

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Ellison, Ollie B., Sr., 1927-2015
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr.,
Dates:	January 14, 2005 and November 29, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004 and 2005
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:53:22).
Abstract:	Foreign service officer Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. (1927 - 2015) was among the first African American U.S. Foreign Service officers. Ellison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 14, 2005 and November 29, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_239
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Foreign service officer Ollie Benjamin Jefferson Ellison, Sr. was born on February 23, 1927 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. His mother was a schoolteacher; his father, the first African American attorney in the State of Oklahoma. Ellison's father also served as chairman of the Negro Democratic Party. Ellison graduated from Douglas High School in 1944 and then attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, where he received his B.A. degree in biology in 1949. During his junior year in 1946, Ellison was drafted into the U.S. Army for the Korean War and served in the Military Police Unit in Inchon, Korea. He later entered Indiana University's graduate program, where he studied clinical psychology and Soviet studies. In 1951, Ellison was sent by the U.S. Army to intelligence school in Berlin, Germany. Upon returning from military duty in Germany, he enrolled in a graduate program in political science at the University of Chicago.

In 1957, Ellison was among the U.S. State Department's first African American foreign service officers and was assigned to a post in the Middle East. He served in Cairo, Egypt from 1959 to 1964; Bremen, Germany from 1967 to 1970; Kinshasa, Zaire from 1974 to 1978; and Bangkok, Thailand from 1978 to 1981. Between 1981 and 1982, Ellison served in Bangui, Central African Republic; and, from 1983 to 1989, was an officer in Geneva, Switzerland. There, he served as U.S. representative to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. As a foreign service officer, Ellison met with several leaders and artists including P.W. Botha, Oliver Tambo, Malcolm X and Maya Angelou. He retired from the U.S. State Department in 1989 and later worked for the National Archives declassification department.

In 1973, Ellison authored the "Employment Practices of U.S. Firms in South Africa", which appeared in the *Johannesburg Star* and became known later as The Sullivan Principles. In February of 2013, his career was featured in the U.S. State Department's *State Magazine*.

Ellison passed away on May 26, 2015 at the age of eighty-eight. He was married to Lydia A. Ellison and had four children: Ollie B. Ellison, Sylvia J. Ellison, Bonita J. Ellison, and Rebecca W. Ellison.

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 29, 2004 and January 14, 2005.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. was conducted by Racine Tucker Hamilton on January 14, 2005 and November 29, 2004, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Foreign service officer Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. (1927 - 2015) was among the first African American U.S. Foreign Service officers.

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:

Ellison, Ollie B., Sr., 1927-2015

Hamilton, Racine Tucker (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Warwick, Rick (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ellison, Ollie B., Sr., 1927-2015--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

United States. Dept. of State.

Occupations:

Foreign Service Officer

HistoryMakers® Category:

PoliticalMakers

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 Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., January 14, 2005 and November 29, 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 Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_001_001, TRT: 0:31:02 ?

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. was born on February 23, 1927 in Muskogee, Oklahoma. His mother, Gertrude Barzart Ellison, was born in Echo, Louisiana to a father of Native American and black ancestry and a white mother. After the murder of her oldest brother, her family moved to Oklahoma. She lived with an older sister after her mother's death, attended Wilberforce University in Ohio for two years, and worked as a teacher in Muskogee. His father, Ollie B. Jefferson, was born in Arkansas City, Arkansas around 1880. He ran away to Washington, D.C. at fourteen to pursue his education, first attending the Normal and Preparatory Department of Howard University before attending Howard for his undergraduate degree and graduating from its School of Law in 1901. He then opened his law practice in Muskogee. Jefferson was the first African American lawyer in Oklahoma and chaired the local Negro Democratic Party. He died when Ellison was ten years old, and Ellison moved to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to live with his mother.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_001_002, TRT: 0:30:28 ?

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. and his younger sister grew up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma during the oil industry's expansion in the state, resulting in a well drilled right outside Ellison's home. His father's law practice focused on defending land rights for Native Americans, usually unsuccessfully. His father would sometimes be paid with food which Ellison's mother would can, especially during the Great Depression. As a child, Ellison was solitary and liked books so much that he read the entire children's section at the local branch of his public library. Though born left-handed, an elementary teacher forced him to write with his right hand, probably causing the stutter he had throughout his school years. He attended Inman E. Page School until fifth grade when he transferred to Dunbar School. During his time at Douglass High School, he decided to become a doctor, partly due to career expectations in the African American community. Ellison also attended an Episcopal church where he served as an altar boy.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Ollie B. Ellison attended Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri until he was drafted into the U.S. army his sophomore year. After training at Fort McClellan in Alabama, he was sent with the only black battalion to Incheon, South Korea. The battalion initially served as part of a police force, until they were stationed as guards for the docks due to discrimination. Ellison's typing skills led to him becoming a recorder for the board of officers and an assistant to the captain. At the University Graduate School of Indiana University in Bloomington, he studied clinical psychology for two years before being called back to the army. Ellison's studies of Soviet Russia resulted in his assignment to Berlin, Germany as an intelligence officer rather than a combat second lieutenant in Korea. In Germany, Ellison experienced discrimination from American soldiers unused to black officers. He frequently wandered the city and befriended German citizens, which caused tension with other members of the regiment.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_001_004, TRT: 0:31:09 ?

