

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rodney Adkins

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## Overview of the Collection

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| <b>Repository:</b>           | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com  |
| <b>Creator:</b>              | Adkins, Rodney C., 1958-  |
| <b>Title:</b>                | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins,   |
| <b>Dates:</b>                | July 9, 2013  |
| <b>Bulk Dates:</b>           | 2013  |
| <b>Physical Description:</b> | 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:36:02).   |
| <b>Abstract:</b>             | Corporate executive and computer engineer Rodney Adkins (1958- ) has worked for IBM for over thirty years. He was the company's first African American corporate officer and senior vice president of development and manufacturing for the systems and technology group. Adkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 9, 2013, in Somers, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| <b>Identification:</b>       | A2013_173   |
| <b>Language:</b>             | The interview and records are in English.   |

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Corporate executive and computer engineer Rodney Adkins was born on August 23, 1958, in Miami, Florida, to Archie and Wauneta Adkins. He attended Miami Jackson High School where he graduated in 1976 as valedictorian. In 1981, Adkins graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology with his B.S. degree in electrical engineering. He then received his B.A. degree in physics from Rollins College in 1982, and an M.S. degree in electrical engineering in 1983 from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

Adkins began working at International Business Machines (IBM) in 1981 as a test engineer. In 1986, he was promoted to manager of special component engineering. In the early 1990s, Adkins helped to develop the IBM ThinkPad, one of the first laptop computers, and a frequent winner of design awards following its launch in 1992. In 1993, he attended Harvard Business School's Program for Management Development. A promotion to vice president of commercial desktop systems followed in 1995. Within three years, Adkins became the general manager of the UNIX server division, which he revitalized. In 1998, IBM named him to its Worldwide Management Council which consisted of forty-five of IBM's top executives. In 2002, Adkins was promoted to vice president of development for IBM's systems and technology group, and he remained in that position until 2007 when he was named an IBM corporate officer and senior vice president of development and manufacturing for the systems and technology group. Adkins became the first African American to attain that position in the history of IBM. In 2009, he was named the senior vice president and group executive of IBM's systems and technology group. Adkins was named senior vice president of IBM's corporate strategy in 2013.

Adkins has received numerous awards including the 1996 award for Black Engineer of the Year, the 2007 Black Engineer of the Year, and *Black Enterprise* magazine's Corporate Executive of the Year in 2011. *Fortune* magazine has also named Adkins one of the 50 Most Powerful Black Executives in America in 2002, and, in 2001, the National Society of Black Engineers awarded him the Golden Torch Award for Lifetime Achievement in Industry. In 2011, Adkins was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Science degree from the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Adkins is married to Michelle Collier, and they have two sons, Rodney and Ryan.

Rodney Adkins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 9, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rodney Adkins was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 9, 2013, in Somers, New York, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Corporate executive and computer engineer Rodney Adkins (1958- ) has worked for IBM for over thirty years. He was the company's first African American corporate officer and senior vice president of development and manufacturing for the systems and technology group.

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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:

Adkins, Rodney C., 1958-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

Adkins, Rodney C., 1958---Interviews  
African Americans--Interviews

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African American electrical engineers--Interview.

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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:**

Electrical Engineer

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ScienceMakers

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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 Rodney Adkins, July 9, 2013. 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 Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:42 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins describes his family's background. His mother, Wauneta Norton, was born on August 28, 1936 in DeLand, Florida. Her father, Willard Norton, was a landscaper and her mother, Irene Norton, was a maid. Adkins' father, Archie Lee Adkins, was born on September 23, 1933 in Louisville, Georgia. His parents, Joe Adkins and Annie Jessie Adkins, were farmers. Adkins' mother was a nurse and received her LPN (licensed practical nurse) in her fifties at Miami Dade Community College in Miami, Florida. His father worked as a custodian for the Dade County School System in Florida. Adkins describes how he came to be born in Louisville, Georgia and talks about his neighborhood in Miami, Florida.

African American families.

African American mothers--Florida.

African American fathers--Georgia.

Childhood--Florida--Miami.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:29 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins continues to talk about the Allapattah

neighborhood in Miami, Florida, where he grew up. He also describes the influence of the space program on him, as he was eleven during the Apollo 11 mission that put astronauts on the moon in 1969. As a child Adkins enjoyed comic books, which fueled his creativity, and would take appliances apart so he could see how they worked. He was also interested in radios, which led Adkins to become interested in how systems, such as television broadcasting, work. Adkins did well in school as he found learning and studying enjoyable, and was the valedictorian of his high school when he graduated in 1976. He describes his mentors during his school years.

