

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Norma Jean Darden

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Darden, Norma Jean, 1940-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Norma Jean Darden,
Dates:	May 14, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:25:37).
Abstract:	Model and entrepreneur Norma Jean Darden (1940 -) was one of the first African American models to grace a European runway and was considered one of the most successful black caterers in New York. Darden was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on May 14, 2012, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_126
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Model and entrepreneur Norma Jean Darden was born in Newark, New Jersey. Darden enrolled at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York where she graduated with her B.A. degree in liberal arts in 1961. She then entered the world of modeling while at Sarah Lawrence and was a part of the historic 1973 Models of Versailles show in Paris, which featured twenty models, the first collective of African American models to grace a European fashion runway. Throughout her modeling career, Darden graced the pages of fashion magazines such as *Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle* and *Vogue*. After a medical condition forced her to leave

the world of modeling in 1975, Darden and her sister Carole launched a catering business. Three years later, they co-wrote a seminal cookbook on Southern cooking titled, *Spoonbread & Strawberry Wine: Recipes and Reminiscences of a Family*.

Darden then opened her first restaurant in New York City's Harlem neighborhood called *Spoonbread, Inc*, which specialized in Southern cuisine. In 1997, Darden opened two more restaurants with *Miss Mamie's Spoonbread Too* and *Miss Maude's Spoonbread Too* restaurants, both in Manhattan. Darden's *Spoonbread Catering* has amassed a client list that includes Fortune 500 companies and celebrity clients like Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey. In addition, Darden appeared in the motion picture *The Cotton Club* in 1984 and has served as food stylist for the Eddie Murphy film, *Boomerang*. Additionally, Darden produced a one-woman show based on her book titled *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, which premiered at the American Place Theatre.

Darden's restaurants have been featured in publications as diverse as the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Black Enterprise*, *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines.

Additionally, Darden sits on the Board of the Salvation Army.

Norma Jean Darden was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on May 14, 2012.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Norma Jean Darden was conducted by Larry Crowe on May 14, 2012, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Model and entrepreneur Norma Jean Darden (1940 -) was one of the first African American models to grace a European runway and was considered one of the most successful black caterers in New York.

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:

Darden, Norma Jean, 1940-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Darden, Norma Jean, 1940---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

Occupations:

Model

Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

StyleMakers|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 Norma Jean Darden, May 14, 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 Norma Jean Darden, Section
A2012_126_001_001, TRT: 1:29:15 2012/05/14

Norma Jean Darden was born in Newark, New Jersey on November 4, 1940. Darden's mother was born in Camden, Alabama as Mamie Jean Johnson, but her name was changed to Mamie Jean Sampson after she was adopted by her older sister, and her brother-in-law. Darden describes her mother's upbringing in Delaware, Florida. Darden's paternal grandfather, Charles Henry Darden, was a young boy during the Emancipation Proclamation. A handyman, he became the first black undertaker in North Carolina. Darden's paternal grandmother, Diannah Scarborough Darden was of Native American ancestry. Darden's father, Walter Darden, was born in Wilson, North Carolina. She describes his upbringing, his siblings and how her parents met. As a physician in Newark, New Jersey, Darden's father conducted house visits until his office was robbed at gunpoint and it became dangerous to carry drugs around on house visits. As a child, Darden spent winters in Newark, New Jersey, and summers in Wilson, North Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Jean Darden, Section
A2012_126_001_002, TRT: 2:28:58 2012/05/14

Norma Jean Darden's parents were similar in temperament and philosophy, but different in political and religious views. Darden's parents supported blacks migrating from the South. Darden's father was a physician who practiced at Beth Israel Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey. Her father also hosted fashion show fundraisers for the NAACP, featuring models like Helen Williams and Dorothea Towles, with celebrities like Diana Sands and Sammy Davis, Jr. in attendance. Darden describes the

sights, sounds, and smells of her childhood. Her childhood home in Newark was next to the home of Father Divine. The family later moved into the former home of a Rothschild in Montclair, New Jersey during a period of white flight. Prior to the family's move, Darden was chauffeured from Newark to Nishuane Elementary School in Montclair. She then attended Hillside School in Montclair before enrolling at Northfield School for Girls in Northfield, Massachusetts. Darden also describes summers in Wilson, North Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Jean Darden, Section A2012_126_001_003, TRT: 3:28:36 2012/05/14

Norma Jean Darden attended Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York in 1957 where she was nominated to appear in Mademoiselle magazine. However, Mademoiselle did not want to feature a black model. In college, Darden was recruited by HistoryMaker Audrey Smaltz, to picket for the inclusion of blacks in Harper's Bazaar. Darden also picketed with HistoryMaker Louis Gossett, Jr. to protest the lack of black actors on Broadway. Darden recalls early black modeling agencies, models, and fashion shows. Black Beauty her breakthrough as a model after the agency was featured in Life magazine. After studying acting at Sarah Lawrence, Darden continued her training with Lee Strasburg, Sanford Meisner, and Uta Hagen. She also danced for Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey. Darden joined Wilhemina Models shortly before the death of its founder, Wilhelmina Cooper. She modeled in the historic Battle of Versailles Fashion Show in Paris in 1973; and remembers Beverly Johnson, the first African American on the cover of Vogue.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Jean Darden, Section A2012_126_001_004, TRT: 4:31:25 2012/05/14

Norma Jean Darden talks about her acting career during the 1970s. She joined La Mama E.T.C., acted in Ed Bullins plays, appeared in commercials, and started her own company, the Cornbread Players, with Edgar White and Walter Jones. Darden continued modeling for designers like Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Halston, Anne Klein, and HistoryMaker Stephen Burrows until she was

hospitalized with acute peritonitis. Darden talks about “Spoonbread & Strawberry Wine,” a memoir cookbook she wrote with her sister, Carole Darden. The book was published by Doubleday in 1978. Darden talks about her catering career, from her early days as an amateur caterer, to the incorporation of Spoonbread, Inc. She talks about her catering menu as well as challenges she faced, including a brief venture into the import/export business. Darden owns two restaurants in New York City, Miss Mamie’s Spoonbread Too and Miss Maude’s Spoonbread Too. She describes the impact of 9/11 and President Bill Clinton’s Harlem residency on her business.

Video Oral History Interview with Norma Jean Darden, Section
A2012_126_001_005, TRT: 5:27:23 2012/05/14

Norma Jean Darden talks about starring in “Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine,” a one-woman play by Wynn Handman adapted from Darden’s namesake cookbook memoir. In 2011, Darden was feted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art along with the other living models from the historic Battle of Versailles Fashion Show in 1973. Darden reflects upon her future aspirations, what she would change about her career, and her legacy. She also talks about her hopes and concerns for the African American community, her family, and how she would like to be remembered. During her catering career, Darden worked for or on behalf of political figures like Nelson Mandela, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and HistoryMakers Barack Obama and David Dinkins. Other clients include HistoryMaker Reginald Van Lee, Whitney Houston, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, American Express, Chase, and Goldman Sachs. Darden concludes her interview by narrating her personal photographs.