

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Stanley Nelson

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Nelson, Stanley, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson,
Dates:	April 3, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:56:50).
Abstract:	Film producer Stanley Nelson (1951 -) has produced several award-winning documentaries, including 'Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker', and 'The Murder of Emmett Till'. With his wife, he is a founder of the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media. Nelson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 3, 2006, in Berkeley, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_059
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Veteran filmmaker Stanley Earl Nelson, Jr., was born on June 8, 1951, in New York City. He attended New Lincoln School, a Manhattan private school, from kindergarten through high school. He attended Beloit College in Wisconsin, and later transferred to six different colleges including New York University, Morris Brown, and Hunter College. In 1976, he received his B.F.A. degree from the Leonard Davis Film School at the City University of New York.

Upon graduating, Nelson worked as an assistant editor with documentary filmmaker William Greaves. He also worked for several years at United Methodist Communication, a communication branch for the United Methodist Church. By 1989, Nelson wrote, produced, and directed his first documentary feature, *Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker*, a story of the nation's first self-made African American female millionaire. This documentary later won the CINE Golden Eagle Award and was cited as the Best Production of the Decade by the Black Filmmaker Foundation.

Nelson began working as a television producer at PBS on the series *Listening to America with Bill Moyers*. Nelson went on to produce and direct the 1999 Emmy nominated documentary entitled *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*, and the 2000 Black International Cinema Festival award winning documentary *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind*. Nelson and his wife, Marcia A. Smith, then formed the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media. Firelight Media received funding from *American Experience* to produce the critically acclaimed 2003 documentary entitled *The Murder of Emmett Till*. The film won several awards including an Emmy for Best Directing-Nonfiction, the Sundance Film Festival 2003 Special Jury Prize, and the George Foster Peabody Award. In addition, the U.S. Justice Department has recently reopened the 1955 murder investigation of Emmett Till, citing the presence of new evidence exposed in Nelson's documentary.

Nelson has taught film production and broadcast journalism at facilities in Rwanda and at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Nelson received fellowships at the American Film Institute, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the 2002 MacArthur Foundation Genius Fellowship. In 2004, Nelson was honored with the Educational Video Center's Excellence in Community Service Award. In 2006, he completed the documentary entitled, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Stanley Nelson was conducted by Loretta Henry on April 3, 2006, in Berkeley, California, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Film producer Stanley Nelson (1951 -) has produced several award-winning documentaries, including 'Two Dollars and a Dream: The Story of Madame C.J. Walker', and 'The Murder of Emmett Till'. With his wife, he is a founder of the nonprofit documentary film production company Firelight Media.

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:

Nelson, Stanley, 1955-

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Nelson, Stanley, 1955---Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

African American television producers and directors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Firelight Media

Occupations:

Documentary Filmmaker

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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 Stanley Nelson, April 3, 2006. 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 Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Stanley Nelson was born on June 8, 1951 in New York City to A'Lelia Ransom Nelson and Stanley Nelson, Sr. His maternal great grandfather was born into slavery in 1857. His grandfather was the general manager of the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana, where Nelson's mother was born. In Washington, D.C., she worked at the Library of Congress. Nelson's paternal grandfather hailed from Virginia, and held multiple jobs. Nelson's father grew up in Washington, D.C., where he attended Howard University College of Dentistry and met Nelson's mother. They relocated to Harlem and raised Nelson and his three siblings in a close-knit apartment complex. Nelson attended the integrated New Lincoln School, where he was inspired by his second grade teacher, Mr. Swan, and played basketball. His father worked long hours, so his mother reared him. Nelson, who attended six different colleges, describes his attitude toward higher education, as well as his father's opinion of church.

African American librarians.

Library of Congress.

African American dentists.

Walker, C. J., Madam, 1867-1919.

African American families--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_002, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Stanley Nelson attended six different colleges, including Beloit College in Beloit, Wisconsin; Morris Brown College in Atlanta, Georgia; and New York University and Hunter College in New York City. Due to their middle class background, Nelson's parents supported his schooling expenses. During college, Nelson attended New York University's summer film program, which inspired his interest in filmmaking. Upon graduating from City College of New York's film school, Leonard Davis Center for the Performing Arts, he struggled to find a job at white film production companies. He contacted William Greaves, a black filmmaker. Greaves hired him and initiated Nelson's career in documentary filmmaking, which Nelson compares to commercial filmmaking. He then joined United Methodist Communications, the United Methodist church's communications branch, working on radio and film projects from 1978 to 1984. As the church became more conservative and less focused on social action, he left to pursue work overseas.

New York University.

Film + media studies.

City University of New York. City College.

Greaves, William.

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_003, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Stanley Nelson proposed the documentary film 'Madam C.J. Walker: Two Dollars and a Dream' to United Methodist Communications, his employer at the time, who allowed him to work on it independently. While the film was well received, garnering awards from the Black Filmmaker Foundation upon its release in the late 1980s, he also learned about budgeting. During the 1990s,

Nelson produced documentaries while working on side projects for organizations like the Smithsonian Institution. His documentary, 'The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords,' propelled his filmmaking career, compounding his previous success. Bill D. Moyers' office recruited him to work for New York City's WNET-TV, and he produced a feature on the war on drugs for 'Listening to America.' At this time, Nelson and his wife, Marcia Smith, founded Firelight Media, a documentary film company, through a Ford Foundation grant. For the PBS series 'American Experience,' they produced "The Murder of Emmett Till" and received a daytime Emmy Award.

Two dollars and a dream (Motion picture).

United Methodist Church (U.S.). Division of Television, Radio, and Film Communication.

Black Filmmakers Foundation (New York, N.Y.)

Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.)--Employees.

Listening to America (Television program).

Video Oral History Interview with Stanley Nelson, Section A2006_059_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Stanley Nelson was especially proud that his documentary film, 'The Murder of Emmett Till' contributed to the reopening of Till's case in 2004. At this time, Nelson received a MacArthur Fellowship. His and his wife, Marcia Smith's company, Firelight Media, produced 'Beyond Brown: Pursuing the Promise' and 'A Place of Our Own,' based on Nelson's family and Martha's Vineyard's black community. He reflects upon the challenges associated with its filming, including the exposure of his middle class background. In the 2000s, Firelight Media produced 'Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice,' 'Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes' and 'Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple.' Nelson describes his family's move to San Francisco, California, and his ongoing teaching opportunities. In addition to filmmaking, he coached Little League baseball and enjoyed fishing. He reflects upon his career and future projects, his hopes and concerns for the African American community and the importance of doing one's best.

Till, Emmett, 1941-1955--Death and burial.

Documentary films--Production and direction.

A Place of Our Own (Motion picture).

Martha's Vineyard (Mass.).

Jonestown Mass Suicide, Jonestown, Guyana, 1978.