

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Samuel Yette

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Yette, Samuel F.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette,
Dates:	June 7, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:56:33).
Abstract:	Newspaper columnist, author, and book publishing chief executive Samuel Yette (1929 - 2011) is the author of, "The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America," which has won several awards. A professor of journalism at Howard University and founder of Cottage Books, Inc., Yette has had a wide and influential career, and is still an active photojournalist and author. Yette was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 7, 2004, in Silver Spring, Maryland. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_065
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Samuel F. Yette, the author of *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America*, was born on July 2, 1929, in Harriman, Tennessee, to Frank Mack Yette and his wife Cora Lee Rector Yette (the family name is pronounced “yet”). Growing up in segregated Tennessee during the Great Depression, Yette attended Jamieson Elementary School in Harriman and Campbell High School in nearby Rockwood, Tennessee. Campbell High School principal John Brown Olinger mentored Yette, who graduated in 1947. After a brief interlude at Morristown College in 1947, he finished his studies at Tennessee State University from 1948 to 1951.

After joining the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War and serving from 1951 to 1953, Yette returned to teach and coach at Campbell High School from 1953 to 1954 and at Howard High School in Chattanooga from 1954 to 1955. Between 1954 and 1956, Yette worked as a sports writer for *The Chattanooga Times* and as a sports caster for WMFS radio. Yette completed his B.S. in English from Indiana University in 1956 and his M.A. in journalism and government in 1959. Also in 1956, Yette was teamed with photographer Gordon Parks as a special correspondent for a four part series on civil rights that appeared in *LIFE Magazine*. In 1956 he became a reporter for the *Afro-American Newspapers* in Baltimore and Washington, before serving as associate editor of *Ebony* from 1957 to 1959. That year, Yette was named director of information for Tuskegee University, where he remained until 1962. Yette covered City Hall for the *Dayton Journal Herald* as their first black reporter in 1962. Yette became the Peace Corps’ press liaison for Sargent Shriver’s visit to Africa in 1963 and was made the executive secretary of the Peace Corps in 1964. He was then appointed special assistant for civil rights to the director of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, a position he held until 1967.

Becoming the first black Washington correspondent for *Newsweek* in 1968, Yette covered urban violence and began writing *The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival In America*. *The Choice*, published in 1971, was an African

American insider's view of the relationship between the Vietnam War, the War On Poverty and African American survival. For *The Choice*, Yette garnered a Special Book Award from the Capitol Press Club in 1971, and the Top Non-Fiction Work of Distinction from the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in 1972. Featured on PBS's *Black Journal*, Yette lectured widely.

In 1972, Yette accepted a position as professor of journalism at Howard University while continuing to write columns and commentary for the *Miami Times*, *Tennessee Tribune*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, *Richmond Free Press*, *Nashville Banner* and the *Afro-American Newspapers* and for magazines like *Black World*, *Black Scholar*, *Black Collegian* and *Black Books Bulletin*. He founded Cottage Books, Inc., and republished *The Choice* in 1982. In addition, Yette was a political commentator for BET in 1987 and 1988 and hosted *Talk TV Politics* on WHMM-TV (now WHUT) from 1991-1992.

Yette was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 7, 2004.

Yette passed away on January 21, 2011, leaving behind two grown sons.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Samuel Yette was conducted by Larry Crowe on June 7, 2004, in Silver Spring, Maryland, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Newspaper columnist, author, and book publishing chief executive Samuel Yette (1929 - 2011) is the author of, "The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America," which has won several awards. A professor of journalism at Howard University and founder of Cottage Books, Inc., Yette has had a wide and influential career, and is still an active photojournalist and author.

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:

Yette, Samuel F.

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Lane, Edgar Carey (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Yette, Samuel F.--Interviews

African American journalists--Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

Journalism teachers--Interviews

Publishers and publishing--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Newspaper Columnist

Author

Book Publishing Chief Executive

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

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 Samuel Yette, June 7, 2004. 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 Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_001, TRT: 0:31:05 ?

Samuel Yette was born on July 2, 1929 in Harriman, Tennessee. His mother, Cora Lee Rector Yette, was born in 1888. Although she did not have access to education beyond eighth grade, she was very good at arguing a case and served as an unofficial lawyer in her community. His father, Frank Mack Yette, was born in 1886 in Parrottsville, Tennessee. Yette's paternal grandmother spoke an African language and his paternal grandfather was fearless, refusing to be intimidated when threatened by a white man with a shotgun. Yette's father was supposedly illiterate but his children later discovered love letters he wrote to his wife. He was very strong and worked as a farmer, laborer and owned a grocery store, which enabled Yette's parents to send all thirteen children to school. Yette grew up in the Walnut Hill area of Harriman where his neighbors included Zano, a talented rapper who served as father figure to Yette, and Piggie Miller who was a self-styled performer at local baseball games.

African American journalists--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

Journalism teachers--Interviews.

Publishers and publishing--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_002, TRT: 0:29:26 ?

