

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Herman Roberts

PERSON

Roberts, Herman, 1924-

Alternative Names: Herman Roberts;

Life Dates: January 21, 1924-February 1, 2021

Place of Birth: Beggs, Oklahoma, USA

Residence: Chicago, IL

Occupations: Entrepreneur

Biographical Note

Herman Roberts was born in 1924 in Beggs, Oklahoma to James and Ella Roberts as the youngest of six children. An entrepreneur from an early age, Roberts became the nation's foremost African American hotel and motel owner. He is known best for the sixth Roberts Motel, a Chicago institution.

When Roberts was twelve, his family moved to Chicago, Illinois. He began working odd jobs, including delivering papers and washing taxicabs. Within three years, Roberts drove a cab himself and soon earned enough to buy a license. He continued to buy licenses and then started his own cab company. After serving in the military, Roberts returned to Chicago in 1947. He immediately picked up his business again.

Roberts opened the Lucky Spot in 1953, a small lounge on the city's South Side. The Roberts Show Club, which featured entertainers such as Sammy Davis, Jr., Redd Foxx, and Della Reese, opened a year later. Segregation made housing these performers difficult, and Roberts realized the need for a black-owned motel. In 1960, he founded the first Roberts Motel. It opened to such demand that Roberts followed quickly with four others. As he focused more on the needs of families, he redesigned his show club into a bowling alley. In 1970, he launched his sixth motel—a huge, fully equipped complex that included 250 sleeping rooms, twelve suites, two penthouse party suites, a restaurant, lounge, ballroom, travel agency, convenience store and beauty parlor. He continued building his motel business with acquisitions in Oklahoma and Gary, Indiana.

Roberts bought land that had once been an oil field and built a house in his hometown of Beggs. He drilled for oil and struck it in 1981. Roberts then sold his motel business, converted the bowling alley to a skating rink and concentrated on his new venture — he still operates two derricks. He remains a Chicago icon.

Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on July 24, 2002.

Roberts passed away on February 1, 2021.

Related Entries

Edmund Burke Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Englewood High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

did not graduate

Lucky Spot Lounge [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1953 to ?]

Founder, owner

Roberts Show Club [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1954 to ?]

Founder, owner

Roberts Motels [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1960 to 1981]

Founder, owner

[EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1981 to ?]

Founder, operator