

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Wilkerson, Oscar Lawton, Jr., 1926-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr.,
Dates:	August 22, 2013
Bulk Dates:	2013
Physical Description:	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:03:43).
Abstract:	Tuskegee airman and radio program director Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr. (1926 - 2023) received his commission as 2nd lieutenant with the 617th Bombardment Squadron in 1946. After his service with the U.S. Army Air Force, he had a long career in radio as a programming executive. Wilkerson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 22, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2013_202
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Tuskegee Airman and radio programming executive Oscar Lawton Wilkerson Jr. was born on February 9, 1926 in Chicago Heights, Illinois to Oscar L. and Elizabeth Wilkerson. After his graduation from Bloomfield Township High School in 1944, Wilkerson entered the U.S. Army Air Force's Aviation Cadet training program in Tuskegee, Alabama. He was assigned to the 617th Bombardment Squadron, where he was trained to fly the B-25 "Billy Mitchell" bomber.

Wilkerson received his commission as a 2nd lieutenant and his "wings" as a B-25 pilot in 1946. In 1947, he graduated from the New York Institute of Photography. Wilkerson also graduated from the Midwest Broadcasting School in 1960. Wilkerson became a weekend disc jockey and community relations director at WBEE-AM in Harvey, Illinois in 1962. As an on-air personality, he was known as "Weekend Wilkie." As community relations director, he launched a weekly radio show hosted by Chicago Alderman Charles Chew, as well as publicity campaigns for the NAACP, the Chicago Urban League, the Committee of 100 and other organizations. Wilkerson was promoted to the position of program director at WBEE in 1965. Under Wilkerson's supervision, WBEE launched the radio career of Merri Dee, who became known as "Merri Dee, the Honey Bee." In 1969, he oversaw the station's switch to a more jazz-oriented format, and took on the additional responsibilities of operations manager. Wilkerson also hosted his own program, *Wilk's World*, on weekday mornings. Wilkerson left WBEE in 1971 to become the public affairs director at WMAQ Radio. In that role, he was responsible for all public service material aired on the station. Wilkerson was named program director at WMAQ in 1973, and served there until his retirement in 1988. Following his retirement, Wilkerson served as president of the Multi Media Ministry at New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson, Illinois. He was one of the "Documented Original Tuskegee Airmen" (DOTAs), and was active in the Chicago "Dodo" chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen Inc. Wilkerson regularly visited schools around the United States to tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. He lived in Markham, Illinois.

Oscar Lawton Wilkerson Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 22, 2013.

Oscar Lawton Wilkerson Jr. passed away on February 8, 2023 at the age of 96.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr. was conducted by Thomas Jefferson on August 22, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Tuskegee airman and radio program director Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr. (1926 - 2023) received his commission as 2nd lieutenant with the 617th Bombardment Squadron in 1946. After his service with the U.S. Army Air Force, he had a long career in radio as a programming executive.

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:

Wilkerson, Oscar Lawton, Jr., 1926-

Jefferson, Thomas (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Wilkerson, Oscar Lawton, Jr., 1926- --Interviews

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans--Interviews.

African American disc jockeys--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Air Force

WMAQ (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.)

Occupations:

Tuskegee Airman

Radio Program Director

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers|MilitaryMakers

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 Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., August 22, 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 5/30/2023 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 Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_001, TRT: 1:28:29 ?

Oscar Wilkerson describes his family background. His mother, Elizabeth Wilkerson, was born in Chamblee, Georgia. Her mother, Mary Coker, was part Native American and lived to be 102 years old. Wilkerson was named after his father Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Sr. Wilkerson's father worked for Bisbee Linseed Oil and Company Armour Fertilizer Company in the Chicago area, while his mother worked as a domestic. Wilkerson is the youngest of his parents' children and his brother Rufus is thirteen years older. Wilkerson describes his earliest childhood memory and the Chicago Heights neighborhood he grew up in. He attended Franklin Elementary School and then went on to Washington Junior High School and Bloomfield Township High School. Wilkerson joined the U.S. Air Force in 1944--right out of high school. He was interested in aviation and decided to join the Air Force. Wilkerson also talks about his basic training experience in Biloxi, Mississippi.

African American families.

African American mothers--Georgia.

African American fathers.

Childhood--Illinois--Chicago.

Education--Illinois--Chicago.

United States. Army Air Forces.

Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_002, TRT: 2:35:24 ?

