

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Robert Bennett

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Bennett, Robert E., 1947-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett,
Dates:	December 14, 2004 and January 6, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2004 and 2005
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:55:01).
Abstract:	Lawyer Robert Bennett (1947 -) is the founder of Bennett and Bailey International Consulting, which worked on the King Shaka International Airport Project and the West African Gas Pipeline in the late 1990s. Bennett later became engaged in a long-term consultancy and exchange with the Ghanaian justice system. Bennett was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 14, 2004 and January 6, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_260
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Lawyer Robert Bennett was born April 14, 1947, in Columbus, near Fort Benning, Georgia. Raised primarily by his mother, Annie Mae Bennett, Bennett attended Claflin School in Columbus; the Harriet Beecher Stowe School in Cincinnati; and graduated from Chicago's Parker High School in 1965. Beginning in high school, Bennett spent his summers working on the Santa Fe Super Chief passenger train from Chicago to Los Angeles. At Dartmouth University, Bennett was one of the founders of the Afro American Society and spent two years in discussions on how to build United States support for the African National Congress (ANC). Graduating with his B.A. degree in Political Science in 1969, Bennett spent the summer in Europe and North Africa on \$5.00 a day; he finished Yale Law School in 1972.

From 1975 to 1978 Bennett was an associate attorney with Winston and Strawn and later Rudnick and Wolfe. From 1978 on he operated his own law firm in which he handled corporate and commercial transactions and real estate development. Bennett regularly hosted ANC leaders in his Chicago home, including Alfred Nzo and Graca Machel, and volunteered his legal services in support of various pro ANC groups throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Bennett hosted Nelson Mandela's fundraising visit to Chicago in 1993, and raised \$87,000 to support his campaign for the presidency of the new South Africa. Bennett hosted a tour of selected U. S. cities for then President of Ghana, Jerry Rawlings, and became Honorary Consul of Ghana from 1996 to 2002.

Founder of Bennett and Bailey International Consulting, Bennett was a consultant in the late 1990s on the King Shaka International Airport Project in Durban, South African, and on the West African Gas Pipeline. Bennett was a consultant for the movie, *Ali*, some of which was shot in Ghana. Bennett later became engaged in a long-term consultancy and exchange with the Ghanaian justice system.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Robert Bennett was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 14, 2004 and January 6, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Lawyer Robert Bennett (1947 -) is the founder of Bennett and Bailey International Consulting, which worked on the King Shaka International Airport Project and the West African Gas Pipeline in the late 1990s. Bennett later became engaged in a long-term consultancy and exchange with the Ghanaian justice system.

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:

Bennett, Robert E., 1947-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Bennett, Robert E., 1947---Interviews

African American businesspeople--Interviews

African American lawyers--Interviews

Business consultants--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Lawyer

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

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 Robert Bennett, December 14, 2004 and January 6, 2005. 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 Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Robert Bennett was born on April 14, 1947 in Columbus, Georgia. In the late 1800s, Bennett's maternal family moved from Alabama to Georgia to farm and ended up owning property. When the U.S. military expanded its base at Fort Benning, it acquired the family's land. His mother, Annie Bennett, was born in 1932 in Columbus near Fort Benning. Although she did not finish school, she later obtained her GED and became a registered nurse. Bennett never knew his father. In Columbus, Bennett lived with maternal family members, including his grandmother, aunts, and cousins, and attended Antioch Baptist Church. His maternal grandfather often told stories that depicted the exploitation of African Americans in the South at the hands of white people. An industrious child, Bennett worked from an early age and cleaned his family's chicken coop regularly. He attended the segregated Claflin School, although he played with both black and white children. One winter, Bennett injured his hand while preparing a fire in the stove.

African American businesspeople--Interviews.

African American lawyers--Interviews.

Business consultants--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_001_002, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Robert Bennett was raised in Columbus, Georgia. The town received little information about the Civil Rights Movement, despite its proximity. With his family, he attended Antioch Baptist Church where he enjoyed socializing at Easter picnics. In 1957, he moved from to Cincinnati, Ohio, which offered somewhat more freedom and opportunities for the black community despite its unofficial segregation. Bennett attended Harriet Beecher Stowe School and Abigail Cutter Junior High School. A driven student, he was interested in American history and excelled in school despite his family's frequent moves. Bennett always worked during summer breaks. In 1960, he washed dishes for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad's Super Chief train. After five years, he moved to Chicago, Illinois where he attended Parker High School. He remembers media representations of Africa and its liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s as well as the common impressions of white people he received from his childhood community.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_001_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Robert Bennett decided he wanted to be a lawyer as a junior high school student in Cincinnati, Ohio. During this time, he learned to live independently due to turmoil at home. Luckily, he was helped by teachers who took an interest in him. While at Parker High School in Chicago, he spent summer breaks working in the kitchen cars of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. The experience of traveling throughout the American Southwest broadened his world view. A top student, he was recruited by many universities. He received a full scholarship to Dartmouth College, a predominantly white university in Hanover, New Hampshire. There, he played football, participated in student government, and interacted with Professor Jere Daniell and Eduardo Mondlane, founder of the Mozambique Liberation Front. During his sophomore year, Bennett helped start the Afro-American Society, which led civil rights demonstrations, including one against George C. Wallace. Bennett graduated in 1969 and planned to attend Yale Law School.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_001_004, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Robert Bennett was attending Dartmouth College when Reverend Dr. Martin

Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. In 1969, Bennett entered and won Dartmouth's oratorical contest; the winnings funded his hitchhiking trip across Europe and North Africa in 1969. In Algiers, Algeria, he met Kathleen Neal Cleaver and Eldridge Cleaver, who he admired but found disappointing in person. While in Europe, Bennett encountered several black travelers, but only a few fit the expected image of expatriate artist. Ultimately, his travels cemented his desire for a law career focused on social justice. At Yale Law School in New Haven, Connecticut, he found his interest in advancing social change through the law was unpopular, and he encountered resistance from a contracts professor. He co-founded the Malcolm X Legal Studies Association, the more activist counterpart to the Black American Law Students Association, and worked as a contracts consultant for African American-owned fuel companies in New England and New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_002_005, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Robert Bennett traveled throughout Europe in 1969. While there, he observed similarities between black communities in the United States and Europe, which challenged notions that Europeans were more progressive than Americans regarding race. In Lisbon, Portugal, Bennett discussed the Portuguese Colonial War with Mozambican and Angolan students. During his travels, Bennett also saw the influence of African American culture in Europe, especially with jazz music and student-led movements. In 1970, after returning from abroad, he hitchhiked from New York, New York to New Haven, Connecticut where he attended Yale Law School. Bennett found that his desire for an activist law career differed greatly from most white law students and even from some more traditionally-inclined African American students. Although Yale's competitive environment was not welcoming, Bennett appreciated the program's rigor. Following his graduation from Yale in 1972, Bennett hoped to enact social change through his legal work.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_002_006, TRT: 0:30:22 ?

Robert Bennett hitchhiked through Sub-Saharan Africa in 1970. Bennett met African American expatriates and the African National Congress for the first time in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where most of its leadership was in exile. He traveled in East Africa, including Rwanda and Kenya, then later went to West Africa. He observed that East African capitals, notably Nairobi, Kenya, were significantly more developed than capitals in West Africa, although West Africa was more densely populated. Despite the common supposition that African Americans originate from West Africa, Bennett found all of Africa to be a cultural homeland. Bennett partnered to form a construction business that built houses for FESTAC '77 in Lagos, Nigeria. In 1995, Bennett became honorary consul general for the Republic of Ghana and served on the West African Gas Pipeline project. Bennett reflects upon what he has learned from his travels and dispels myths about Africans' views of African Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_002_007, TRT: 0:29:38 ?

Robert Bennett first became involved with African liberation movements as a student at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. A professor introduced him to Eduardo Mondlane, and after hearing his platform for the Mozambique Liberation Front, Bennett protested the speeches of government representatives from Lisbon, Portugal. After graduating college, he traveled to East Africa in 1970 and met key people in the African National Congress (ANC) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In Chicago, Bennett hosted ANC visitors, such as Alfred Nzo, and worked closely with HistoryMaker Harold Rogers to support the anti-apartheid movement. Bennett was friends with Molapatene Collins

Ramusi, who invited him to attend the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1992. As Ghana's honorary consul general, he helped facilitate construction of the West African Gas Pipeline. He also served as a consultant for the film 'Ali.' He talks about the film's portrayal of pan-Africanism in the 1960s.

Video Oral History Interview with Robert Bennett, Section A2004_260_002_008, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Robert Bennett hosted Graça Machel at his home in Chicago, Illinois in 1988. He attended anti-apartheid negotiations and a constitutional workshop to amend the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa in South Africa in the early 1990s. In 1991, he met Nelson Mandela at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in Durban, South Africa. He considers Mandela's political imprisonment on Robben Island, the end of apartheid and the effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Bennett talks about his three grown children, whom he raised on his own for many years, and his mother and the house he built for her. Bennett describes his political ambitions and his hopes and for the African American community. He reflects upon his life and legacy. He concludes the tape by describing how he would like to be remembered.