

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dorothy Harrison

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Harrison, Dorothy, 1907-2010
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison,
Dates:	January 18, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:20:25).
Abstract:	Elementary school teacher Dorothy Harrison (1907 - 2010) served as a national officer for The Links, Inc., succeeded Dorothy Height as president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and served as a board member of the Chicago Metropolitan YWCA and the National Council of Negro Women. Harrison was also selected as co-chair of the federal Head Start program. Harrison was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 18, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_015
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Educator and former president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Dorothy Penman Harrison was born Dorothy Marie Penman on December 8, 1907 in Portsmouth, Ohio. Harrison's parents were former teacher, Annabelle Layne, and chef, Victor Logan Penman. Harrison grew up in Portsmouth where she learned to read and took piano lessons. Attending all black Eleventh Street Elementary School, Harrison graduated from Portsmouth High School in 1924. At Fisk University, she studied history with A.A. Taylor. When both of her parents passed away in 1926, Harrison returned to Ohio and taught school. She earned her B.A. degree in education from Ohio State University in 1932. That same year, Harrison joined the Epsilon chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and married educator, Dr. Gerald Lamar Harrison. Her husband earned his Ph.D. in education from Ohio State University in 1936 while he was serving as head of the Education Department at Prairie View A&M College in Texas.

In 1940, Harrison moved to Oklahoma when her husband was named president of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University. The college was renamed Langston University in 1941. As first lady to the president, Harrison hosted distinguished guests like W.E.B. DuBois and Liberia's Clarence L. Simpson. In 1944, she traveled to Liberia for the inauguration of William V.S. Tubman as Liberia's president, also attending were Mary McLeod Bethune and Eta Moten Barnett. Tragedy struck as Harrison's eldest son, Gerald Lamar, passed away at the age of thirteen, in 1948, followed by the younger son, Richard, in 1950. Returning to school, Harrison acquired her M.S. degree in education from Oklahoma State University. She also amassed a record of civic activities, serving as treasurer of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. under president Dorothy Height in 1952 and national officer for The Links, Inc. in 1957. Harrison was elected president of the sorority in 1956 and served through 1958.

In 1960, Harrison relocated to Chicago, Illinois with her husband after spending twenty years at Langston University. She continued her public service as a board member of the Chicago Metropolitan YWCA and as a

national board member of the Central Review Team and the Urban League Women's Board. Harrison is a lifetime member of the NAACP and the National Council of Negro Women. In 1965, Harrison was selected as co-chair of the federal Head Start program. She also served on the board of directors of the City Associates of the Chicago Art Institute. Harrison has traveled numerous times to Europe, Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean.

Awarded an honorary doctorate from Langston University in 2003. Harrison passed away on December 22, 2010.

Harrison was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 18, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dorothy Harrison was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 18, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Elementary school teacher Dorothy Harrison (1907 - 2010) served as a national officer for The Links, Inc., succeeded Dorothy Height as president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and served as a board member of the Chicago Metropolitan YWCA and the National Council of Negro Women. Harrison was also selected as co-chair of the federal Head Start program.

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:

Harrison, Dorothy, 1907-2010

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harrison, Dorothy, 1907-2010 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Elementary School Teacher

