

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Junius "Red" Gaten

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gaten, Junius, 1900-2005
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gaten,
Dates:	March 6, 2003
Bulk Dates:	2003
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:14:45).
Abstract:	Community activist Junius "Red" Gaten (1900 - 2005) was a former iceman, piano player, and socialist. Born in 1900, Gaten remembered Ida B. Wells and the Chicago Race Riot of 1919. Gaten was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 6, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2003_037
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Junius Gaten was born February 28, 1900, in Smithdale, Mississippi. He was called “Red” because of his thick red hair. At age five, Gaten moved with his aunt to Chicago. He attended Haven Elementary School and Chicago’s oldest black church, Quinn Chapel A.M.E Church. At sixteen, Consumer’s Ice Company in Chicago’s Bridgeport neighborhood hired him. His horses knew the route, which wound through the Black Belt and down integrated Grand Boulevard (now King Drive).

As “Iceman Red,” Gaten delivered ice to black activist Ida B. Wells and former black Congressman John Roy Lynch. He resisted and survived the violent Chicago Race Riot of 1919 and the Palmer House Riot of 1924. In the 1920s, Gaten frequented the Dreamland, Royal Garden, Sunset Café and Grand Café. Able to earn extra money by playing the piano for rent parties, Gaten was advised by businessman Jesse Binga to open an account in his Binga Bank. Running errands for Al Capone, he earned \$10 dollar tips and Cuban cigars. Gaten knew the Gordon family of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and heard Marcus Garvey speak at Chicago’s Liberty Hall. He talked with Carter G. Woodson, who stayed with Gaten’s uncle during his frequent visits to Chicago. During the Depression, he was assigned to work in Haiti by the Works Progress Administration. “Washington Park Red” aired his political views publicly. He was a union man seeking better wages and equal rights.

Gaten was associated with the Communist Party in the 1940s, joining Margaret Burroughs and Ishmael Flory. In this context, he helped sponsor an appearance by Paul Robeson. Gaten retired more than thirty years ago as operations manager for the Jefferson Ice Company. He bought a house for himself and his late wife, and bought real estate in what is now called the Bronzeville community. In his later years, Gaten served as Sunday School Director at St. John Church - Baptist on Chicago’s southside.

Gaten lived to be 105 years old. He passed away on November 30, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Junius "Red" Gaten was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 6, 2003, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Community activist Junius "Red" Gaten (1900 - 2005) was a former iceman, piano player, and socialist. Born in 1900, Gaten remembered Ida B. Wells and the Chicago Race Riot of 1919.

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:

Gaten, Junius, 1900-2005

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gaten, Junius, 1900-2005--Interviews

Urban elderly--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Socialists--United States--Interviews

Older African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Community Activist

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers

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 Junius "Red" Gaten, March 6, 2003. 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 Junius "Red" Gaten, Section A2003_037_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Junius "Red" Gatén was born on February 28, 1900 in Smithdale, Mississippi. Gatén has ancestral roots from Louisiana and is of Cajun, Creole, Haitian, and Nigerian descent. Gatén's maternal grandfather was born into slavery. Gatén's paternal grandfather was also a slave. A skilled blacksmith, he also ran the basket plantation on his master's plantation with his brother. He was deeded 88 acres of land from his slavemaster and also preached at his slavemaster's funeral. Gatén's mother, Myrtice Turner Perkins was sixteen when Gatén was born. Gatén's father, Charlie, was his mother's uncle. He made a living collecting insurance on houses he built, sold, and burnt until he was arrested. Family members prevented Gatén's mother from taking Gatén to New Orleans, Louisiana where she practiced hoodoo. Gatén was raised by his mother's sisters, Alma Gatén and Mary Perkins. Gatén took his last name from Alma Gatén's husband. As a young boy, Gatén had a heart condition and his Aunt Mary brought him to Chicago, Illinois for treatment. Gatén was then raised in Chicago.

Urban elderly--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Socialists--United States--Interviews.