Oscar Wilkerson talks about attending church as a child and his parents' personalities. He also discusses his interest in photography. Wilkerson describes the way his family celebrated New Years and going on family vacations to Ohio and Georgia. Additionally, he talks about his relationship with his brother, Rufus. In 1944, Wilkerson entered the U.S. Army Air Force's Aviation Cadet training program. He discusses his basic training in Biloxi, Mississippi and primary training in Tuskegee, Alabama. Wilkerson describes the thrill of his first flight experience, as well as the reaction of his flight instructor, Charles Johnson, when he performed a risky air maneuver. Wilkerson also talks about making his first solo flight.

African American churches--Illinois--Chicago.

African American families.

United States. Army Air Forces.

Tuskegee Army Air Field (Ala.)

Air pilots, Military--Training of--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_003, TRT: 3:25:48 ?

Oscar Wilkerson describes his experience as a cadet at the Tuskegee Army Air

Force Base in Alabama. Initially there was a tense atmosphere because it was most of the cadets' first time away from home. Even though there was camaraderie amongst them, they still had to be cautious and set boundaries. Wilkerson talks about the Tuskegee Airmen in the 99th air squadron and 332nd fighter group who established a strong reputation for black pilots through their military exploits. Wilkerson discusses the various phases of his advanced training at Tuskegee Army Airfield. He also talks about leaving military service in 1946, returning to Illinois and working various civilian jobs. During the latter part of 1946, Wilkerson studied at the New York Institute of Photography on the GI Bill. A few years later, he began working for Rollins Broadcasting, WBEE in Harvey, Illinois.

Tuskegee Army Air Field (Ala.)

United States. Army Air Forces.

Air pilots, Military--Training of--United States.

New York Institute of Photography.

Radio broadcasting--Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_004, TRT: 4:29:41 ?

Oscar Wilkerson talks about films that have been about the Tuskegee Airmen. Wilkerson recalls his flight training in Tuskegee, Alabama and the flying accidents that occurred. He talks about the officers in charge during his flight training and the various jobs he worked after leaving the military in 1946. Wilkerson talks about going into radio broadcasting and his interest in music. Wilkerson graduated from the Midwest Broadcasting School in 1960. He became a weekend disc jockey and community relations director at WBEE-AM in Harvey, Illinois in 1962. Wilkerson talks about his colleagues and responsibilities at WBEE Radio, as well as the entertainers and radio personalities he knew while there. In 1969, he oversaw the station's transition to a more jazz-oriented format, and took on the additional responsibilities of operations manager. Wilkerson also hosted his own program, "Wilk's World," on weekday mornings. In the early 1970s, Wilkerson left WBEE and began working for WMAQ Radio.

Tuskegee Army Air Field (Ala.)

Radio broadcasting--Illinois.

Disc jockeys.

WBEE (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.)

African American radio stations.

Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_005, TRT: 5:31:10 ?

Oscar Wilkerson talks about his colleagues at WBEE Radio: disc jockeys, Bill Kenner and Marty Faye; Program Manager, Bill German and Station Manager, John Wilson. In 1971, when Wilkerson moved to WMAQ Radio in Chicago, he reported to Lee Davis--whom had worked at WBEE with Rollins Broadcasting in a managerial capacity. Wilkerson served as public affairs director at WMAQ Radio, which meant that he was responsible for all public service material aired on the station. In 1973, Wilkerson was named program director at WMAQ. During this time he also became Treasurer for the National Broadcast Association for Community Affairs (NBACA). Wilkerson talks about other blacks in Chicago who were in the broadcasting field and compares his job at WMAQ to his previous one at WBEE. Wilkerson talks about WMAQ's shift into country music and describes the radio station under Charlie Warner's

leadership. He explains what radio taught him and why he was successful.

Disc jockeys.

WBEE (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.)

African American radio stations.

WMAQ (Radio station : Chicago, Ill.)

Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Oscar Lawton Wilkerson, Jr., Section A2013_202_001_006,
TRT: 6:33:11 ?

Oscar Wilkerson talks about the community leaders he met during his work in radio. Additionally, he discusses his work with the National Broadcast Association for Community Affairs (NBACA). Wilkerson describes attending the 1963 March to Washington and getting to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech. He also talks about gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who was in attendance at the march. Wilkerson talks about his participation in organizations, such as the Gavin Foundation and the Harvey Rotary Club, and his retirement in 1988. Wilkerson talks about flying and pilot, Jim Tillman. He describes his hopes and concerns for the black community and reflects upon his legacy.

Radio broadcasting--Illinois--Chicago.

March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D.C., 1963.

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 1929-1968--Public appearances.

Jackson, Mahalia, 1911-1972.

Tilmon, Jim

Reminiscing.