

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Henry Ponder

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Ponder, Henry, 1928-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 29, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:44:27).
<b>Abstract:</b>	University president Henry Ponder (1928 - ) served as Vice President of Alabama A&M University, President of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, President of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and President of Talladega College in Alabama. Ponder was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 29, 2007, in Hilton Head, South Carolina. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_033
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Henry Ponder was born on March 28, 1928 in Wewoka, Oklahoma. He was the eleventh of fourteen children born to Frank and Lillie Mae Ponder. Ponder excelled in academics and participated in his high school student council as the class president. After hearing a speech by Mary McCloud Bethune, Ponder was inspired to become a university president. He graduated from Douglas High School in 1946 and attended Langston University, where he pledged the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and received his B.S. degree in agriculture in 1951. Ponder served two years in the United States Army during the Korean War. When he returned to civilian life, he worked as a research assistant at Oklahoma State University. He then earned his M.A. degree from Oklahoma State University and his Ph.D. from Ohio State University.

Ponder served as both Chair and Assistant Professor for the Department of Agriculture and Business at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. He also served as the Chairman of the Department of Business and Economics of Fort Valley State College in Fort Valley, Georgia. Additionally, Ponder was the Vice President of Alabama A&M University in Normal, Alabama. In 1973, he fulfilled his dream by becoming President of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. After an eleven year tenure, he became the President of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee for twelve years. While at Fisk, Ponder was honored as one of the “100 Most Effective College Presidents in the United States.”

In 1996, Ponder left Fisk University to serve as the CEO and president of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. In early 2002, he became President of Talladega College in Alabama. While in his presidency, Ponder helped retain the 160-year-old institution’s accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Ponder currently lives on Hilton Head Island in South Carolina with his wife of fifty-five years, Eunice. They have

two adult daughters.

Ponder was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 29, 2007.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Henry Ponder was conducted by Denise Gines on January 29, 2007, in Hilton Head, South Carolina, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. University president Henry Ponder (1928 - ) served as Vice President of Alabama A&M University, President of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, President of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and President of Talladega College in Alabama.

---

## 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:

Ponder, Henry, 1928-

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Ponder, Henry, 1928---Interviews

---

## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

## Occupations:

University President

---

## 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 Henry Ponder, January 29, 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 Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Henry Ponder was born on March 28, 1928 to Lillie Mae Edwards Ponder and Frank Ponder in Wewoka, Oklahoma. Ponder's maternal grandparents, Lou Edwards and Ladd Edwards, were from North Carolina, and settled on eight

acres of farmland in Seminole, Oklahoma. His maternal grandmother was often mistaken for white, even by her own family. His paternal grandparents hailed from Polk County, North Carolina, where a school was named after his paternal grandfather, Henry Ponder. Ponder's parents met in Oklahoma, despite both growing up in North Carolina. His father, Frank Ponder, Sr., rented 160 acres of land where he farmed cotton, peanuts and sorghum cane. In 1934, Ponder's father died, and his mother was left to care for their fourteen children. She raised and canned produce to sustain her family through the winter, and encouraged her children to pursue education. Ponder also describes his three oldest brothers, including their work for the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_002, TRT: 0:28:48 ?

Henry Ponder grew up with thirteen siblings in a supportive family in Wewoka, Oklahoma. Ponder nearly drowned in a pond when he was very young, but was rescued by his older sister, Katheryn Ponder Brown, and the two were close from that time. From the age of six years old, Ponder was responsible for chores on his family's farm, which was fifty yards from U.S. Route 56, and four miles from town. Each day from sunrise to sunset, he cut wood for the stove, fed the hogs and milked the cows with two of his brothers, Alonzo Ponder and Frank Ponder, Jr. Despite growing up during the Great Depression, Ponder never went without food. His older brother, Theodore Roosevelt Ponder, was employed by the Works Progress Administration, and used his paychecks to support the family. Their neighbors were also generous, and they often lent each other money. On special occasions, Ponder's mother gave him and his siblings each fifteen cents to see a movie and eat a double dipped ice cream in town.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:25 ?