Samuel Yette attended Jamieson Elementary School in Harriman, Tennessee. His family was the target of threats and violence from whites in the area because they were ambitious and academically-inclined. His mother earned further enmity working to integrate the schools after realizing one of her daughter's math skills exceeded those of the teachers. Yette's parents sent him to Rockwood Colored High School in Rockwood, Tennessee. Its principal, John Brown Ollinger, was very accomplished and became Yette's mentor. Yette's interest in high school sports helped him gain admission to Morristown College in Morristown, Tennessee. While there, he joined the choir, the debate team and the football team while carrying an A average. Yette was denied the letter he

earned in football because the coach wanted him to focus on academics. Yette transferred to Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College in Nashville with the intention of playing football but his brother persuaded him to become a sports announcer instead.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_003, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Samuel Yette founded the student newspaper, The Meter, at Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College in Nashville in 1949. He credits Professor George W. Gore, Jr. with inspiring his journalism career as well as the careers of Tennessee State alumnae Oprah Winfrey and Carl Rowan. Yette had challenging courses at Tennessee State and his work as editor kept his grades just shy of graduating with honors. Yette entered the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War and was stationed first at Francis E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming where he received technical training and was at the top of his class, as HistoryMaker James Cheek had been the year before. He then went to Officer Candidate School at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas where he encountered racist officers who unsuccessfully tried to have him discharged. After his year of training, he was stationed at Francis S. Gabreski Air Force National Base on Long Island, New York and then the Air Defense Command in Colorado Springs.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_004, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Samuel Yette returned to Tennessee to teach at his alma mater Rockwood Colored High School after being discharged from the U.S. Air Force. While back home, he became the first African American granted a card at the local library. Yette used his G.I. Bill education benefits to attend the journalism program at Indiana University in Bloomington. He was associate editor of the student newspaper and encountered discrimination from professors and in the student council election process. In 1957, Yette accepted a position as an associate editor of Ebony. He married his wife in 1958, and in 1959 the couple moved to Alabama where he worked as director of information for Tuskegee Institute alongside HistoryMaker Dorothy B. Gilliam. The Montgomery Advertiser refused to print material generated by Tuskegee until Yette convinced it to publish a story he scooped on the work of Dr. John Scudder and Charles R. Drew. Later, while a guest lecturer at Indiana University, he persuaded Carl Rowan to speak at the school.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_005, TRT: 0:30:09 ?

Samuel Yette left Tuskegee Institute in 1962 to work for the Journal-Herald of Dayton, Ohio. He traveled to New Orleans, Louisiana for the job interview, which had been arranged by the chair of Indiana University's journalism department. Yette was the first African American reporter at the paper. His initial meeting with Editor Glenn Thompson ended in an argument and he was taunted with racist remarks by coworkers but proved himself to be such an adept reporter that he was given their jobs, including the assignment of covering Dayton City Hall. Yette also discovered that a coworker's sexual harassment was part of a test set up by staff in the hopes of getting him fired. On the recommendation of Carl Rowan, he left the Journal-Herald to work for the Peace Corps and was assigned by Douglas Kiker to travel to Africa with R. Sargent Shriver in 1963. During their travels through Liberia, Yette interviewed President William Tubman and impressed the difficult-to-please Shriver with his dedication and attentiveness.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_006, TRT: 0:28:43 ?

Samuel Yette was promoted to executive secretary of the Peace Corps by Bill Moyers. In 1964, he accepted the position of special assistant for civil rights to

the director of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity when President Lyndon B. Johnson called upon R. Sargent Shriver to head the War on Poverty programs. Yette left the OEO in 1967 after he was excluded from meetings for questioning Senator James Eastland, Richard J. Daley and other politicians who shut down anti-poverty programs such as the Child Development Group of Mississippi. Yette moved to New York City and joined Newsweek in 1968 as its first black reporter and Washington D.C. correspondent. He was fired by Newsweek in 1971 after his book 'The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America' was released. Yette filed an unsuccessful lawsuit against Newsweek for employment discrimination. He elaborates on the book's investigation of the relationship between U.S. rice exports, the Vietnam War and the financial motivations of U.S. legislators.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_007, TRT: 0:31:12 ?

Samuel Yette learned from Secretary of Labor George Shultz that the government planned to use Job Corps Centers as labor camps for African Americans. Yette confronted Shultz about the issue in a 1969 'Meet the Press' interview. Yette began teaching journalism at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1972 and continued working as a correspondent for various news outlets, including the Afro-American Newspapers and B.E.T. In 1982, Yette started Cottage Books Publishing Company, which published his photography book 'Washington and Two Marches, 1963 & 1983' and reprinted 'The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America,' which has had an impact on many, including HistoryMakers Dick Gregory and Barbara Reynolds. Yette names several journalists he admires, such as HistoryMaker Vernon Jarrett, shares his advice for aspiring black journalists and talks about journalists' connections to the intelligence community. He reflects upon his legacy and his hopes and concerns for the African American community.

Video Oral History Interview with Samuel Yette, Section A2004_065_001_008, TRT: 0:23:34 ?

Samuel Yette recalls an incident from his high school years when he was falsely accused of theft by his employer. When Yette told his mother he had been fired, she confronted his accuser and successfully defended him. He appreciated his mother's certainty that he would never steal. In 1964, Yette's mother was able to witness a ceremony honoring him as a hometown hero at the Golden Anniversary celebration of Harriman, Tennessee. Yette was selected for his work as executive secretary of the Peace Corps. At the celebration, he gave a well-received speech, but declined a ride from Tennessee Governor Frank Clement in favor of celebrating his success with his mother. Yette concludes by narrating his photographs.