

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bezelee Martin

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## 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>	Martin, Bezelee, 1932-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bezelee Martin,
<b>Dates:</b>	December 1, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:48:50).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Retail entrepreneur Bezelee Martin (1932 - 2021) was head of the black family owned Lena's Food Market in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was also the first licensed African American car dealer in the State of Wisconsin. Martin was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 1, 2007, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_337
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Head of the Black family-owned Lena's Food Market, Bezelee Martin was born on September 29, 1932, in Dumas, Arkansas, to Tom Martin and Ruthie Hall Martin. He was named by an aunt who found "Bezelee" in the Bible. Martin's aggressive mother reared him with strict rules of behavior and taught him to always be on time. He was raised mainly in Boley, Oklahoma – an all Black town. Being raised in this independent African American environment influenced Martin's world view. As a child, he went into the lawn mowing business, employing other children as workers. Martin always had a pop and chicken concession stand at baseball games and sold Blair's products. He attended Rust School in Boley, Boley Grade School, and Boley High School.

Martin attended Milwaukee Area Technical College where he took business and bookkeeping while working at a tannery. By 1950, he was the first black licensed car dealer in Wisconsin. By 1957, he was selling his own brand of stockings, Martin Hosiery, to women, and by 1958, Martin was operating his own trucking company. In 1960, Martin and his wife, Lena, opened a store in the Harambee section of Milwaukee, and by 1965, they owned a 3,000 square foot location. Martin purchased Milwaukee's 13,000 square foot Kohl Food Store in 2001. During this period, Martin purchased four sites for Lena's Food Market giving it a square footage of 87,000 to utilize.

Martin's family is deeply involved with the businesses, especially three of his four sons, Anthony, Derrick, and Gregory (his oldest son, Eric, is not involved in the business), and his brother, Bruce. Ownership and distribution make it possible for Martin to serve the specific product requests from the African American community. In 2005, Martin used \$3.7 million in New Market Tax Credits through the Wisconsin Housing and Urban Development Authority to open a more spacious store. That made Lena's Food Market the first minority owned business to receive these credits. In 2007, Lena's Food Market purchased two new locations raising the total to six stores employing 600 people.

Martin passed away on July 27, 2021.

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bezelee Martin was conducted by Larry Crowe on December 1, 2007, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Retail entrepreneur Bezelee Martin (1932 - 2021) was head of the black family owned Lena's Food Market in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was also the first licensed African American car dealer in the State of Wisconsin.

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# 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®.

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# 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.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

Martin, Bezelee, 1932-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Martin, Bezelee, 1932- --Interviews

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African American businesspeople--Wisconsin--Milwaukee--Interviews.

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# Organizations:

## HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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### Occupations:

Retail Entrepreneur

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

BusinessMakers

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## 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 Bezelee Martin, December 1, 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Bezelee Martin, Section A2007\_337\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:20 ?  
Bezelee Martin was born on September 29, 1932 in Dumas, Arkansas to Ruthie Hall Martin and Tom Martin. His maternal grandparents were farmers in Arkansas, where his mother was born and raised. With her family, she attended the local African Methodist Episcopal church. Martin's paternal grandparents

were also farmers, and his father was a skilled carpenter. Martin's parents met and married in Arkansas, and eventually lost their farm due to a poor harvest. After sharecropping for one year, Martin's father obtained a position teaching carpentry at the State Training School for Incurable Negro Boys, and moved his family to the all-black city of Boley, Oklahoma. There, Martin grew up in a strict household, where his mother taught her ten children the value of hard work. Entrepreneurial from an early age, Martin sold pencils and mail-order products from the Blair Corporation to his peers at Boley Grade School. He also mowed lawns, and hired classmates to work for him after buying a second lawn mower on credit.

African American businesspeople--Wisconsin--Milwaukee--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Bezelee Martin, Section A2007\_337\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Bezelee Martin admired the leaders of his community in the all-black town of Boley, Oklahoma, including the Lee family, who created the Smokoroma, Inc. grill company; and the Turner family, who owned the local bank. Martin began his education at Boley's Rust School, and then transferred to the Boley Grade School. He was active in the Boy Scouts, and attended Boley's African Methodist Episcopal church, both of which were led by Benjamin Harrison Hill. While a student at Boley High School, Martin sold concessions at baseball games, and traveled with the basketball team as their mascot. He also raised chickens and tomatoes to sell in town. After his sophomore year, Martin joined his older brother in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; where, instead of returning to high school, he studied marketing at the Milwaukee Area Technical College. In Milwaukee, Martin began selling women's hosiery, and eventually formed the Martin Hosiery company. Later, he established a trucking business that grew into the Martin Wholesale company.

Video Oral History Interview with Bezelee Martin, Section A2007\_337\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Bezelee Martin expanded the Martin Wholesale company in the mid-1960s, eventually purchasing the Central Wholesale Supply Corporation in 1968. When a newly built expressway in Milwaukee, Wisconsin disrupted his business, Martin transitioned to the retail industry, and opened Lena's Food Market. The store was named after his wife, Lena Martin, who managed the business' finances. Martin opened his first location beside a Kroger grocery store, which eventually went out of business, as it could not compete with Martin's emphasis on customer service. Martin focused on developing relationships with his majority African American clientele, and provided products specific to the black community, like ribbon cane and persimmons. He also sold bulk foods around holidays. From the early 1970s, Martin expanded the Lena's Food Market business, eventually opening six stores. Martin and his wife had four sons; and, although Martin encouraged them to pursue their own goals, three of them returned to work for his business.

Video Oral History Interview with Bezelee Martin, Section A2007\_337\_001\_004, TRT: 0:18:40 ?

Bezelee Martin owned six Lena's Food Market stores in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, all of which were purchased without business loans. The store locations included a variety of amenities, such as pharmacies and banking branches. Martin describes his business philosophy, including the importance of hiring competent personnel; as well as his plans to expand Lena's Food Markets, and bequeath the company to his sons. At the time of the interview, his son, Gregory Martin, was in charge of the stores' advertising campaigns, which primarily focused on radio commercials. Martin describes his hopes and concerns for the African American community, and reflects upon his life, legacy and how he would like to be remembered.