Allapattah (Miami, Fla.).

Childhood--Florida--Miami.

Space flight to the moon.

Education--Florida--Miami.

Mentoring in education.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_003, TRT: 3:28:46 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins remembers his high school mentor, Mrs. Johnson, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In 1968, Adkins became involved in the martial art Nisei Goju Ryu and received the black belt at the age of thirteen. Adkins attended Allapattah Middle School in Miami, Florida for one year and then was switched to Robert E. Lee Middle School due to integration. At Miami Jackson High School Adkins decided to become a computer scientist and engineer due to an experience writing a computer program. He graduated as valedictorian from high school in 1976. Adkins decided to attend a dual-degree program where he spend three years at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida and two years at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia. He received an electrical engineering degree from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1981 and a physics degree from Rollins College in 1982.

Mentoring in education.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968--Assassination.

Karate.

Education--Florida--Miami.

Georgia Institute of Technology.

Electrical engineering.

Rollins College (Winter Park, Fla.).

Physics.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:29 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins talks about his degrees from Rollins College and the Georgia Institute of Technology and his mentors at the Georgia Institute of Technology. He was recruited by IBM in 1981 as a test engineer. Adkins describes the history of IBM and the evolution of personal computers. IBM allow Adkins to take a one year leave to obtain a master's degree in electrical engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology, which he received in 1983. In 1986, Adkins was promoted to a manager of special component engineering. Adkins led teams at IBM from the concept to the release of personal computer products. He also helped develop the IBM ThinkPad, one of the first laptops released in 1992.

Rollins College (Winter Park, Fla.).

Georgia Institute of Technology.

Mentoring in education.

International Business Machines Corporation.

Electrical engineering.

IBM microcomputers.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:19 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins talks about the IBM ThinkPad, its marketing, and IBM's business strategy. In 1986, Adkins was promoted from a test engineer to a manager of special component engineering. Adkins describes his transition from being an engineer to being in the management of IBM and the impact of IBM's open-door policy. He also discusses the restructuring of IBM in 1988 and the 1993 acquisition of Lotus Development Corporation by IBM. In 1992, Adkins attended Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts for their Program for Management

Development. Adkins was promoted to the position of vice president of commercial desktop systems at IBM in 1995, where his role was to supervise IBM's desktop systems portfolio.

IBM microcomputers.

International Business Machines Corporation.

Computer engineering.

Lotus Development Corporation.

Harvard University.

Promotions.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section A2013\_173\_001\_006, TRT: 6:30:16 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins describes his promotions in IBM. In 1998, Adkins joined the IBM's Worldwide Management Council, placing him at the highest level of management at IBM. Adkins managed the UNIX division of IBM and made IBM the world market leader of Unix operating systems in 2003. Also in 2003, Adkins was promoted to vice president of development for IBM's Systems and Technology Group, which gave him a larger role in the development of hardware products for IBM. Adkins then became the senior vice president and group executive of the IBM Systems and Technology Group in 2009. Adkins discusses the 2004 sale of IBM's PC (personal computer) business and its innovation into new areas of computing, including cloud computing and smart cities. He also talks about Lotus Notes, an email management system in IBM's portfolio, and the Blue Gene System, a research supercomputer focused on complex scientific problems.

International Business Machines Corporation.

Promotions.

IBM computers.

UNIX (Computer file).

Software engineering.

Computer engineering.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section A2013\_173\_001\_007, TRT: 7:30:53 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins discusses the IBM supercomputer Watson

and the cognitive era of computing. Adkins is a member of the Strategy Fifty, a group of strategy executives from Fortune 500 companies who collaborate on business strategies. Adkins describes his mentors at IBM. He reflects on his career and his legacy, and shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community. Adkins also talks about his family and how he would like to be remembered.

Supercomputers.

Computer engineering.

International Business Machines Corporation.

IBM computers.

African American families.

Reminiscing.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodney Adkins, Section  
A2013\_173\_001\_008, TRT: 8:10:08 2013/07/09

Rodney Adkins describes his photographs.

Photographs.