Ollie B. Ellison decided to pursue a career in the U.S. Foreign Service in 1952. After his discharge from the U.S. army, he worked briefly for the Chicago

Transit Authority until admitted to the University of Chicago for a master's degree in international studies. While continuing his studies at the doctorate level, he completed the officer test for the U.S. Foreign Service. In his last semester, he was called to join the next Foreign Service class. Upon moving to Washington, D.C. with his wife in 1957, Ellison began his training. Although the service was opening up at this time, gender discrimination and racism were still prevalent. Ellison's assigned mentor was racist and refused to help him, so Ellison resolved to advance without a mentor. In 1959, he was transferred to Cairo, Egypt. During this era of Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency and shortly after the Suez Crisis, he assisted displaced Palestinian refugees and dispensed visas to those wanting to come to the U.S., which made him popular with the locals.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_002_005, TRT: 0:31:18 ?

Ollie B. Ellison served as a junior U.S. Foreign Officer in Cairo, Egypt until 1963. During his time there, he witnessed the rise of African nationalism and met exiled African National Congress co-leader Oliver Tambo while he was trying unsuccessfully to obtain a U.S. visa. Ellison also observed the Civil Rights Movement from afar and was startled at the changes that occurred while he was stationed overseas. His experience in the Middle East and work with Palestinian refugees landed him a position as advisor on the Arab-Israeli conflict to the U.S. Department of State upon his return to the U.S. In 1966, he was assigned to Bremen, Germany. This post proved challenging due to working under a difficult consul general, as well as the insularity of North German culture. He encountered racism in an instance of housing discrimination and in a difficult interaction with a local leader of the Communist Party of Germany. In addition, Ellison was once assigned to attend a Neo-Nazi convention.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_002_006, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., after leaving Germany in 1971, returned to Washington, D.C. to complete a crash-course in economics. Under the direction of assistant secretary of state to Africa David D. Newsom, Ellison travelled around southern Africa to research the employment practices of U.S. firms. The eventual report issued by the U.S. Department of State was viewed as interfering in South African affairs for suggesting better treatment of African workers. Much of the initial conclusions were later echoed in the Sullivan Principles, providing belated vindication. Ellison was assigned to the Republic of Zaire in 1974, arriving in time for The Rumble in the Jungle Though he did not attend the match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, he attempted to collect bills for U.S. vendors, some of which remained unpaid as the fight depleted much of Zaire's treasury. Ellison also describes the relationship between Africans and African Americans and his commonalities and differences with HistoryMaker Angela Davis.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_002_007, TRT: 0:30:49 ?

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. was assigned to be a finance and development officer for the U.S. embassy in Thailand in 1977. In advocating for U.S. economic interests, he organized showings of Hollywood movies in an effort to lift the ban on American films. After listening to the concerns of experts in Thailand, he wrote an influential report on the country's economic issues. He encountered Chinese President Deng Xiaoping during a surprise visit to the country. Ellison's next posting was the Central African Republic. Arriving in 1981, he saw the

country's potential for development despite its disarray following the ousting of Jean-Bédél Bokassa's regime. Hoping to revitalize its economy, Ellison worked with local officials and became friends with the Archbishop Joachim N'Dayen, despite the U.S. ambassador stonewalling his efforts. After an attempted coup, Ellison was assigned to provide diplomatic protection for Albert Lincoln, a missionary whose legal work angered the government.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_002_008, TRT: 0:17:36 ?

Ollie B. Ellison, Sr. won a commendation for defusing a tense situation when he and his wife were illegally stopped by Central African Republic soldiers out of the government's fear of an attempted coup d'état. Despite this commendation, the racist U.S. ambassador that Ellison worked under had him recalled and filed a false report that threatened Ellison's career. Upon returning to the United States, Ellison underwent a grievance process to remove the report from his record. Despite his success in fighting the false report, he worried about supporting his family and had difficulty finding another assignment until he was posted to Geneva, Switzerland, where he remained from 1984 to 1988. For his accomplishments in his assignment as a working level representative to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, he received a meritorious honor award. Ellison concludes the interview by reflecting upon his life and how he hopes to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Ollie B. Ellison, Sr., Section A2004_239_Ellison_Ollie_06_MED_001, TRT: