, which he learned about through letters from his friend's fathers who had been drafted. At that time, his father, James Walker, Sr., supervised an explosives production line at the Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas. At Merrill High School, Walker

participated in oratorical contests, and joined the football, baseball and track teams. To earn extra money, he cleaned the office of the local doctor, Cleon Flowers, operated a shoe shining stand and sold the Arkansas State Press, the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier newspapers. In 1951, he received a football scholarship to attend Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College in Pine Bluff. Inspired by attorney William Harold Flowers, Walker considered a career in law, and majored in English with a minor in history. While pledging Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, he met the college's future chancellor, Lawrence A. Davis, Jr., and educator Malcolm Hemphill, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_004, TRT: 4:29:56 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker attended Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where his classmates included surgeon Samuel L. Kountz, chemist Gloria Anderson and business executive Darwin N. Davis, Sr. While in college, he worked for attorney Wiley A. Branton, Sr., a colleague of Thurgood Marshall whom Walker later met while studying at Fisk University. Upon graduating in 1955, Walker became an English teacher and coached at Lincoln High School in Camden, Arkansas. In 1957, he transferred to Horace Mann High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he taught Melba Pattillo Beals, Elizabeth Eckford, Minnijean Brown Trickey, Terrence Roberts and Ernest Brown, who went on to integrate Little Rock Central High School as part of the Little Rock Nine. He recalls marrying Loraine Tate in 1954, with whom he had four children: restaurant manager Cheryl Walker, former NFL player James Walker II, former government official William Walker, Jr. and Leslie Walker.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_005, TRT: 5:27:53 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker met civil rights activist Ozell Sutton while writing for the Arkansas State Press in Little Rock, Arkansas. The two became close friends, and subsequently collaborated to integrate all forms of media in Arkansas. In 1963, Walker earned a certificate in

counseling and guidance at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, and returned to teach at Horace Mann High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. As president of the Arkansas Teachers Association Department of Classroom Teachers, he advocated for the fair and equal treatment of African American teachers. During this time, Walker supported Sue Cowan William's lawsuit against the Little Rock School District, and publically challenged the local school board and superintendent Floyd W. Parsons. As a result, his salary was decreased. In 1965, he resigned, and moved to Syracuse, New York to work with Crusade for Opportunity. In this role, he created both a pilot Head Start program and the strategic plan for the National Head Start Association.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_001_006, TRT: 6:18:49 2011/04/21

William "Sonny" Walker returned to Little Rock, Arkansas in 1967 to serve as deputy director, and eventually executive director, of the Economic Opportunity Agency of Pulaski County in Arkansas. In 1968, he was appointed the head of the Arkansas Office of Economic Opportunity by Governor Winthrop Rockefeller, working closely with Ozell Sutton to integrate all areas of the economy, with notable successes in public media and banking. Due to his role as a community leader, Walker helped to confiscate a cache of firearms from Black United Youth President Bobby Brown in 1969. In 1970, following the election of Arkansas Governor Dale Bumpers, Walker left the state government to head the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's office in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_002_007, TRT: 7:28:02 2012/03/18

William "Sonny" Walker moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 1972 to serve as regional director of the Office of Economic Opportunity for the Southeast region. At the time of his arrival, the Voter Education Project, led by attorneys Wiley A. Branton, Sr. and Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., was working to educate and register African American voters. Walker supported Maynard H. Jackson, Jr.'s 1973 mayoral campaign, and was later asked to represent the

city on the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority board. At this point in the interview, Walker talks about the growth of the Atlanta University Center Consortium as well as the overall city in the 1970s. He also describes civic leader Arthur Fletcher's affirmative action initiatives in the federal government, which led to the appointment of many African American government officials, such as Donald Hollowell of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Reverend Benjamin Hooks of the Federal Communications Commission.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_002_008, TRT: 8:30:56 2012/03/18

William "Sonny" Walker worked as the regional director of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1976, he joined the board of directors at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, working closely with Coretta Scott King, Christine King Farris and civic leader Jesse Hill. In 1980, Walker left the Office of Economic Opportunity, which was renamed the Community Services Administration in 1976, to join the National Alliance of Business, becoming regional vice president for the Southeast. In this role, he encouraged local communities and agencies to invest in African American banks like the Citizens Trust Bank and the Tri-State Bank. In 1994, Walker resigned from the National Alliance of Business to become the executive director of The King Center. During this time, he worked with TransAfrica Forum Founder Randall Robinson to support the South African anti-apartheid movement, and hosted Nelson Mandela and his wife, Winnie Mandela, at The King Center.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_002_009, TRT: 9:29:38 2012/03/18

William "Sonny" Walker remained involved with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia, even as its leadership passed from Coretta Scott King to her children, Bernice Albertine King, Dexter King and Martin Luther King III. In 2008, Walker supported Hillary Rodham Clinton's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, having worked with her during his son William Walker, Jr.'s time as

President Bill Clinton's floor leader in the Arkansas Senate and House of Representatives. Walker was extensively involved in civic activities in Atlanta, where he helped found 100 Black Men of America, Inc., and served on the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority Board and the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. At the time of the interview, Walker continued to work with the Fulton Atlanta Community Action Authority and the Center for Civil and Human Rights, while operating his own consulting company, the Sonny Walker Group.

Video Oral History Interview with William "Sonny" Walker, Section A2011_029_002_010, TRT: 10:12:53 2012/03/18

William "Sonny" Walker lived in Atlanta, Georgia, and witnessed the impact of the Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children cases of the 1980s. When the city hosted the 1996 Summer Olympics, Walker attended many of the events. He concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy and life, and describing how he would like to be remembered.