Henry Ponder attended the Johnson Grove School in Wewoka, Oklahoma through the eighth grade. There, he was inspired by his teacher, Theodore Malone, who motivated student achievement through strict discipline and corporal punishment. When Ponder was in the seventh grade, he walked to town to hear Mary McLeod Bethune speak; and, from that day, aspired to become a college president. From 1942, Ponder attended Douglas High School. During his senior year, he was president of his class and the student council, and his teachers encouraged him to attend college. However, upon graduating in 1946, he remained in Wewoka to help his mother with the harvest. Ponder worked at Armour and Company in Oklahoma City for one year, and then decided to pursue his education. His older sister, Mayme Ponder Jackson, and older brother, Paul Harding Ponder, paid for his tuition at Langston University, and his sister, Katheryn Ponder Brown, sent him spending money. An agriculture student, he was listed on the honor roll.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Henry Ponder met his wife, Eunice Wilson Ponder, at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma, where they were in a freshman chemistry class together in 1947. Ponder pledged Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, to which he credits his academic discipline during college. He also talks about how fraternal organizations have strayed from their original purpose. Ponder graduated with honors in 1951. Due to segregation at neighboring universities, he could not pursue a master's degree, and instead obtained a position at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma City. From there, Ponder became the farm superintendent at the State Training School for Incurable Negro Boys. He was married in 1952; and, in 1953, was drafted to the U.S. Army to serve in the Korean War. He was sent to a leadership school at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, and then to the Yakima

Firing Center in Washington. In Incheon, Korea, Ponder served as the chief computer in the fire direction control unit for the Ninth Corps' 240 howitzers artillery.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Henry Ponder was promoted to sergeant while serving in the Korean War with the desegregated U.S. Army. He returned to Oklahoma in 1955. From 1956, he pursued a master's degree in agricultural economics at The Oklahoma State University for Agriculture and Applied Science, and was the only African American member of the department. Ponder received his degree in 1958; and, until 1961, served as an assistant professor and the chairman of the agribusiness department at Virginia State College in Petersburg, Virginia. He was barred from studying at southern graduate schools due to his race, so he obtained a stipend from the Virginia Department of Education to attend The Ohio State University for Agriculture and Applied Science. In 1963, Ponder earned his Ph.D. degree, and returned to Virginia State College to teach. During this time in Virginia, African Americans were barred from shops like Thalhimers department store, and rural white communities celebrated President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's death.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:11 ?

Henry Ponder's older daughter, Cheryl Ponder, was born in 1959 in Petersburg, Virginia. His younger daughter, Anna Ponder, was born in 1964. Ponder then became the chairman of the Department of Business and Economics at Fort Valley State College in Georgia. There, he increased his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, after he and his wife experienced discrimination at a local bank and a hospital in Macon, Georgia. In 1966, Ponder was appointed as the vice president for academic affairs at Huntsville's Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College. When Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, he joined his students' march to the courthouse in Huntsville to ensure their safety from the police. Although he was offered research positions at other universities, Ponder remained at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College in order to pursue his goal of becoming a college president. In 1970, he was offered the presidency of Saint Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_007, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Henry Ponder was offered the presidency of Saint Paul's College in 1970, but turned it down to ensure that his daughters had the best opportunities for their own education. From 1973, Ponder served as the president of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina. During his tenure, he developed the school's reputation as an open admissions college. In 1984, Ponder became the president of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee at a time when the school was deeply in debt, and increased its enrollment and endowment. In 1996, he became the president and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. In 2001, Ponder was appointed to the presidency of Talladega College in Talladega, Alabama, where he regained the college's accreditation. In 2003, Ponder retired to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Ponder ends this section of his interview by describing his honorary degrees, as well as his involvement in the church and academic organizations like the American Council on Education.

Video Oral History Interview with Henry Ponder, Section A2007\_033\_001\_008, TRT: 0:21:40 ?

Henry Ponder describes the education and careers of his daughters, Cheryl Ponder and Anna Ponder. He reflects upon his marriage to Eunice Wilson Ponder, and how her support led to his success. Ponder was inspired from a young age to pursue his education through the encouragement of his teacher,

Theodore Malone, at Johnson Grove School in Wewoka, Oklahoma. Like Malone, Ponder shares a message to future generations about encouragement and persistence. Ponder describes how he would like to be remembered, and concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.