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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 Dorothy Harrison, January 18, 2007. 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 Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_001, TRT: 0:30:06
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Dorothy Harrison was born on December 8, 1907 in Portsmouth, Ohio to Annabelle Layne Penman and Victor Penman. Her paternal grandfather was the free son of an African American woman and a white slaveholder, and opened a barber shop in Meadville, Pennsylvania; where, many years later, Harrison's family reunions were held at her grandfather's historic home. Harrison's father ran away from Meadville at fourteen years old. He became a railroad cook, and met Harrison's mother while his train was stopped in Portsmouth. Harrison's parents valued education, and her brother was one of the first black students at Meadville's Allegheny College. He went on to attend Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee; and Harrison enrolled at the nearby Fisk University with her mother's encouragement. When Harrison was nineteen years old, her parents both passed away. She returned to Portsmouth, and taught elementary school while taking college courses. Harrison also remembers her maternal uncle, who passed for white.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_002, TRT: 0:29:55
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Dorothy Harrison grew up in an integrated neighborhood in Portsmouth, Ohio. The area was prone to flooding, and her family once fled the rising waters to stay at a neighbor's home. In Portsmouth, Harrison attended the Allen Chapel A.M.E. Church with her family. She began her education at the all-black Eleventh Street School; where her teachers, including Principal E.M. Gentry, were all African American. She went on to attend the integrated Portsmouth High School, where she experienced racial discrimination, including exclusion from social events. Upon graduating from high school in 1924, Harrison matriculated at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The next year, her mother contracted tuberculosis. Her father soon died of a heart attack; and, within three months, her mother passed away as well. Harrison also remembers her brother, Frederick Penman, who was a talented carpenter and pianist; and talks about the restrictions that barred married women from teaching during her early career.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_003, TRT: 0:31:00
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Dorothy Harrison experienced racial discrimination while a student at the integrated Portsmouth High School in Portsmouth, Ohio, where she was barred from extracurricular activities. Upon graduating, she decided to attend the historically black Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where she studied history under Professor A.A. Taylor. Although the university's students were closely monitored, Harrison found the requirements less strict than her parents' rules. After two years, Harrison transferred to The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. She graduated in 1932, and married General Lamar Harrison, whom she met on a trip to West Virginia State College. Together, they moved to Wilberforce, Ohio, where her husband served as a trustee of Wilberforce University. Harrison's husband later accepted a position at the Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College in Prairie View, Texas, where he worked to secure funds for a library, and obtain accreditation as a degree granting institution.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_004, TRT: 0:29:33
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Dorothy Harrison lived with her husband, General Lamar Harrison, in Prairie

View, Texas, where he led the education department of the Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College, while also completing his doctoral dissertation. In 1940, Harrison's husband was appointed to serve as the president of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma. The following year, the school was renamed Langston University, honoring abolitionist John Mercer Langston. Harrison describes the history of the university, as well as her husband's efforts to secure the school's accreditation. While at Langston University, Harrison developed a work-study program, and hosted notable African Americans like historian W.E.B. Du Bois, musician Nat King Cole and contralto Etta Moten Barnett. She also earned her master's and doctoral degrees at Oklahoma Territorial Agricultural and Mechanical College in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In addition, Harrison describes the dust storms that struck Oklahoma during the 1940s.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_005, TRT: 0:29:39
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Dorothy Harrison joined the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority while studying at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio; and later became active in the sorority's chapter in Oklahoma City. Following the deaths her older son, Gerald Harrison, in a car accident; and of her younger son, Richard Harrison, from an asthma attack two years later, Harrison devoted her time to the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. She was elected to serve as its national treasurer from 1952; and, during her tenure, visited President Dwight David Eisenhower at the White House with the sorority's board. She became the national president of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 1956. In addition, Harrison and her husband, General Lamar Harrison, made frequent trips to Africa from the 1940s. They attended Liberian President William V.S. Tubman, Jr.'s inauguration in 1944; and witnessed the coup that deposed Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah in 1966. During their travels, Harrison also visited Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_006, TRT: 0:29:02
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Dorothy Harrison served as president of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority from 1956 to 1958, and remained on its executive committee for nineteen years. During this time, she supervised the organization's growth, and events such as the sorority's first Christmas party, which was held in honor of the Little Rock Nine. In 1960, Harrison moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she continued her civic activities, while her husband worked at Roosevelt University and the Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity. In Chicago, Harrison founded the city's first chapter of The Links, and organized numerous events for the organization. She was also active with the YWCA, Head Start, the NAACP and the National Council of Negro Women. Harrison describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community; and talks about the presidential elections of 2008, including Barack Obama's campaign. Harrison also reflects upon a statement she made in 1958, when she held that the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority should not accept white members.

Video Oral History Interview with Dorothy Harrison, Section A2007_015_001_007, TRT: 0:21:10
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Dorothy Harrison received an honorary degree in 2003 from Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma. Although most of her immediate family had passed away at time of the interview, she remained in contact with her nieces. Harrison talks about her love of sports and her favorite teams, including the Chicago Cubs. She describes how she would like to be remembered, and reflects

upon her legacy of service to the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Harrison concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.