

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Herman Roberts

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Roberts, Herman, 1924-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts,
Dates:	July 24, 2002
Bulk Dates:	2002
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:06:19).
Abstract:	Lodging entrepreneur and entrepreneur Herman Roberts (1924 - 2021) is a consummate businessman who has founded a taxi company, a night club, a bowling alley and a motel chain in Chicago. He is known best for the sixth Roberts Motel, a Chicago institution. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2002_108
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Herman Roberts was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 24, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lodging entrepreneur and entrepreneur Herman Roberts (1924 - 2021) is a consummate businessman who has founded a taxi company, a night club, a bowling alley and a motel chain in Chicago. He is known best for the sixth Roberts Motel, a Chicago institution.

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:

Roberts, Herman, 1924-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Roberts, Herman, 1924---Interviews

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

African Americans--Genealogy

Rural-urban migration--United States

Dust Bowl Era, 1931-1939

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans

Paperboys--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Taxicab drivers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Nightclubs--Illinois--Chicago

Success in business

Entrepreneurship--Illinois--Chicago

Hospitality industry--Management

African American business enterprises

Celebrities--Anecdotes

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Entrepreneur

HistoryMakers® Category:

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 Herman Roberts, July 24, 2002. 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 Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_001, TRT: 0:30:27 ?

Herman Roberts describes his family background, tracing back the roots on his mother's and father's sides of the family, and describing his siblings. Roberts recalls growing up and going to school in Oklahoma, during the Great Depression Dust Bowl days. Roberts then describes his family's move to Chicago, contrasting his new neighborhood with his rural Oklahoma town. Roberts also names some of his influences and mentors as a child.

African American businesspeople--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Rural-urban migration--United States.

Dust Bowl Era, 1931-1939.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Paperboys--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Taxicab drivers--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Nightclubs--Illinois--Chicago.

Success in business.

Entrepreneurship--Illinois--Chicago.

Hospitality industry--Management.

African American business enterprises.

Celebrities--Anecdotes.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_002, TRT: 0:28:21 ?

Herman Roberts describes the start of his long career as an entrepreneur, selling newspapers on the South Side of Chicago. Roberts then explains how he got into the taxicab business, which eventually led to him driving taxis at the age of fifteen. Throughout, Roberts discusses his strategies for succeeding in business.

Roberts also describes the climate of the country at the outbreak of World War II, as well as his own time in the Army.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_003, TRT: 0:27:50 ?

Herman Roberts, after recalling his time spent in the Army, gives a detailed description of his early success in the business world. He discusses the start of his own cab company, and how he used that to enter the nightclub business, opening the famous Roberts Show Club on Chicago's South Side. Roberts also shares his philosophies and strategies for success in business.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_004, TRT: 0:29:07 ?

Herman Roberts discusses his venture into the hospitality business, describing the success of his Roberts Motel chain in Chicago, particularly the 500 Room at Roberts Motel No. 6. Roberts discusses some of the problems inherent in the hotel business, including illegal activity by customers. Roberts also discusses his business relationship with disc jockey Marty Faye and considers the factors leading to success for black businesses.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_005, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Herman Roberts shares his opinions regarding the changing business landscape, as more corporations are forcing smaller businesses to fold. He also discusses how integration impacted black businesses negatively. Roberts shares some humorous stories from his years of interaction with celebrities and entertainers. He then reflects on his career and discusses his current business situation.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_006, TRT: 0:30:44 ?

Herman Roberts shares some more humorous stories from his encounters with celebrities. He considers the future of black businesses and addresses the problems facing black businesses today. Roberts then considers his legacy and how he would like to be remembered. Roberts also describes photos depicting his life, family, and career.

Video Oral History Interview with Herman Roberts, Section A2002_108_001_007, TRT: 0:10:40 ?

Herman Roberts describes a series of photos depicting his life, family, and career.