Older African Americans--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatén, Section A2003_037_001_002, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Junius "Red" Gatén talks about his childhood in the Black Belt of Chicago, Illinois and the development of Grand Boulevard on the South Side. As a child, Gatén attended Chicago's Haven School and Moseley School, but was expelled from Moseley as a teenager. Gatén's memories of grade school include studying from Noah Webster's Blue Back Speller and learning the times tables. Across the street from Haven School was the Chicago Coliseum where Gatén saw pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski in performance. Gatén also heard blues musician Little Brother Montgomery and learned to play piano at a young age without lessons. He describes his experience in Whitely, North Dakota where his aunt and uncle worked on the railroad. As a teenager, Gatén worked as a dishwasher at John R. Thompson's restaurant in Tip Top Inn before being hired to deliver ice. Gatén also mentions Samuel Insull, the president of Commonwealth Edison and financier of Chicago's Civic Opera House, Julius Rosenwald who managed Sears and Roebuck, and African American inventor Lewis Howard Latimer.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatén, Section A2003_037_001_003, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Junius "Red" Gatén shares his memories from the Chicago Race Riot of 1919. He describes Chicago's segregated beaches, the stoning of Eugene Williams, and the riots between Bridgeport and the Black Belt neighborhoods in Chicago. Gatén also recounts memories of false media reports, police brutality, and looting stores for goods like ginger ale and cheese. After Gatén began working as an ice delivery man as a teenager, he developed an appreciation for the intelligence of horses. In 1928, a downturn in the ice business led Gatén to a job at Congress Linen Supplies. While working at Congress Linen Supplies, Gatén delivered clothes to Al Capone. He remembers Al Capone giving him generous tips of cash and Cuban cigars. Gatén also talks about issues during Prohibition era Chicago including women's suffrage, the Italian mafia, and Irish gangs like the Hamburg Social and Athletic Club and Regan's Colts. During the 1920s, Gatén earned extra money playing piano for house rent parties. Gatén also talks about preeminent boxers like Jack Dempsey, Harry Willis, Jack Johnson, and James Jeffries.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatén, Section A2003_037_001_004, TRT:

0:29:25 ?

Junius "Red" Gatlen describes African American boxer Jack Johnson, promoter Bill Bottoms, and other figures in the boxing world of the 1920s. During the 1920s, Gatlen frequented the locales like the Dreamland Café, Sunset Café, Grand Café, and Royal Garden. Gatlen describes Marcus Garvey's activities in Chicago after the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association [UNIA] and church bombings incited by racial tensions as African Americans expanded outside of Chicago's Black Belt. In 1927, Gatlen participated in a riot at the Palmer House in downtown Chicago protesting the segregation of elevators in the hotel. The riot was quelled after black Republicans Oscar DePriest, Louis B. Anderson, and Robert R. Jackson met with Mayor William Hale Thomas. As a lifelong citizen of Chicago, Gatlen witnessed ethnic tension amongst European immigrants in the city. Gatlen recounts the Council Wars led by Edward Vrdolyak and Edward M. Burke following the election of Mayor Harold Washington. Gatlen also describes joining the Communist party, the desegregation of Walter Powers' restaurant and his various contracting jobs.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatlen, Section A2003_037_001_005, TRT: 0:30:25 ?

Junius "Red" Gatlen was hired as the engineer's chief helper at the Lincoln Ice Plant in Chicago, Illinois after helping to build the plant. At the plant, Gatlen learned the fundamentals of engineering, cleaned the machinery, and eventually became the plant's operations manager. Gatlen describes the process of making ice with ammonia, a process superseded by electricity. After joining the Communist party around 1927, Gatlen helped recruit HistoryMaker William Warfield and Paul Robeson to appear at party meetings in Chicago's Washington Park. Gatlen describes Paul Robeson and other historical civil rights activists from Nat Turner in the 19th Century to lawyer William Robert Ming of the NAACP. Gatlen contributed to the Communist party's efforts to secure freedom of assembly by appealing to U.S. Senator Paul Douglas and his wife, U.S. Representative Emily Taft Douglas. Gatlen also talks about Two-Gun Pete and Chicago Mayor William Hale Thompson. He also reflects upon factors in buying a house and changes in his neighborhood. Gatlen describes the FBI's assassination of Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in 1969.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatlen, Section A2003_037_001_006, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Junius "Red" Gatlen describes Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood during the 1920s. The neighborhood's vibrant music scene attracted actors like John Barrymore to the Club DeLisa and entertainers like Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, and Louis Armstrong to the Sunset Café. Gatlen laments the historical lack of cooperation between black business owners and black banks. He believes that political power in the black community has decreased over time and questions the worth of a degree in a racist society. During the years Gatlen worked for Al Capone, he was always flush with cash. Gatlen talks about black alderman in Chicago's political machine like Claude Holman, Kenneth Campbell, and Ralph Metcalf. While working as a union steward, Gatlen witnessed the persisting impact of slavery and systemic injustice on African American families and on the poor. Gatlen describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community and highlights inspirational women in his neighborhood like activist Ida B. Wells.

Video Oral History Interview with Junius "Red" Gatlen, Section A2003_037_001_007, TRT: 0:19:20 ?

Junius "Red" Gatlen reflects upon his legacy and how he would like to be

remembered. He ends the interview by narrating his photographs.